

JULIE LEWIS

CURTAIN
CALL

Chapter 1

Most stories start with a beginning. This one starts with the end.

The end of a dream come true. The end of my music career, which seemed to be over before it had really begun.

The end of my run on *American Idol*.

No, really. *American Idol*. I'd earned my golden ticket at my audition in Chicago seven months ago, survived Hollywood Week, made the top twenty-four, then the top twelve, and then the top eleven. If I made the top ten, I'd be guaranteed a place on the summer tour.

But standing on the stage next to Ryan Seacrest, my arm slung around the guy I wanted to go home instead of me, I knew it wasn't going to happen. Okay, so I didn't know it for sure; the show's not *that* rigged. (And even if it is, I'm contractually forbidden from telling you so.) But I felt it. I was going home.

"Dim the lights, and here we go." Ryan gave the cue, and the bright stage lights faded, bathing us in blue. I gazed out into the first few rows of the audience, looking for no one in particular. My dad wasn't there. He'd flown out last week to watch me perform for the first time on the big stage, and he'd promised he'd come for the finale if I made it. But he couldn't afford the plane ticket or the time off work to fly to Los Angeles every week. I knew he was watching at home.

"Cary, Tim, good luck to both of you," said Ryan, and I lowered my eyes to the stage, steeling myself for what he was about to say next. "After the nationwide vote, the person who is going home tonight, unless the judges save them, is..."

If you've ever watched *American Idol* before, you know how long Seacrest draws out that pause to build suspense. Long enough for me to catch you up to speed.

I'm Cary, if you hadn't guessed. It's short for Carolyn. Singing wasn't my life, but I wanted to make it so. I'd been singing and songwriting as a hobby ever since I was a kid. I've always been kind of shy, until you get me on a stage. Onstage, I'm like a different person. I love to perform. When I was younger, I did musicals and talent shows and sang in the choir. After college, I settled for singing to the old people in the nursing home where I work.

I was happy with my career path. I'd gone to nursing school and worked a couple of years in a hospital while I got my master's so that I could become a nurse practitioner. I found my job fulfilling, and I never really considered giving it up for something else... until word got out that *American Idol* auditions were being held in Chicago.

I wasn't going to go – I hadn't the last two times they'd come – until my coworkers reminded me that the age limit was twenty-eight. Guess how old I was? Twenty-eight.

If I didn't audition then, I'd never have another chance, and what if, just what if, it turned out to be my big break? Wouldn't I regret not going for it?

So I went for it. I let my coworkers talk me into it, and a small group of us road-tripped up to Chicago for the preliminary auditions. It wasn't as exciting as it looks on TV. We didn't camp out in a long line to wait for our turn to go in and see Simon, Randy, and Paula (or rather, Simon, Randy, Kara, and a random guest judge who wasn't Ellen DeGeneres). In fact, the judges weren't even there. Instead, we sat around in the United Center for hours, until they herded us down to one of twelve tables spread across the floor to sing for the producers. You can imagine how much time they gave us to sing: twelve thousand people, divided between twelve tables... you do the math. I got about thirty seconds to flash my brightest smile and belt a few bars of my song.

Out of all those people, I didn't expect to even be noticed, let alone chosen, but the next thing I knew, I was on my way to the next round, a yellow piece of paper clutched in my hand. A month later, I was back in Chicago to sing for the real judges – Simon, Randy, Kara, and, for some reason, Shania Twain. As I waited around with the others who were there to audition, I got paranoid. What if I hadn't been called back because I was good, but because I was really bad? What if I was one of "those" people – you know, the delusional freaks who don't realize they're tone deaf? By the time I finally walked into the room to meet the judges, I was a nervous wreck. I just kept praying they wouldn't rip me apart and humiliate me on national television.

They didn't. They actually praised my voice and my vintage style, told me I was "unique" and to work on my stage presence. I left the room with a priceless golden ticket, and a few months later, I was jumping through the hoops of Hollywood Week. At every cut, I'd think, *This is it. My luck's run out. I'm not gonna make the next round.* But I did. I made the top twenty-four, the top twenty, the top sixteen, the top twelve.

If I could survive that night's cut, I'd make the top ten. That was further than I'd ever, in my wildest dreams, expected to make it, and I tried to remind myself of that fact as I waited for Ryan's results. If I was the one going home, I wouldn't be disappointed, I told myself. I would smile, nod, thank everyone for the opportunity, and go on with my life. But I sooo wanted to go on tour instead.

The pause before the name seemed to last forever. It's infuriating enough when you're just watching it on TV. Imagine being the one standing there onstage, awaiting your fate. My knees were so quivery, I thought if Seacrest didn't hurry it up, they were going to buckle. It didn't help that the show's stylists had me in a pair of boots with six-inch stilettos. I was, quite literally, shaking in my boots.

And then, the verdict came.

"...Cary Hilst."

I felt myself deflate, as the breath I'd been holding rushed out of me.

“Tim, you are safe,” I heard Ryan add, and I was aware of Tim hugging me quickly before scurrying back to the safety of the couch off to the side of the stage, where the other contestants sat. “Congratulations, Tim. Come here, Cary,” said Ryan, drawing me in closer. “Cary, as you know, the judges have one save that they can use this season. You’re now going to have the opportunity to sing for the save.”

I nodded. We had rehearsed this, and I was prepared. Ryan walked me over to the center of the stage, where my mic stand was set up and a stage hand was waiting with my ukulele. I took a deep breath, adjusted the microphone to the right angle, and positioned my fingers on the ukulele that had been my grandfather’s. He was the one who had taught me to play. On my cue, I started to strum and leaned into the microphone to sing.

“Lookin’ at your picture, from when we first met... you gave me a smile, that I could never forget... and nothin’ I could do could protect me from you, that ni-i-ight...”

I’ve always been an old soul. I’m sure it has something to do with the fact that I was practically raised by my grandparents. They taught me about music, the kind of music they grew up on – the classics. I loved oldies, jazz, and big band, and I’d modeled my own singing after the greats – women like Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and Etta James.

But then, I also loved the Backstreet Boys.

“Wrapped around your finger, always in my-y mind... the days would blend, ‘cause we stayed up a-all night... yeah, you and I were everything, everything to me...”

For the semifinal rounds, as the top twenty-four was whittled down to twelve, we had our choice of songs that had made the Billboard Top 100 chart. After two weeks of covering classics, the judges warned me I was coming across as too serious, too old-fashioned, too predictable. I had to change it up.

“I just want you to kno-ow... that I’ve been fightin’ to let you go... so-ome da-ays I make it through... and then there’s nights that never end...”

I had chosen a lesser-known Backstreet Boys single, “Just Want You to Know,” as the song that would get me into the top twelve. Staying true to form, I slowed it down and sang it in a syncopated, blues style, accompanied only by my ukulele. Though the judges had pointed out that viewers may not be familiar the song, they’d praised me for singing something modern and changing it to better suit myself as an artist.

“I wish that I could belie-eve... that there’s a day you’ll come back to me... bu-ut sti-ill I have to say... I would do it all again... just want you to know...”

I hoped they would remember that now and save me. It was a long shot, but I wasn’t ready to leave Hollywood and go back to my old life yet. I wasn’t ready to let my dream die.

“That since I lost you... I lost myself... no, I can’t fake it... there’s no one e-el-else...”

I could see the judges deliberating down at their table, their four heads pressed close together, whispering behind their hands. I tried not to watch them, staying in the moment of what was probably going to be my last *Idol* performance.

“I just want you to know... that I’ve been fightin’ to let you go... so-ome da-ays I make it through... and then there’s nights that never end...”

I crescendoed to my big finish, strumming the ukulele hard as I sang my heart out.

“I wish that I could belie-eve... that there’s a day you’ll come back to me... bu-ut sti-ill I have to say... I would do it all again... just want you to know...”

I let my last note fade away, making eye contact with Simon. Seacrest always said it took a unanimous decision from the judges, but I knew it was really Simon calling the shots. If he wanted to save me, I’d be saved. When he didn’t offer me one of his subtle winks, I knew it was all over.

Sure enough, when the applause died down and Ryan came back to the stage to ask the judges for their verdict, Simon said, “Sorry, sweetheart, but we’re going to go with America on this one. It’s a no.”

I nodded, forcing a smile, reminding myself to be gracious. But the tears were already welling in my eyes. I barely heard the rest of the judges’ comments. I know, from watching the episode later on my dad’s DVR, that they offered me words of condolence and encouragement, but the rest of my time on stage went by in a blur. They had a video montage of my *Idol* highlights, from my first audition in front of the judges to my top twelve performance on the big stage. I cried through it. The other contestants came off the couch and surrounded me in a group hug. Some of the other girls were crying, too. My tears wet their shoulders as they held me close, filling my ears with trite phrases like “This is just the beginning for you” and “When one door closes, another one opens.”

I’m sure I nodded and agreed with them, but in my heart, I didn’t believe it. Artists like Chris Daughtry and Jennifer Hudson were the exception, not the rule. I knew that most *Idol* alumni – and even some of the winners – faded into oblivion following their time on the show. They might go on to record an album no one would know about or score a role in a Broadway musical, but they would never again be the household name they’d been for the five months they were on *American Idol*. There was nothing wrong with the life I’d lived before *Idol*, but it was depressing to think I’d probably just end up as a footnote on Wikipedia. Oh well - before this, my name wasn’t on Wikipedia at all, so a footnote was better than nothing.

“Thank you for the opportunity,” I remembered to tell the judges and producers after the live broadcast, wiping away my tears. “I had an amazing experience.”

And it was true. But now that experience was finished, and so was my shot at a music career. The next morning, I'd be on a flight back to Illinois, back to my old life, back to the nursing home. There would be no record deal for me, no summer tour. My journey was over.

The end.

Chapter 2

A month after my *Idol* elimination, my life was back to normal. I was home, living alone in my one-bedroom apartment, working at the nursing home, and writing songs for an album I'd probably never record. Sometimes I got recognized when I was out in public, which was always a little flattering and a little weird, but for the most part, the hype had died off, and life had settled down.

I thought I'd be okay with that, but the truth was, I missed it. I missed the hustle and bustle of Hollywood. I missed all the fun opportunities that had come my way when I was one of "the Idols." Most of all, I missed performing on stage every week with a live band behind me and an audience before me. Singing to a room full of the elderly, half of whom were there but not really "there," just wasn't the same.

People kept asking me if I'd gotten any offers yet – for record deals, acting gigs, Broadway parts, commercials, anything. "You will," they assured me, when I told them I hadn't. "Maybe they're just waiting until the season ends, to make sure you're not still under contract."

I always smiled and said "We'll see," but I wasn't holding my breath. Eleventh place on *American Idol* may have been a significant accomplishment in my life, but in the larger scheme of things, it meant there were ten other aspiring singers who'd done better than me. I didn't think many producers wouldn't be interested in the one who'd come in eleventh.

Maybe that was just as well. I was twenty-eight, almost twenty-nine. I was supposed to be settling down, not chasing fame. All of my friends were married, and most of them owned their own homes and had children. All I had was my career. If I gave that up, I'd have nothing at all.

And then an offer came.

It came on a Wednesday night, toward the end of April. I'd just gotten home from work, my arms laden with a few bags of groceries and a stack of mail. I dropped everything on the kitchen counter and put away the groceries before sorting through the mail – mostly junk and ads, as usual. I set aside the bills, chucked the rest into my recycling bin, and pulled my cell phone out of my purse to plug back into its charger. I always kept it

silenced while I was at work, and as I went to turn the volume back up, I noticed a missed call. Viewing the call details, I frowned. It wasn't from one of my contacts, and the number wasn't familiar – in fact, there was no number at all. All it said was "PRIVATE CALLER."

I checked my voicemail, but there was no message, so I shrugged, left the phone on my counter, and went into my bedroom to change out of my scrubs. "Hammy!" I called on the way in the high, sweet voice I reserved for animals and babies. "Where's Mama's baby?" As I pushed open the door to my room, I heard a muffled grunt and saw a tiny snout appear under the dust ruffle, as my pet teacup pig, Hambelina, nosed her way out from under my bed. "There you are!" I exclaimed, kneeling down, and my little pig responded with an oink of excitement and scampered into my arms. I picked her up, cradling her like a baby, and brought my nose down to her snout, giving her Eskimo kisses.

I'd wanted a pet pig ever since I had seen the old cartoon movie of *Charlotte's Web*, which was also my favorite book. As a child, I imagined myself just like Fern, pushing around a little pink piglet in a baby carriage and feeding it from a bottle. Of course, my dad wouldn't let me have one then, and even now, he regarded Hambelina with a sort of amused disapproval. He had reluctantly agreed to take care of her while I was in Los Angeles, but only because he loved me, not her. He had grown up in a farming town, where pigs were raised to be food, not pets, so I didn't really expect him to understand.

After a minute or so, I set Hambelina down and stripped off my scrubs. I had just pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants when I heard my phone ring. Scurrying back out to the kitchen, I plucked the phone up and checked the screen.

PRIVATE CALLER.

Normally, I screen my calls; I rarely pick up for numbers I don't know. But after all the talk of "offers," I have to admit, I was curious. *You better not be a solicitor*, I thought, as I pressed the button to answer the call. "Hello?"

"Hi," said a man's voice, low and uncertain. "Is this Cary Hilst?"

"Yes, it is," I replied. "Who's this?"

"This is Nick Carter."

Now, of course, the first thought I had was of the Backstreet Boy. What other Nick Carters did I know? But "Nick" and "Carter" are both pretty common names, and that, coupled with the fact that there was no way the Backstreet Boy one would be calling me, made me think it had to be some other Nick Carter.

Whoever he was, he didn't say anything else after his introduction, prompting me to reply, "Sorry, do I know you?"

There was a pause. Then he said, “I think you know *of* me. You sang one of my songs on *American Idol*, didn’t you?”

My stomach lurched, and my heart started beating fast. I held the phone tight to my ear, my fingers suddenly sweaty, my cheeks very warm. *No way...* I thought. Then the cynical side of me came to its senses, and I scoffed. “No, really. Who is this?”

“Nick Carter.”

I rolled my eyes. At the same time, my mind raced. Who would be trying to trick me? I thought of my guy friends... Some of them knew I still liked the Backstreet Boys, but could any of them pull off Nick Carter’s voice? Because now that I thought about it, it did sort of *sound* like him... Sort of...

“You need me to prove it or something?” he asked, when I didn’t say anything back right away. He sounded half-irritated, half-amused. Oh God, he *so* sounded like Nick...

“Sure,” I said on impulse, trying to play it casual. If he was just someone messing with me, I didn’t want to seem gullible. “Prove it.”

“Alright... what’s your favorite Backstreet song?”

I considered this carefully. Here was a way to test him. “Evergreen,” I finally decided. It was a song they’d recorded for *Unbreakable*, but never released. If he wasn’t a Backstreet Boy (or a fairly hardcore fan – and none of my friends were), he wouldn’t know it.

“Evergreen, huh?” He chuckled, and my skepticism rose. He was totally stalling. But all of a sudden, he started singing! “*I’ve been on the run, slept under the sun, feedin’ off the clouds and eatin’ them like ice cream...*”

My mouth dropped.

“...*I’ve been all around, never left this town, blisters on my eyelids like it’s spring in Paris...*”

I pressed the phone against the side of my head, absorbing the sound of his voice in my ear. My cheeks felt fiery hot now; I was overheating.

“...*I’ve seen everything, I’ve dreamt every dream, I am every human...*”

It was him. I could hardly believe it, but it was so him! Nick Carter! On the phone! Singing to me!

“...*Oh, I’m not even finished... Can I stop now?*” he cut off abruptly.

I giggled at the irony and squeaked, “Sure!” My heart was pounding so hard, it felt ready to burst out of my chest at any moment.

“You believe me now?”

“Yes...” My voice was still higher than usual. “I believe you.”

“Good. I have a proposition for you.”

Later, I would laugh as I told people Nick Carter had propositioned me. “Okay...” was all I managed to say then.

“The North American leg of our tour is starting in another month,” he began. “It kicks off on the twenty-ninth of May in Miami and will run through the end of August, with a break in July. We’re looking for an opening act, and I thought of you.”

Gaping silently, I practically gagged as I sputtered, “Are you serious??”

“I saw you sing on *Idol*,” was all he said. “You wanna sing at our shows?”

“Um, yes!” I burst out. “But – I don’t have an album or anything...”

His reply came quickly, like he’d anticipated this. “But you have some songs, right? I mean, you’ve written songs? You’d only need, like, three for your set.”

I’d been writing songs since junior high, but that didn’t mean they were any good (in fact, it meant a lot of them were pretty bad). “Well, yeah...”

“So no problem.”

I shook my head. This was all so unbelievable, my skepticism was starting to set in again. “Dude, is this for real, or are you just messing with me? Did someone put you up to this?” I asked desperately.

“No, I’m for real.”

“How did you get my number?”

“Ellen DeGeneres.”

My heart sank. “You are messing with me! Or she is!” I groaned. This whole phone conversation was probably being recorded for a bit on Ellen’s talk show. I’d seen her segments when she made celebrities like Dennis Quaid and Paris Hilton go out and do silly things in public while she coached them through a bug in their ear. This was just another stunt like that.

“I swear, I’m not messing with you, Cary.”

When he said my name, I so wanted to believe him. But my dad hadn't raised me to be easily taken advantage of. "Why would she give you my number?" I demanded. "That information should be private."

"Cause I promised her an appearance on her show after the tour. Why, do you wish I hadn't called you?"

I sighed. "No," I admitted. "Just... are you *sure* you're serious?"

"I'm super serial." He said it deadpan, but with a lisp, like *South Park*'s impression of Al Gore.

I giggled again. Despite the humor, I had to believe him. I *wanted* to believe him. And he kept repeating that he was for real... "Okay," I said, "so then, what's the catch?"

"What?"

"You know – the catch? I'm just thinking this is too good to be true for me, so I wanna know what's in it for you," I pressed. I don't know why I didn't just say, "Sure, I'm in!" and leave it at that. I guess it's because, like I said, I wasn't brought up to be taken advantage of, and something about this whole "proposition" of his seemed off. Just as I'd told him, it sounded too good to be true.

"I told you, the tour starts in a month, and we still don't have an opening act. I saw you on *Idol* and liked what you did with 'Just Want You to Know.' I think the fans will like you, too. What do you think?"

It didn't occur to me that he hadn't actually answered my question. He sounded almost too serious, like he was starting to get annoyed by my grand inquisition, and I was afraid he was going to retract the offer and hang up on me any second, so I gushed, "I think it sounds amazing! Thank you! You don't know what this means to me..."

"Trust me, you're doing me a favor, too. Us, I mean. So listen, why don't I fly you out here in a couple of weeks so we can meet and talk about the tour? I know you probably don't have a manager or anything yet, so I can be that for you, for now. I can help you with your set and whatnot."

Again, I wondered vaguely why he would make such an elaborate offer, but this time, I didn't ask. With no thought to my job, my family, or the life I'd just gotten back in order after the roller coaster ride of *American Idol*, I blurted, "That sounds great!"

"Awesome. I'll be in touch," he said.

Then he hung up.

Chapter 3

I was on cloud nine the rest of that night, giddy with excitement and disbelief. I pinched myself quite a few times, convinced I had to be dreaming or hallucinating or something. I kept checking my phone, looking for “PRIVATE CALLER” in my list of recent calls, to make sure there had actually been a person on the other end of the line and I wasn’t just hearing voices. Nick Carter! That person had been NICK CARTER!

The next morning, reality sunk in. I woke up with a feeling of dread in my stomach and quickly realized it was because of the phone call – the phone call that had to have been part of a really incredible dream. I checked my phone again, and my heart leapt when I still saw the two calls from “PRIVATE CALLER” in my log. For a moment, I was elated again – it had really happened! In the next instant, my heart plummeted.

I realized he hadn’t left me any of his contact information. I didn’t even have his phone number, thanks to the whole “PRIVATE CALLER” blocked call bullshit. Nor did I have any details whatsoever. All he’d told me was when the tour started – and that I could have just looked up. Hell, I’d already bought tickets to their show in Chicago in June. That was another thing that seemed fishy – concert tickets had already gone on sale, but they still didn’t have an opening act? I was no insider in the music business, but to me, that was strange. And he was going to just “fly me out there” two weeks before the first show to “talk about the tour,” without even hearing any of my original music? I didn’t even know where “out here” was! I assumed Los Angeles, but I wasn’t sure. Hadn’t he also bought a place in Nashville? But the first show was in Miami... maybe he’d meant Florida.

Who was I kidding? I wasn’t flying to LA or Nashville or Miami. It was all clearly a joke. I’d been set up by someone – him or Ellen or Ryan Seacrest or... someone! I’d gotten punk’d.

I moped around the rest of the week, devastated. I told no one about the phone call. I felt like enough of an idiot myself; I didn’t need everyone else to know I was one, too.

Friday after work, I went out with a few of my coworkers for a much-needed Happy Hour. After a couple of drinks, I was feeling better than I had in days. On my way home from the bar, I rented a movie and picked up some comfort food and more booze, ready to spend the rest of the night in, making myself forget Nick Carter – or whoever could do such a dead-on impression of him – had ever called me.

When I got home, I fixed myself a rum and Diet Coke and sat down at my computer to check my messages before I put in the movie. I pulled up my email, and there, in my inbox, were two new message from Twitter. One had the subject, “Direct message from Nick Carter,” and the other, “Nick Carter is now following you on Twitter!” I nearly choked on my drink. Managing to avoid spewing my keyboard with rum and Coke, I clicked to open the first message.

Hi, Cary,

You have a new direct message:

nickcarter: is this the real cary? whats your fav bsb song?

Reply on the web at http://twitter.com/direct_messages/create/nickcarter
Send me a direct message from your phone: NICKCARTER

I clicked the link, and sure enough, it took me right to his Twitter page, his verified Twitter page, with a box for me to send a message back. In it, I typed: *It's really me. And as far as you know, my favorite BSB song is Evergreen. ;)* My hand shook as I reached for the mouse and clumsily clicked the send button.

Then I sat back in my chair, stunned. It was really Nick Carter who had called me. And now I had a way to contact him back, even if it was only through Twitter. It might have been the liquor, but suddenly, the whole thing seemed real again.

I refreshed Twitter and my email for the next hour, waiting for him to reply. When he didn't, I finally got up and put in my DVD, but I couldn't focus on the movie. I'd brought my laptop over to the couch with me, and I kept opening it up, checking to see if I had any new messages.

Lying on the couch with Hambelina curled up on my chest and my drink perched on the coffee table beside me, I fell asleep before the end of the movie. When I woke up, Hambelina was gone, and my Twitter page was showing several new tweets and one more direct message than I'd had the last time I checked. I sat up quickly and propped the computer on my lap, my finger fumbling over the touchpad as I tried to get into my direct messages.

Sure enough, the new one was from Nick.

nickcarter: whats your address?

I was disappointed that that was all he'd said, but I diligently responded with the address of my apartment. I wondered why he wanted it when he already had my phone number.

Though I didn't hear from him again all weekend, I found out why the following Tuesday, almost a week after he'd first called, when I opened my mail to discover a plane ticket tucked inside a plain envelope with no return address. The ticket was for a flight to Los Angeles that left the next Saturday. There was a handwritten note with it.

Tweet me to let me know you got this. I'll have a car pick you up at the airport and bring you to my place. See you next Saturday. – Nick

Besides tweeting Nick, there was a lot I had to do before the date printed on my plane ticket.

First I had to figure out my living situation. Nick finally gave me his phone number, and I called him to find out all the details he hadn't made clear in his 140 character tweets. It was hugely reassuring to be able to plug his number into my contacts and know that I could reach him, that I wouldn't be relying on Twitter alone as I flew into the great unknown. Nick promised to book me a hotel room in Los Angeles for the two weeks I'd be there before tour rehearsals began, so at least I knew I'd have a place to stay.

Then I had to notify the nursing home that, once again, I was taking off to California. It wasn't exactly a two weeks' notice – Nick hadn't given me that much time – but they didn't take it as such, anyway. The director was great, and just as he had when I'd made it onto *Idol*, he assured me that I'd always have a place there, if I wanted to come back. With *Idol*, I'd always assumed I'd be back, unless I ended up winning. This time, I wasn't so sure.

It was one thing to be in a singing competition where the top prize was a recording contract. It was another to be taken under the wing of an established musician. I would not only gain valuable stage experience opening for the Backstreet Boys, but if Nick had been serious about helping me with my songs, I would have a mentor all to myself. It still seemed too good to be true.

I wasn't the only one who felt that way. My dad tried to act happy for me when I broke the news to him, but I knew he was concerned. I was his only daughter, and he was the only family I had left. We were both protective of each other. It had been as hard for him to watch me go out to Hollywood for *American Idol* as it had been for me to leave him behind. But with *Idol*, there had been a contract and plenty of precedent for me to know what I was getting myself into. The only unknown was how long I'd last in the competition. This time, it was different. The journey I was about to embark on was full of unknowns.

To me, it was exciting, but to my dad, I'm sure it was scary. He had always been a skeptic, and I knew he was worried I'd be taken advantage of. "It's the chance of a lifetime," I told him again and again. "It may be a risk, but it also may be my big break. I need to do this." And he needed to let me. At twenty-eight, I'd been on my own for years, and I knew he couldn't stop me from going, but I still wanted his blessing.

He drove me to the airport that Saturday and helped me with my luggage. Before I passed through security, he hugged me tight and told me how much he'd miss me.

“I’ll miss you, too,” I said, my voice muffled by his broad shoulder. “But I’ll see you in a couple months, in Chicago.” I had already given him the tickets I’d bought for the show in Highland Park, one of Chicago’s suburbs.

“I can’t wait,” he replied, releasing me gradually. Holding me at an arm’s length, he offered a proud smile. “You’re gonna have a blast, kiddo. Big things are gonna happen for you.”

I grinned back. “This is pretty big on its own.”

“Thatta girl,” he chuckled. “Keep that attitude. That way you’ll stay humble when you’re a big star.”

I laughed and shook my head at the “big star” part. “We’ll see...”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “I love you, Cary,” he said gruffly.

“Love you too, Dad.”

“Call me when you get there?”

“Of course. Take good care of Hambelina for me.”

He grunted in reply to that, and I laughed. We shared another quick hug, and then we separated. I joined the line to get through security, while he turned to head back to the car. The line moved surprisingly quickly, and before I knew it, I was waiting at my gate for the plane, ready for my new journey to begin.

Chapter 4

I wasn’t sure who exactly would be picking me up from the airport, so when the plane landed, I took my sweet time getting off it, figuring it would be easier to find whoever was supposed to meet me if the terminal was less crowded. I had a window seat, so I just stayed put, letting most of the other passengers file out ahead of me. Then I grabbed my carry-on and joined the back of the line.

When I stepped into the gate and looked around, I realized I knew right where I was. LAX was starting to feel familiar to me. I’d flown there in January for Hollywood Week, then again in February for the *Idol* semifinals. Before that, I’d been far from an experienced traveler. I hadn’t grown up in the kind of family that took vacations. After my mom died, it was just Dad and me, and he wasn’t big on traveling. We went on road trips now and then – the kind where we’d stop at antique shops in small towns and take pictures of random roadside attractions, like the World’s Largest Catsup Bottle in Collinsville or the giant statue of Superman in Metropolis – but we never really made it

out of the Midwest. Believe or not, I'd never even been on a plane until I was twenty and flew to Florida with some college friends for spring break. So it was pretty weird to think I'd flown halfway across the country three times in five months.

Despite my best efforts to dawdle, the gate was still pretty crowded. I wandered around, wondering how in the world I was supposed to find my driver. It turned out to be a lot easier than I'd thought – I suddenly spotted a man in a dark uniform, holding up a sign with my name on it. Seriously, just like in a movie! He looked up and saw me at the same time I saw him, we made eye contact, and I hurried over, smiling in relief. "Hi!" I said brightly. "I'm Cary."

"Right on time," said the driver, smiling back. "Almost never happens here. Do you have checked luggage?"

"Lots," I replied apologetically. I hadn't had a clue what to pack for a two-month tour, so I'd pretty much packed it all. We made our way to baggage claim, where we stood around for a long time, waiting for all the luggage from my flight to make it onto the carousel. Finally, the bags started tumbling out of the chute. I pointed out my two bulging suitcases and ukulele case, and the driver helped me haul them down from the carousel. Then we made our way outside, my luggage split between us.

It was a typical California afternoon: bright, sunny, and much hotter than the Illinois spring I'd left behind. I started perspiring on the walk to the car, which turned out to be not *just* a car, not even a cab, but a limo! A genuine, shiny, black limousine! I was quite impressed when the driver opened the door for me and then went around back to start loading my luggage into the trunk. *Jeez, Nick Carter*, I thought, as I slid across the soft, leather seat. We'd gotten to ride in limos on *Idol*, but that was *American Idol*, the number one show on television. I didn't think the Backstreet Boys were doing quite so well these days.

I still wasn't sure what I'd done to warrant the whole royal treatment, but my best friend Jessica had some ideas. I texted her from the backseat after calling my dad to let him know I'd landed, and she replied, "*Wow, is he trying to score points or what! Don't let him get u in his bed yet tonite or he'll think ur a groupie!*"

"I'm not gonna sleep with him!" I texted back feverishly. *"Pretty sure he has a girlfriend."*

Her response to that was, *"Since when has that ever stopped a celeb?"*

I rolled my eyes. *"Please,"* I typed into my phone, my fingers flying over the tiny keypad. *"He could score any girl he wants. Why me?"*

"Why not?" came her reply. *"He obviously thought u were hot on Idol, or he wouldn't have called u. No offense!"* And before I could decide whether to be offended by her implication or not, my phone beeped with a follow-up text. *"Just be careful. Remember he dated Paris Hilton. He's prolly got VD!"*

I texted a two-letter response – “EW!” – and put my phone back in my bag. I was starting to feel nervous. It wasn’t the thought of Nick’s possible STDs that freaked me out – it was the thought of meeting Nick at all! I’d been a Backstreet Boys fan since I’d gotten their first album for my sixteenth birthday. I’d seen them in concert several times, but I’d never met any of the guys before. I hoped I wouldn’t clam up and embarrass myself around him.

Traffic was bad, as always, and it took a long time to get to Santa Monica, which was apparently where Nick lived. That gave me an equally long time to prepare myself for what I would do and say when I found myself face to face with him, which really just made me more nervous. When the limo finally stopped, I still didn’t have a clue.

The driver jumped out and opened the door for me. As soon as I climbed out, I looked up. I was standing at the base of a gorgeous high-rise, right on the waterfront. I could see the Pacific Ocean sparkling in the sunlight behind the building. “Wow,” I breathed.

The driver chuckled. “Swanky, huh?” he remarked, as he set my luggage on the curb.

Like a fancy hotel, the high-rise had its own doorman, who came over to help me with my luggage. I thanked the limo driver, quickly digging some cash out of my wallet for a tip, and followed the doorman inside. As he escorted me into a sprawling lobby, I tried not to look around too much. I didn’t want to act like a tourist, even though I felt like one. The interior of the building was even more impressive than the outside. I wondered how much people paid for the condos in it and if there were any other celebrities living there. Maybe I’d ask Nick once I got to know him better.

The doorman brought me to a front desk, and the security guard sitting behind it asked my name and business. Apparently he’d been told to expect me, because once I introduced myself and said I was there to see Nick, he got up, came around the desk, grabbed my suitcase from the doorman, and grunted, “This way.”

I followed, lugging my other suitcase into an elevator. I shifted my weight from foot to foot on the ride up. There were butterflies in my stomach, making me feel jittery. When the elevator doors slid open again, I took a deep breath before stepping out into a long hallway. The man with my suitcase took me down the hall and stopped outside one of the doors. He rapped on it three times, then moved aside, leaving me standing in front of the door.

It took a moment, but then I heard footsteps on the other side. A lock clicked. The doorknob turned. I drew in a sharp breath. Then the door swung open, and there he was. Nick Carter.

“Hi,” I breathed, with what I’m sure was a dopey smile and total deer-in-the-headlights expression.

“Hey,” he said casually, flashing his trademark half-smile. “I’m Nick.”

He held out his hand, and I took it. “Cary.”

“Glad you made it. Come on in. Lemme grab your luggage here.” He ushered me inside, thanked the security guard who had walked me up, and dragged my bulky suitcase in behind him. Closing the door, he said, “You can just leave all this stuff here, till I drive you to your hotel.”

I wondered why he hadn’t just had the limo take me to the hotel first, but I didn’t ask. I had so many questions, I didn’t know where to start. I let Nick do most of the talking at first. He made small talk as he showed me around his condo. Had my flight been okay? Was traffic bad on the way over? What did I think of the view?

“It’s beautiful,” I said, gazing through the sliding glass doors that opened onto his stone balcony, overlooking the ocean. “We don’t have scenery like this at home, that’s for sure.”

“Illinois, right?” I was glad he remembered to leave off the “S” at the end. Any Illinois resident will tell you they can’t stand when people pronounce it “Illinoise.”

“Yep. Mostly just flat land and cornfields, where I’m at,” I replied, with a self-conscious giggle. “It’s sort of pretty when it’s green in the spring and summer, but not like this.”

“Yeah... I like to have the ocean nearby,” he said, a faraway look in his eyes as he followed my line of sight.

My eyes shifted to him, studying his profile. He looked different in real life than he did in pictures. He was gorgeous, of course; his eyes were just as blue as the water outside his window, and with his face thinned down, I was able to follow the angles of his cheekbones and jawline, which was covered in a fine, blonde stubble. I could definitely appreciate how attractive he was, but up close, he looked older than I’d expected. There were lines on his face, creases in his forehead and little crinkles around his eyes. I figured his weight loss made them more noticeable. I knew he’d lost quite a bit, but it was even more obvious in person. He was smaller than I’d expected, too – tall, but lean. Skinny, even. His baggy jeans and t-shirt hung on him, but his body had never looked better.

“So,” he said, turning back to me, and I promptly blushed, caught in the act of giving him the once-over. “You want something to drink?”

“That’d be great.”

He gestured for me to sit down in his living room while he went to the kitchen. I couldn’t stop looking around, marveling over the fact that I was really sitting in Nick Carter’s condo. I felt like I was in the plot of some teenybopper fan fiction story. When Nick came back, carrying two cans of soda, he handed me one and flopped down on the white couch across from the chair I was sitting in, stretching out his long legs. “So,” he

said again, and I could sense him searching for something to say. Maybe I wasn't the only one who felt awkward. "Tell me about yourself."

I hated that request. It made it feel like an interview. Then again, maybe that's what this was. I'd been interviewed a lot for *Idol*, but I still never knew what to say. I supposed there was a lot I could tell him, but most of it wasn't very interesting. The most exciting thing that had ever happened to me, before this, was being on *American Idol*, and he already knew about that.

"Well..." I was grasping at straws.

He laughed at my hesitation. "Sorry – I guess that was pretty broad. So you're a nurse, right?"

"Nurse practitioner," I corrected with a smile. "It's like a step up from a nurse. I work in a nursing home, and I do a little bit of everything there." I left it at that, figuring he probably wasn't interested in the finer points of my job description.

When people asked, it was easiest to just say I was a cross between a nurse and a doctor. Like a nurse, I was able to develop a rapport with the residents and their families. I gave physical therapy and ran weekly focus groups for the seniors, and I got to know most of them that way. For the sicker ones, I took on more of a physician's role. I examined patients, ran tests and procedures, diagnosed problems, and prescribed treatments. I was a bridge between basic nursing care at the home and the more intensive treatment doctors would provide in a hospital.

"Sounds like a tough job," Nick said. "You like it?"

I nodded. "Most days. It's not easy, but it's rewarding."

I was nine years old when I decided I wanted to be a nurse. Seeing the gentle way in which the nurses at the hospice where my mother was dying took care of our family had a huge impact on me. They couldn't take away my pain, but they did my mom's, and in time, the knowledge of that helped ease mine, too. I would never forget the way they'd accommodated my visits, bringing me coloring books and treats to help pass the time I spent sitting around in my mom's room. They explained things better than her doctors did, in a way I could understand, showing me what each piece of equipment was for to make it seem less frightening. They gave me an old stethoscope to play with, which I kept until I was in nursing school myself, and showed me how to make balloons out of latex gloves. I remembered their compassion as much as I remembered the smell of the hospice, the sounds of the medical machinery, and the way my mother had looked in her last few weeks of life, and after I had accepted her death, I made a promise to pay it forward and provide the same kindness for other families like mine.

When he found out I was interested in medicine, my dad had pushed me to become a doctor instead. "Nurses do all the dirty work and get paid squat for it. The doctors are the ones who call the shots and make the big bucks," he'd urged. But at the time, I'd had

no desire to go to medical school. I didn't admire doctors the way I did nurses. My mother's doctors hadn't done much for her. They hadn't saved her, nor had they comforted and cared for her the way the nurses had. Even if it meant less money, I wanted to comfort and care for people, not give orders and walk away. So I'd gone into the nursing program instead and earned my license as a registered nurse.

The two extra years of school it had taken for me to become certified as a nurse practitioner had been a compromise to my dad. He was a blue collar worker who had never gone to college, and he wanted better for me. As a CNP, I made more money than I had as an RN. I also got to make more of my own decisions, take fewer orders from doctors, and do less scut work. Yet I still saw fewer patients and had more time to spend with them. It was the perfect position for me. Sitting there across from Nick, I wondered if I'd been a fool to leave it.

"I never considered singing for a living instead," I told him. "I guess I was always practical enough to realize most aspiring singers never make it in the music business. I only auditioned for *Idol* 'cause my coworkers talked me into it, and it was my last year of eligibility. I'll be twenty-nine in June."

"Aren't you glad you did?"

"Oh, sure!" I said quickly. "It was a cool experience. I've always liked performing, but I never dreamed I'd have the opportunity to sing on national television! It was a wild ride, though. A roller coaster. First I was up, and then I was down..."

"... and now you're here," Nick finished for me, his lips twitching into another half-smile.

"And now I'm here," I repeated, smiling back at him. "So... now what?"

He licked his lips and considered me through narrowed eyes. "Now... I guess I should tell you something about *myself*."

"Okay..." I said, amused. When he didn't say anything back, I prompted, "So... what are you going to tell me?"

He leaned forward. "It's a secret," he said in a low voice. "Something nobody else knows..."

I raised my eyebrows and waited, wondering how juicy it could be.

"I..." he started, then paused, seeming to channel Seacrest. He locked eyes with me, and when he had me at the brink of suspense, he finished, "...just farted."

"Ew!" I cried, as I burst out laughing, wrinkling my nose. "That is charming. Just charming. Do you always woo your opening acts this way?"

He snickered. “Eh, a good belch works just about as well. I can do it on command, you know.”

“Wow. You are *truly* talented.”

Nick was still laughing. I grinned at him, but my smile faded as his chuckles went on. There was something strange about the way he kept laughing, like he was forcing it. When the laughter finally died down, an odd expression flickered across his face, like a passing shadow. It was just for a split second, and then he turned away from me, reaching for his drink.

I watched him take a long swig from the can. “You’re not gonna demonstrate for me?” I teased, when he set it back down on the coffee table.

“Huh? Oh.” He chuckled again, and it sounded just as forced. “Nah, I’ll save that one for next time. Gotta give you a reason to come back, right?”

“An audience for my music is plenty reason enough,” I said, smiling at him again.

He returned the smile, but it didn’t seem to reach his eyes. “Good,” was all he said back. He glanced down at his lap, tugging at the hem of his t-shirt. I stared at him, long after he’d broken eye contact. He was holding back somehow, hiding something.

There was no doubt in my mind that Nick Carter had secrets, and they didn’t have anything to do with farts.

Chapter 5

“So,” said Nick, “you wanna have a jam session? Show me some of your stuff?”

I’d been prepared to be asked at some point, but that didn’t make me any less nervous. “Sure, I’d love to!” I replied brightly, trying to hide my nerves. *Get over it*, I scolded myself on the way to get my ukulele from the front hall. If I couldn’t perform for him now, how did I expect to be able to open for him every night?

I followed Nick into a spare bedroom, which he’d converted into his home office and own personal music studio. All of his instruments were set up there – a shiny drumset in one corner, a pair of guitars and an amplifier in another, and a big keyboard with lots of buttons set up along one wall. Taking up the opposite wall was a large, wrap-around desk, which held a desktop computer and two different laptops. I could see some kind of music software up on one, a video game paused on another.

“You play anything?” Nick asked, noticing my interest in his equipment. “I mean, besides the ukulele?”

“Piano,” I replied, realizing he meant instruments and not video games. “A little guitar, but I’m not very good. It’s tougher to master than the ukulele – a lot more chords, and my fingers don’t stretch to make them as easily.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I hear ya. I’m gettin’ better on guitar. Been tryin’ to learn our songs so I can play more on tour.”

“Really? Are you going to play this tour? That’d be great!” I enthused.

He shrugged. “We’ll see.” Then, without my having to ask, he strode across the room and picked up his acoustic guitar. He looked down at the strings, the tip of his tongue poking between his teeth while he concentrated on getting his fingers in the right position, and then he started to strum.

It took me a minute, but I recognized the chord progression. “Quit Playing Games.” Without really thinking, I started to hum the familiar intro. “*Da, DA...na...da-na-NA...na...da-na-NA...na...na...na...*”

Nick looked over at me and grinned, still strumming. I faltered. “No, come on,” he urged, as he played the progression again, leading into the first verse. “You know the words, don’t ya?”

My confidence boosted, I grinned back and joined in with the lyrics Brian usually sang. *“Even in my heart... I see... you’re not being true to me. Deep within my soul... I feel... nothing’s like it used to be. Sometimes I wish I could... turn back time... impossible as it may seem, but I wish I could... so bad... baby... Quit playing games with my heart...”*

“*Quit playing games with my heart,*” Nick sang under me, watching his fingers move over the guitar strings.

“*With my heart...*”

“*Before you tear us apart...*”

“*My heart...*”

“*Quit playing games with my heart...*”

“*I should have known from the start...*”

“*Before you got in my heart...*”

“*From my heart...*”

“*Quit tearin’ us apart...*”

“My heart...”

“Quit playing games with my heart...”

Nick’s voice crescendoed into the second verse, the one he was used to singing. *“I live my life... the way... to keep you comin’ back to me. Everything I do... is for you... so what is it that you can’t see?”* I stared at him, mesmerized by the pure sound of his voice over the acoustic guitar. *“Sometimes I wish I could... turn back time... impossible as it may seem, but I wish I could... so bad... baby... You better quit playing games with my heart...”*

This time, we traded, and I jumped in with the back-up vocals while he sang lead on the chorus. I thought we actually sounded pretty good, until we hit the bridge, and his fingers stumbled over the key change. “Shit,” he said, as he hit the wrong chord. “I always mess up on this part... hang on...” He played around, trying to get the right combination of strings, but finally he gave up and sat the guitar down on his lap. “Ah well... the first part sounded good, anyway.”

I beamed. My heart was beating fast with the surge of adrenaline that had shot through me, but my nerves were gone. “Once you get the rest of it down, you should totally play it that way at your shows,” I told him.

“Thanks,” he said, with a quick flicker of a smile, then put his guitar down and looked at me. “Now your turn.”

After spending the afternoon with Nick, singing my original songs for him and playing on his keyboard, I felt a lot more comfortable around him. Still, I was surprised when he asked me out to dinner that night.

Of course, I said yes. I knew no one in Los Angeles, except for the remaining *American Idol* contestants, but they would be busy with rehearsals all weekend, so it wasn’t like I had anyone else to make plans with. “Do you mind if I freshen up first?” I asked Nick. I’d been wearing the same clothes since I got up at the crack of dawn that morning, well over twelve hours ago when you took into account the time change, and I was starting to feel pretty gross. If I was going out on the town with a Backstreet Boy, I wanted to look my best.

Nick offered me his guest room, and I lugged one of my suitcases in with me. My careful packing went out the window, as I rifled through it, looking for the perfect outfit to change into. I’m not usually what I’d call “high-maintenance” – you really can’t be when you’re a nurse – but I am pretty girly. Maybe it’s because my everyday outfit consists of scrubs and a ponytail that I look forward to any excuse to dress up. Besides performing, my favorite part of being on *American Idol* was having my own stylist!

I traded my jeans, top, and flip-flops for a spring dress with a bold, vintage, floral pattern and a pair of peep-toe pumps. Then I finger-combed my hair and touched up my makeup, applying a fresh coat of my favorite red lipstick. “You look nice,” Nick told me when I emerged, his eyes panning down my body and back up again.

“You too,” I returned the compliment with a smile. He had also changed – still a jeans/t-shirt combo, but the new pants and dark shirt were stylishly fitted, showing off his trim body. “You know, I totally admire you for losing all that weight and keeping it off for, what, two years?”

“Almost.” He flashed a crooked smile. “It wasn’t easy.”

“No, I know! Losing weight is tough, and sticking to it’s even harder.” I knew this from experience. I wasn’t fat, but my metabolism had caught on to the fact that I was pushing thirty, and I’d found myself having to watch my figure more carefully than I ever had before. I had managed to lose fifteen pounds after my *Idol* audition, wanting to look my best on the show, and since my elimination, five of them had already piled back on. Too many nights curled up on my couch with a pint of Ben & Jerry’s were starting to catch up to me. I hoped a hectic tour schedule would whip me back into shape, but I feared it would have the opposite effect – sitting on a bus all day and eating on the road didn’t exactly go hand-in-hand with a healthy diet and exercise. “I’m counting on you to keep me on track on the tour,” I added.

He grinned. “You got it. You can do the same for me. The other fellas eat whatever they want and never gain a pound; it ain’t easy trying to diet with them around.”

I shook my head. “No, I bet not. I deal with the same thing at work. You’d think nurses would be pretty health-conscious, but you’d be surprised at some of our bad habits.”

He shrugged. “No one’s perfect. You can know something’s bad for you and still do it.”

It sounded like he was speaking from experience. I nodded in agreement. “Very true.”

“So... you ready?”

“Yep. All this talk of dieting is just making me hungrier,” I confessed, and he laughed.

“Me too.”

We left the condo and were already on the road in his black Mercedes Benz before I realized I’d left all of my luggage in his entryway. We’d walked right past it on the way out, and he hadn’t mentioned it. Now he’d have to stop back at the condo before driving me to my hotel later that night. *Unless he’d planned it that way...* I pushed Jessica’s text from earlier out of my mind, telling myself I was overthinking things.

Just like that afternoon: why did I have to assume there was something he wasn’t telling me? He had been perfectly nice all day, a gracious host, and he’d let me play his

keyboard and complimented my music. We'd made small talk most of the afternoon, neither of us getting too personal, but that was to be expected. I'd only just met the guy! Maybe he was just more reserved than I'd expected him to be, and he needed time to warm up to me. A lot of celebrities were private people, and I didn't blame them one bit.

"So," said Nick, snapping me out of my wandering thoughts. "Dinner. What are you hungry for?"

I shrugged. I hated being the one to make a decision about where we went out to eat, especially when I wasn't familiar with the area. "I don't really know. Anything sounds good; I'm not picky. What do you feel like?"

"Steak."

I laughed. "That was quick. Why'd you ask me?"

"Just being a gentleman."

"Aw... well, I appreciate your chivalry. A steakhouse would be great."

"You sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be? Who doesn't like steak?"

"Um... vegetarians?"

I laughed again. "Well, I'm not a vegetarian, trust me. Like I said, I'm not picky. Take me wherever they have the best steaks around here."

His head bobbed in an obedient nod. "You got it, lady."

After all our talk about dieting, it amused me to watch Nick eat every last bite of the large steak he'd ordered and knock back two pints of beer at dinner. I wasn't going to comment, but as he heaped butter and sour cream onto his baked potato, he said, "Some days, you just gotta live it up, you know? Life's too short," and I agreed. I cleaned my plate as well and didn't feel guilty about it.

The prices at the steakhouse he'd chosen were outrageous, but when our waiter brought the check, Nick covered the whole thing. "You don't have to do that," I said, my wallet in hand, but Nick shook his head, refusing to let me pay my portion.

"Chivalry, remember?" he said with a grin I couldn't resist. "You can make it up to me later."

I didn't ask what he meant by that, but insisted on leaving the tip. After the bill was taken care of, we walked outside. It had cooled down considerably now that it was getting dark, and I enjoyed the fresh air as we stood waiting for the valet to return with Nick's car. It was such a pleasant night that I wasn't ready for it to end, so when Nick said, "You wanna check out a club or something?" I was game.

He took me to the Key Club in Hollywood, which turned out not to be the kind of club I was picturing, with loud, pulsing, techno music and flashing, colored strobe lights, but a three-story building with a restaurant on the top floor, a live music hall on the main level, and a laidback basement lounge. A heavy metal band played over our heads as we sat down at a table tucked in a corner of the lounge. I looked around while Nick went to the bar to get us drinks. "I like this place," I said, when he returned.

He nodded. "It's pretty chill. I had a birthday party here last year." He took a sip of his drink. "I didn't really feel like a dance club tonight, so I hope this is okay."

"It's definitely okay," I said, laughing. "Trust me, I'm not much of a dancer."

"Yeah?" He furrowed his perfectly-manscaped eyebrows at me. "I don't buy that. I bet you can dance."

I shook my head. "Not really. Not unless it's choreographed. I can't do freestyle."

"But anyone can do freestyle," he persisted. "That's why it's called 'freestyle.' You just do whatever."

"I think that's my problem," I said with a shrug. "I overthink it. I'm too self-conscious."

"Aw, you gotta get over that! I bet if I get a few more drinks in you, I can get you to dance." He flashed a cocky smile, wiggling his brows.

I suppressed a smile of my own and said in a sing-song voice, "I don't think so..."

"Heh. We'll see." He pushed my glass closer to me. "Drink up."

Raising my eyebrows, I took a long, slow sip and licked my lips when I was done. "Mm... nope. Still don't wanna dance."

"I said a few drinks, not one sip. You'll get there," he replied with confidence, tipping back his own glass. When he had swallowed, he said, "So you can't do freestyle, but you can do choreography?"

I shrugged. "I guess. I took dance classes as a kid, so I have a little background in learning choreography."

"What kind?"

“When I was little? Jazz and tap, till I was nine.”

“Why’d you stop?”

I couldn’t imagine he actually cared; he was just keeping the conversation going with something we had in common. I wasn’t ready to tell him about my mom, though, so I just said, “Eh, it got to be pretty expensive, all the costumes and tap shoes and whatnot, and I wasn’t that serious about it.”

He nodded. “I hear ya. Man, my mom shelled out way too much money on that kind of crap for me when I was doing auditions and talent shows and all of that, trying to break into the biz. Performing ain’t cheap.”

“I’ll drink to that,” I agreed, raising my glass. “Here’s to getting our big break.”

We clinked glasses and downed the rest of our drinks. Mine went straight to my head, and I could feel a buzz kicking in. I was more than happy to let Nick buy me another.

It was late when we finally stumbled out onto the dark sidewalk, our laughter ringing into the night.

Nick pulled out his keys to give to the valet attendant, but I grabbed his wrist. “I don’t think you should be driving home like this.”

“Ah, I’m not really drunk,” he argued, twisting his arm out of my grip. “Just got a good buzz goin’ on.”

“Nick,” I persisted. “Didn’t you get a DUI once? Don’t risk that again... especially with me in your car.”

He scowled, his head flopping down. “Yeah, you’re right,” he admitted grudgingly, stuffing the keys back into his pocket. “Fuck!”

“It’s okay,” I said quickly, alarmed. “Can’t we just take a cab?”

“Yeah, yeah... alright...”

He wasn’t pleased, but he conceded to leaving his car behind for the night, and we hailed a taxi. Nick perked up once we were on the road. The cab driver had the radio playing softly, and Nick kept urging him to “Turn it up! Louder!” With Lady Gaga’s “Telephone” blasting into the backseat, he turned to me and said, “I love this jam. If we’d been in a club that played this kind of music, I’d so have you dancing to this one.”

“You think?”

He fixed me with a penetrating stare. “I know.”

“That so?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely. Listen to this beat... how could you not dance to it? I’m sittin’ in the back of a cab, and I wanna dance.” He started bobbing his head in time to the music, then full out bouncing in his seat, grooving right, grooving left, grooving right into me. “C’mon, dance with me!” he cajoled me, grabbing my shoulder and shaking it. “C’mon! *Stop callin’, stop callin’, I don’t wanna think anymore; I left my head and my heart on the dance floor...*”

Once he started singing in falsetto, I couldn’t resist. I joined in, unable to keep from moving to the beat as I sang along. *“Stop callin’, stop callin’, I don’t wanna talk anymore; I left my head and my heart on the dance floor...”*

I’m sure the cabbie found us annoying as hell, and people on the sidewalk and in the cars around us were probably staring, but I was buzzed enough not to care. “See, this is freestylin’!” Nick exclaimed, as we “danced” in the backseat.

“I think there’s usually feet involved, but okay,” I replied, laughing.

He ignored me, singing, *“Sometimes I feel like I live in Grand Central Station... Tonight I’m not takin’ no calls ‘cause I’ll be dancin’... ‘Cause I’ll be dancin’... ‘Cause I’ll be dancin’... Tonight I’m not takin’ no calls ‘cause I’ll be dancin’...”*

This was the Nick Carter I’d expected – light-hearted, silly, and fun. He was as good as the booze at making me relax and really let loose for the first time that day.

But by the time the taxi made it through the Saturday night traffic and dropped us off in front of the high-rise, my buzz was starting to wear off, and I was getting sleepy. Nick’s silence told me he must be feeling the same way. “Wow, no wonder I’m exhausted,” I commented in the elevator, as I rode with him up to his condo to get my luggage. I had pulled my cell phone out of my purse to check the time. “It’s after two a.m. back home, and I’ve been up since five yesterday.”

“Dang,” was all Nick said. He had clearly run out of steam, too.

I was feeling gross again, and I couldn’t wait to check into my hotel, get out of my dress and heels, and take a quick shower before going to bed. “I left my other suitcase in your guest room,” I said when we entered the condo, already heading toward the room I’d changed in earlier. I didn’t think twice when he followed me in. “We should have asked the cab driver to wait,” I added. “Now I’ll have to get another one to go to my hotel.”

“You don’t have to go tonight,” said Nick. “You can stay here if you want.”

I turned to look at him. “Really?” I had to admit, the offer was tempting – more because I was ready to drop than because he was Nick Carter, but okay, there was that, too.

“Sure. I know you’re tired. Then you won’t have to mess with your luggage and another cab and trying to check in to your hotel in the middle of the night.”

“Yeah, that would be great, as long as you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind. I want you to stay.” He looked me right in the eye and lowered his voice. “I need you to stay.”

As I sank down onto the bed, I thought of Jess’s text again. *Don’t let him get u in his bed yet tonite or he’ll think ur a groupie!* I looked up at Nick and wondered how I could let him know I wasn’t interested without hurting his feelings. He was attractive, but I wasn’t the type of girl who slept with guys I’d just met, and he hadn’t given me nearly enough to drink to make me forget who I was.

“Nick...” I started awkwardly, already shaking my head.

Nick turned away. “It’s a good thing I’m drunk,” he mumbled, his back to me, “or there’s no fucking way I’d be able to do this.” And he pulled his t-shirt up and over his head.

For the first time in my life, I was afraid that I was about to be assaulted. I had never been in such a situation before, but instinctively, I stood up, unsteady in my heels. My mind raced, trying to work out how I would get past him if he came at me.

Slowly, he turned around.

I stayed rooted to the spot, frozen in fear. So did he. He didn’t move toward me, but just stood there, facing me, until my eyes swept over his body, taking it in a little at a time. I noticed his abs first, well-defined in the center of his torso. Then the tattoos, the big collage covering his left shoulder and the sun on his right, above the tribal band that encircled his upper arm.

And then I saw something that made my breath catch in my throat: a circular lump, about the size of a quarter, protruding from the right side of his chest, a few inches below his collarbone.

I stared, my eyes narrowed in confusion, my fear forgotten. Only because I was a nurse did I know what that was. I had seen it on patients, on some of the sickest residents in the nursing home. I raised my eyes to meet Nick’s, questioning him silently. When he didn’t offer up any answers, I had to ask. “You have a portacath? Why?”

He lowered his eyes and raised a hand to his chest, his fingers running over the catheter implanted underneath his skin. Then he swallowed hard, his adam's apple bobbing in his neck, and licked his lips, as if his mouth was too dry to speak.

Finally, three words croaked from the back of his throat.

“Because I’m sick.”

Chapter 6

Nick

The symptoms started overseas.

At first, it was just minor shit – coughs, fevers, fatigue. I thought I had a cold I couldn’t shake or some European strain of the flu that my flu shot hadn’t covered. We were all paranoid about the flu, ever since Brian got the H1N1, and we’d been acting like total germaphobes, dousing our hands in hand sanitizer after soundcheck parties, but we knew there was no surefire way to keep ourselves from catching some bug. It’s just an inevitable part of touring. When you’re on the road, always on the go, traveling different places and shaking hands with hundreds of people a day, you’re bound to come down with something. I don’t think a tour’s gone by where I haven’t gotten sick at least once. I usually just grin and bear it and soldier on through until it runs its course.

This one never did, though, and I went home for Christmas still feeling crappy. I thought I was just run down from two months of touring and was sure that a few weeks at home were all I needed to get my energy back. I did feel less tired when I wasn’t constantly traveling and performing almost every night, but the other symptoms didn’t go away. Looking back, I guess I was stupid not to go to the doctor then, but you know how busy the holidays are. I had so much other stuff going on between Christmas, New Year’s, and my thirtieth birthday, I didn’t make it a priority, and then I just ran out of time. Before I knew it, I was on a plane to Tokyo for the Asian leg of our *This Is Us* tour.

It was in Asia that I realized something was seriously wrong with me. I would run fevers even at night and wake up drenched in sweat, my chest heaving, like I’d had a nightmare, except I couldn’t ever remember having one. My cough had never really gone away, and lying down, I could hear myself wheezing, gunk rattling around in my lungs. When I was onstage, I would get short of breath way more easily than I ever had before, even when I was sixty pounds heavier. But the scariest symptom was the chest pain.

I knew it had to be my heart. Besides the obvious symptoms, I had two personal experiences to back up my self-diagnosis. First, I remembered Brian saying how tired he’d felt before his heart surgery, when his heart was enlarged. Second, I remembered

the way I'd felt, myself, at the end of the European leg of the *Unbreakable* tour, when I'd made the doctor's appointment that led to my diagnosis of cardiomyopathy. My cardiologist had said it was a condition that could worsen, but could also improve if I cleaned up my act and started living healthy. I'd done that! It really sucked to think that, despite everything I had done to take care of myself the past two years, this problem had gotten worse.

I placed a long-distance call from China to schedule an appointment with my cardiologist in Fort Lauderdale for the day after I got back to the States, and when the guys wondered why I was flying to Florida, instead of home to California or Tennessee, I told them it was just a routine check-up and a chance to catch up with some of my family. It was Brian who asked if I'd been feeling alright, Brian I had to lie to when I answered yes. I know I should have opened up to them about what was really going on – I could have used the support – but I wanted to find out what I was dealing with and how bad it was before I told anyone else. *Maybe it's nothing*, I told myself. *No point making them worry if it's nothing*. But I wasn't just being a hypochondriac. I was in denial.

Still jet-lagged from the long trip back from Beijing, I dragged myself to the private practice of my cardiologist, Dr. Richard Polakoff. I was his last appointment of the day. A nurse made me get on a scale on the way back to the exam room, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that I'd lost a few pounds since the last time I had weighed myself, despite having been too tired to work out much. I just figured all the dancing I did on stage was keeping me in shape, and besides, I was still following my diet.

After the nurse had taken my temperature and blood pressure and all that preliminary stuff, Dr. Polakoff came in. I had a lot of respect for him. He was in his mid-fifties and treated me like I was his son. I would never forget the way he had lectured me the day he'd called me in to his office to discuss the test results that showed I had cardiomyopathy. "You need to change your lifestyle," he had said sternly, scaring me with stories of other celebrities who had died young from the same heart disease. Then he'd added, "I don't want you to end up like that." It had stung to hear that, but I knew he was just looking out for my best interest. It was tough love.

I thought it was obvious that I had taken his advice, but after listening to me describe my symptoms, he still asked me lots of questions about my diet, alcohol intake, drug use, and exercise regimen. I'd fessed up to slipping a few times before, but this time, I swore up and down that I was living clean and trying my hardest to stay healthy.

"Well, let me take a listen, and we'll find out what's going on inside there," said Dr. Polakoff finally, slipping his stethoscope into his ears. "Take off your shirt, please."

I pulled my t-shirt over my head and wadded it into a ball in my lap. I winced when he pressed the end of the stethoscope to the center of my chest. Why do those things always have to be so fucking cold?

"Take a deep breath in," Dr. Polakoff ordered. "And out." I could feel the dull ache deep in my chest as it expanded, but when I mentioned it to the doctor, all he did was nod. "Another deep breath, please." He moved the stethoscope over my chest and around to my back, listening to my heart and lungs. Then he lowered the head of the padded table I was sitting on and asked me to lie down. He listened to my chest again while I was lying flat on my back, then tapped along my rib cage with two fingers. The whole time, he had a frown on his face. I hoped it was just because he was concentrating, but deep down, I already knew it was because he was hearing something he didn't want to hear.

After a few minutes, he removed the stethoscope from his ears and slung it around his neck. Then he used his hands to examine me, his fingers poking along my jawline, down my neck, under my arms, and across my chest. I wondered what he was feeling for, but he didn't say. Finally, he told me to sit up and put my shirt back on. When I did, he sat down on his stool in front of me, looked up at me, and said, "I hear fluid in your lungs. That's why you've been short of breath."

"What does that mean?" I asked. When I heard "fluid in your lungs," I thought of someone drowning, like the time my brother fell in the pool when he was little. I couldn't imagine how mine had gotten that way.

"It might just be an infection, like pneumonia. Your glands are swollen, and your history of fevers suggest your body's been trying to fight off something. But I do want to warn you, given your diagnosis of cardiomyopathy, it could be indicative of something much more serious."

My heart responded to his grave tone of voice, skipping a beat and then racing to catch up. "Like?"

"Pleural effusion – a build-up of fluid in the lungs – is a major symptom of congestive heart failure."

It took me a minute to comprehend what he was saying. Congestive heart failure? I'd only heard the term used for old people. I was only thirty years old! How could I be in heart failure? I looked at him, feeling betrayed. "How could I have that?" I demanded. "I did everything you told me to! I stopped drinking, stopped doing drugs, started exercising and eating right. You told me my heart would go back to normal if I did all that!"

"I told you I hoped it wouldn't deteriorate any further if you changed your lifestyle. And it might not have. Like I said, it's only a possibility I wanted you to be aware of, a worst-case scenario. Chances are, you just have an infection. I want to run some bloodwork and get a chest x-ray. We'll know more after that."

He called ahead to University Hospital and ordered the tests, then told me to drive straight over. I had déjà vu the whole way to the hospital, remembering the two days of testing he'd put me through before diagnosing me the first time. The blood draw and

chest x-ray were pretty painless, but it wasn't the tests themselves I was worried about. It was the results.

The next day, I was back in Dr. Polakoff's office, staring at an x-ray film of my chest. It was all pretty much a black and white blur to me. I could make out the bones of my shoulders, spine, and ribs, along with a big white blob in the middle that had to be my heart. But I couldn't tell if it was normal-looking or not.

"Well Nick, I have good news and bad news for you," said Dr. Polakoff, referring to the x-ray. "The good news is that your heart looks fine."

I blinked in surprise. "Really? So it's not..." I didn't want to say the words that had raced through my thoughts all night, keeping me awake.

"Not in failure, no. In fact, it looks in better shape than it did when you were first here two years ago. So that's the good news."

"Okay..." I said, trying to prepare myself. "So what's the bad?" Something told me it was still more serious than pneumonia.

Dr. Polakoff took a deep breath and used his finger to trace around a foggy section of the big white blob as he spoke. "The x-ray shows a mass in your chest."

"A mass?" I repeated, my voice going higher. "You mean like a tumor?"

He nodded. "That's what it appears to be. An x-ray doesn't tell us everything, though, so you'll need to undergo more tests to get a better picture of it. There's no way to know, for instance, if it's benign or malignant. All I can tell is that there's something there, compressing your lungs, which explains your chest pain and shortness of breath, as well as the fluid build-up."

"I thought that was my heart," I admitted, staring at the x-ray.

"The mass is near your heart," he said. "Your heart is down here." He lowered his finger to the bottom of the blob, which was brighter white, more opaque than the supposed tumor. Still, the two looked so close, it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

My short-lived relief over hearing that it wasn't my heart went away, and I was scared again. "Is it cancer?" I asked in a whisper.

Dr. Polakoff offered a reassuring smile. "Like I said, it's impossible to know for sure without further testing. Since it doesn't appear to be cardiac-related, I'd like to refer you to a specialist. You'll need a biopsy for an official diagnosis."

Biopsy... I didn't know exactly what that entailed, but I'd heard the word before, and it never sounded good. I stared at the x-ray, long after Dr. Polakoff left to place a call to a doctor he knew in Los Angeles, the specialist who would be able to diagnose me for sure. I couldn't stop looking at the shadowy blob between the two black spaces that were my lungs.

Alone in the room, I pressed my hand to the left side of my chest and moved it around until I could feel my own heart, pulsing beneath my palm. Then I moved it up and to the right, to the spot where the tumor appeared to be on the x-ray. My hand was right in the center of my chest. I pictured a tumor that looked like Slimer from *Ghostbusters*, buried deep beneath my skin, slowly engulfing my heart and lungs. The mental image alone made me feel light-headed and sick.

I left Dr. Polakoff's office that day with a manila envelope containing copies of my x-rays and bloodwork to take with me to my appointment with the specialist in Los Angeles. He had written down her name on an index card, along with the day, time, and location of my appointment with her. Though he wished me luck and told me again that the diagnosis might not be cancer, I couldn't help but notice the name of the clinic he was sending me to: *UCLA Santa Monica Hematology and Oncology*.

I didn't have a clue what was in store for me at that point, but I knew one thing: oncology was the branch of medicine that dealt with cancer.

Chapter 7

Nick

The clinic wasn't far from my condo in Santa Monica, but on the day of my first appointment there, all that meant was that before I knew it, I was parked on the top level of a parking deck, staring out my windshield at the large, white building that held a diagnosis inside.

I was afraid to go in.

I stalled as long as I could, finishing out the song on the radio, playing with my phone for a few minutes before putting it on vibrate, checking my reflection in the rearview mirror. My eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark sunglasses, so I couldn't see the look of panic in them. I could only feel it. I left the glasses and my baseball cap on when I finally got out of the car and trudged up to a pair of doors that led into the building. Even once I got inside, I didn't take them off.

I compared the card Dr. Polakoff had given me with a directory inside the doors. There were lots of different medical practices housed in the same large building, so it took me awhile to find the right one. By then, I was late for my appointment, but I didn't care.

Doctors were always running behind, and the less time I had to spend in a waiting room, the better.

When I finally found the right office, I thought I was in the wrong place at first. Everyone in the waiting room was old. Like, seriously, white-haired and wrinkly old. Was I in some geriatric clinic instead? I double-checked the name on the door. *Suite 550, Hematology and Oncology*. Nope, I was right. I slouched to the front desk, hoping that if I avoided eye contact with everyone in the room, none of them would look at me either.

The girl behind the desk looked up at me through the clear partition that separated us and smiled. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Um, yeah,” I said in a low voice, just loud enough for her to hear me. I glanced down at the card in my hand, but my new doctor’s name was some long, foreign thing I had no clue how to pronounce: *Chanda Subramanien, MD*. I’d been calling her “Dr. Submarine” in my head, but I felt stupid saying that out loud, so I just gave the receptionist my own name and hoped she’d have the scheduling information in front of her. “Last name’s Carter.”

I don’t know why I was trying to keep it on the down-low. The only other person under sixty in the room was the receptionist herself, and if she recognized me, she was at least being professional about it. “Do you have your insurance card?” she asked, and I dug that out of my wallet. She typed the information into her computer and then said, “Okay, Mr. Carter, you’re all set. I just have some forms we need you to fill out, and someone will call you back shortly.” She handed me back my insurance card and pushed a clipboard towards me.

“Thanks,” I muttered. I took the clipboard and found a seat in an empty corner of the waiting room. It was too hard to read the forms I’d been given with my dark glasses on, so I reluctantly took them off and tucked them into the front of my shirt. As I started filling out the basic personal information – name, address, place of employment – I found myself glancing up after every line, to see if anyone was watching me. No one was. Some of the people were reading or staring at the TV. Others looked half asleep – or half dead. I looked away from a particularly frail old man who was totally bald, the skin stretched over his bony skull so freakishly pale, it was almost translucent. He was the scariest, but just about everyone else in the room looked sick and old.

I don’t belong here, I thought. *This is wrong*. I was only thirty years old and in the best shape of my life – or had been, until all this shit had come up. There was no way I could have the same thing as these people. Dr. Polakoff was a good cardiologist, but what did he know about cancer? He was probably just guessing, and he was wrong. He had to be wrong. It was something else – not heart problems, not cancer, but something else that wasn’t as bad as either of those things.

I felt more confident as I started working my way through the questions about my medical history. I had to check a few things – yes, I had a few of the symptoms listed,

I'd travelled recently to Asia, and with some reluctance, I marked a *YES* for heart disease and jotted "cardiomyopathy" in the space for comments – but for the most part, I was a clean slate. I'd never had surgery before. I didn't have any allergies. I didn't have asthma or digestive problems or mental illness or any of the other medical conditions listed. I even got to check off *NO* for recreational drugs, alcohol, and smoking – okay, so I still had the occasional drink or cigarette, but for the most part, I'd kicked my habits. Seeing the long line of checkmarks in the *NO* column, I thought, *See, I'm healthy! How could anything be seriously wrong with me?*

When I finished filling out the paperwork, I brought it back up to the receptionist and gave her the envelope with my tests results from Dr. Polakoff as well. She promised to pass them on to my doctor, and no sooner had I sat down again than a door next to the front desk opened, and a nurse stepped into the waiting room. "Nick?" she asked, smiling in my direction.

I got back up and followed her through the door. "My name's Dora," she introduced herself on the other side, closing the door behind me. "Can I have you hop up on the scale for me?"

It didn't matter how old I got (though, from what I'd seen in the waiting room, I was a lot younger than her usual clientele); nurses always talked to me like I was a little kid. I almost wanted to answer, "Only if I get a sucker!" but I resisted the urge and dutifully stepped – stepped, not hopped – onto the big scale.

I'd hated this part of doctor's visits more than any other – even shots – ever since I was about eighteen and started filling out. It had only gotten worse in my twenties, but now that I had slimmed down to a healthy weight, I didn't mind it at all. In fact, it made me smile when I saw that the number on the scale was two pounds lower than it had been in Dr. Polakoff's office, just three days earlier. And I'd done nothing but veg out all weekend!

The nurse, Dora, wrote the weight down on the chart she carried on a clipboard, then said, "Right this way. Second door on your right."

Inside the exam room, I went through all the same crap I had the previous Friday. Dora took my vital signs, asked some questions about the symptoms I'd checked off on the medical history form, and told me the doctor would be in to see me soon.

It didn't take long. After just a few minutes, I heard footsteps outside my door, and then it opened, and a petite woman in a white coat came in. "Hi, Nickolas, I'm Dr. Subramanien," she introduced herself, extending a slender brown hand for me to shake. I tried to pay attention to how she pronounced her last name, but within five seconds, I'd forgotten already and was back to calling her "Dr. Submarine" in my head. "I understand you're here on a referral from your cardiologist in Florida."

"Yeah," I said, my voice cracking. My mouth had suddenly gone dry. I worked up enough spit to swallow, then added, "I thought there was something wrong with my

heart again, but he said there's not. He said it might be cancer." I said the last part with a tone of skepticism, hoping she would react with the same, laugh and tell me there was no way a young guy like me could have cancer in his lungs.

But she didn't laugh or even smile. Instead, she slapped a couple of x-rays up on a light board on the wall – my x-rays, I realized, when she switched on the light to make them glow from behind. This time, they didn't look like blurs; my eyes found the white mass immediately. So, apparently, had Dr. Submarine's.

"Your chest films do show what appears to be a mediastinal mass, which is a common finding in some cancers. However, x-rays don't give us the clearest picture, so I'd like you to have a CT scan and then proceed to biopsy. That should give us a diagnosis."

It wasn't what I'd wanted to hear. She wasn't laughing off Dr. Polakoff's ideas, but telling me they could be right. But then, she wasn't saying it was cancer for sure, either. I hoped the other tests would prove them both wrong.

"I recommend hospitalization for the diagnostic procedures," Dr. Submarine was saying. I had zoned out for a minute, but the word "hospitalization" snapped me back to reality. "The symptoms you presented with – shortness of breath, water on the lungs – suggest we need to identify and begin treating your condition as soon as possible, and the diagnostic process will move faster if it's done on an inpatient basis."

"You're putting me in the hospital?" I asked, though I was already pretty sure that's what she was saying.

The doctor nodded. "Only for a few days, I hope," she added, as if this made it any better.

I sighed. "When?"

"Today, if possible."

I stared at her, feeling completely overwhelmed, as if a wave of panic had crashed over my head. I was drowning in information, drowning in fear.

"Are you okay with Ronald Reagan?"

It took me a second to realize she was asking about my hospital preference, not my favorite president. Ronald Reagan Medical Center was the largest UCLA hospital and the best in LA. Lots of famous people had been treated there. That didn't make me any less apprehensive about going. "Sure," I mumbled, "that's fine."

She nodded and smiled at me for the first time. "I'll call to let them know you're coming."

Hours later, as it started getting dark and the lights of Los Angeles grew brighter outside my window, I lay in a hospital bed, alone in my new room at Ronald Reagan.

I couldn't complain about the room – I'd visited hospitals before and seen what the rooms looked like, and this one, by comparison, was pretty nice. It was decorated in shades of blue – pale blue walls, dark blue furniture, medium blue floor tiles around the perimeter. Ocean colors. I guess it was supposed to be relaxing, but I couldn't exactly relax.

The room was private, of course, with a curtain (also blue) that I could pull around my bed if I needed, I dunno, "extra" privacy. That was nice, considering I was still paranoid about TMZ or some other paparazzi fuckbags figuring out I was there. Not like they would really care – it wasn't like I was Michael Jackson or Britney Spears – but still, a story's a story, and if word got out that one of the Backstreet Boys was in the hospital, being tested for cancer, I had a feeling it would make the entertainment news.

I was glad for the privacy, but lonely, too. I've never really liked being by myself, and it was especially depressing being by myself in that room, the only one who knew what was going on with me. I looked over at the blue couch and footstool under the window, and at the two chairs that could be pulled up to my bedside, and I realized there was enough room for a whole family to come visit. But picturing my crazy family crowding around me all at the same time made me feel slightly panicky again. I love them and all, but I wouldn't have wanted them there, anyway.

Some company would have been nice, but every time I thought about picking up the phone in my room and calling one of the guys – my real family, even if not by blood – I chickened out. What would I say? "*Hey Frick, it's me; just letting you know I'm in the hospital to find out if I have cancer. Wanna hang out with me till I know?*" Even if I could find a less retarded way of putting it into words, I didn't want to. Saying the words would make it real. I would rather pretend I was stuck in a nightmare I just hadn't woken up from yet. If the guys knew about my nightmare, then I would know it wasn't really a nightmare at all.

Besides, I didn't think it was fair to freak them out before I had a diagnosis. If I involved them, they would be stuck worrying as much as I was, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone else. I could tough it out, handle things on my own until I found out what I was dealing with. Then I'd figure out what to tell the guys.

With a sigh, I reached up and turned off the light above my bed, then rolled over onto my side, clutching the pillow tight. I knew it was going to take me a long time to get to sleep that night. My CT scan and biopsy were scheduled for the next morning, and I was nervous, especially for the biopsy. Even though I'd just talked myself out of calling one of the guys, I wished again that there was someone else in the room with me, someone to sit in the chair beside my bed and talk me to sleep, or better yet, someone to curl up in bed with me and just hold me.

I wanted Lauren.

It would have been comforting just to have her there, to listen to her soft breathing and feel her warm, firm body pressed up against mine. I missed her, but I wouldn't call her either. It wouldn't be right. We had broken up two months ago, sometime between New Year's and my birthday, on the break between legs of the world tour.

For the first time in my long line of relationships, I hadn't seen it coming. I was happier with her than I'd been in a long time, and I'd thought she felt the same way. She had seemed happy enough on tour. But then, Lauren was the type of person who hid her feelings, bottled them up and let them build until she exploded. It had all been too much for her – too much time on the road, away from her family, and too much pressure from the fans who hated her just because I loved her. After spending the holidays at home, she'd told me she wasn't going back overseas with me. She didn't want me to go, either. She was ready to settle down, and she wanted a commitment from me.

I wasn't ready. As much as I loved her, I didn't want to pull a Kevin and give up the life I loved to stay in one place and raise a family. I wasn't sure I even wanted a family. I wanted Lauren, but I wanted her with me on the road. To me, that kind of commitment was more important than the kind that's symbolized by a ring.

Lauren didn't agree. She wanted to focus on her own career for once, instead of mine. She wanted to have me to herself for once, instead of having to share me with fans. She wanted us to get married and start a new life together in Los Angeles.

I wanted her, but I didn't want those same things. I loved my life the way it was. In the end, I'd had to give up her to keep the rest of it, and though I would always love her, I resented her for that.

Still, I missed her. I missed the kind of relationship we'd had. I missed having that one person I could tell anything to. Especially then.

I closed my eyes and kept them shut, willing my thoughts to shut down too, willing myself to fall sleep. I might have dozed off after several hours, but when I woke up, it was still dark, and I was still alone.

Chapter 8

Nick

Twenty-four hours later, not much had changed. I was still in the hospital, still alone, and still in the dark – both figuratively and literally.

I'd been put through three tests that day, but the technicians told me I wouldn't hear the results until at least the next day. The CT scan wasn't bad; the hardest part had been trying to lie perfectly still while I was inside the big, round machine that was scanning me. The biopsy – big surprise – was a lot worse. I figured they'd put me to sleep, but they only sedated me a little, numbed me up, and made me lie there, perfectly still again and perfectly still awake, while they stuck a long-ass needle in my chest to chisel off a piece of the tumor.

"What if I cough?" I asked, when the doctor who did the biopsy told me how important it was for me to hold absolutely still while the needle was in – like I'd suddenly spring off the table and start doing the "Everybody" dance with a needle sticking out of my chest.

Without missing a beat, the doctor looked me in the eye, straight-faced, and said, "Don't."

"But – what if I have to??" I'd had a cough for months; it seemed likely. But somehow, I managed not to cough, and I got through the biopsy with nothing more than a tiny hole in my skin where the needle had gone in. I touched the spot through my hospital gown; it was tender and covered with a gauze bandage.

They'd surprised me with the third procedure, which was called thoracentesis. I wouldn't have had a clue what that meant before that day, which was probably a good thing, since it involved draining the fluid that had built up in my lungs with another long needle. This time, they had me sit up and lean over a table while they stuck the needle into my back and drained the fluid through a tube into a container that was sent to a lab for testing. So I had another hole and another bandage on my back. I was sore, but I felt better. It was a lot easier to breathe with clear lungs.

I'd almost be able to sleep, if I wasn't still so freaked out. But I couldn't relax, knowing that I might have cancer. So I turned on the TV in my room and flipped through the channels, trying to find something that would take my mind off what might be wrong with me.

It was a Tuesday night, and *American Idol* was on. I'd never really watched the show before; it seemed like we were always out of the country when it was on, and even when we weren't, I didn't really get the hype. But on that night, figuring it might give me a laugh to mock some bad singers, I left it on.

It turned out that they were already past the funny bad audition part, so it was just the good ones left. A guy named Lee was on stage, singing "The Letter" by the Box Tops in a weird, sort of big band, jazz style, complete with a brass band and three groovin' back-up singers. I thought it was pretty cheesy and over the top, but go figure, the judges loved it.

"Lee, Lee, Lee..." said Randy Jackson. "So, uh... you know what's cool, man? It's cool that you chose this kinda bluesy, soul version of this song because when I heard what

you were choosing, I was like, wow, in all of the number ones, you chose this? But you know what, dude? You knocked it out of the box! Way to start off the show!"

Ellen DeGeneres went on some rambling analogy about a pen, and the other girl judge talked about how much he had grown since the first time he'd performed onstage. Only Simon Cowell said what I was thinking. "That, to me, was not a recording performance. That was you doing something quite corny – it was," he insisted, as the live audience started booing. "It actually was. You sounded good; you were bouncing around onstage a little bit, but I think you're kind of missing the point I was trying to say last week about having 'a moment.' That doesn't define you as a contemporary recording artist."

Who'd have guessed that was the guy that would end up winning?

The show went to a commercial break and returned with Ryan Seacrest sitting on a stool next to a pretty, dark-haired girl. "Back with you on *Idol*, we are celebrating chart-topping hits tonight. Here's a cool fact: former Idols have earned two-hundred-sixty-one Billboard number ones since the show started back in 2002. Hoping to add to that is Cary Hilts, who is sitting here." Seacrest turned to the girl on the stool beside his. "Cary, with so many top songs to choose from, how did you narrow down your song choice this week?"

"I had a really hard time with it!" exclaimed Cary, leaning forward on her stool. "You know I like the classics, and it was tempting to choose something from the early days of the Billboard chart, but I was afraid of falling into a rut, 'cause in the top sixteen, the judges told me I was in danger of sounding too old. So I was looking through all the number ones over the years, and I looked up the song that was number one when I was born, July fifth, 1981. It was 'Bette Davis Eyes' by Kim Carnes, which is such a great eighties song. I did a little research and found out that that version is actually a cover; the original was written and recorded by Jackie DeShannon in the seventies. I listened to her version and thought it was really jazzy and fun, so that's the version I'm singing tonight."

I could tell she was nervous by how fast she said all of that, but after the first guy, who just sort of stood there looking half-asleep while the judges critiqued him, I found the passion she put into her long-winded explanation charming. It helped that she was a cute girl – big green eyes that shone with enthusiasm as she talked, dark brown hair curled into ringlets that bounced over her shoulders, and bright red lips that matched the flower pinned behind one ear. She had the look of a fifties pin-up model.

"Well, we can't wait to hear it," said Seacrest. "Let's take a look at your session with Miley."

The show cut to a clip of Miley Cyrus coaching Cary on her song. When that was over, the live feed returned to Cary, now standing in the center of the big stage, between a piano player and the same back-up singers who had performed with the first guy. The band behind her struck up a jazzy number that sounded nothing like "Bette Davis Eyes"

to me, and the piano player joined in with a honky tonk-style accompaniment. Only when the singer came in with the lyrics did I recognize the song.

“Her hair is hollow gold... her lips a sweet surprise... her hands are never cold... she’s got Bette Davis eyes. She’ll turn the music on you... and you won’t have to think twice... she’s pure as New York snow... she’s got Bette Davis eyes...”

She had a unique voice – not powerful, but sweet and bluesy, like an old-fashioned jazz singer. I liked it a lot; it was interesting to listen to.

“And she’ll tease you... she’ll unease you... all the better just to please you. She’s precocious... and she knows just what it... takes to make a pro blush. She’s got... Greta Garbo stand-off sigh; she’s got... Bette Davis eyes.”

“*She’s got Bette Davis eyes,*” echoed her back-up singers.

I had picked up the habit of watching for other singers’ little quirks from Brian, who had his imitations of each us singing down pat. He kept the fans entertained at soundcheck by acting like me, dropping to his knees and raking his hands through his hair with a look of pure constipation on his face. I didn’t think I was that bad, but his impressions of AJ’s slouch, Howie’s cheesy salsa moves, and what the fans referred to as Kevin’s “turtle dance” were pretty dead-on, so maybe I was.

“She’ll take a tumble on you... roll you like you were dice... until you come up blue... she’s got Bette Davis eyes...”

Anyway, after years of hanging around Brian, I’d started looking for the same things, the signature little moves every stage performer had. I could mock Brian’s squinty-eyed, heart-patting, foot-lifting, pointing thing at least as well as he could imitate me. Cary, I noticed, was a wiggler. She had this one little dance move she did as she sang, sort of like the twist, where she’d shimmy her shoulders and wiggle her hips, making the full skirt of her blue cocktail dress swish around her knees. She did this in time to the music, and it was pretty cute.

“She’ll expose you... when she blows you... off your feet with the crumbs that she throws you. She’s ferocious... and she knows just what it... takes to make a pro blush. All the boys... think she’s a spy; she’s got... Bette Davis eyes. Greta Garbo stand-off sigh; she’s got... Bette Davis eyes,” she repeated, slowing down to her finish. “*Oh, Bette Davis eyes...”*

“*She’s got Bette Davis eyes!*” chirped the cheesy back-up singers, as the piano plucked out its last notes.

The audience cheered, and the camera cut to the judges. “Yo... okay, look, yo,” started Randy, once the studio had quieted down. “Cary, Cary, Cary... look, you know I’m a fan, but I gotta be honest, dawg. That just didn’t really work for me.” He held up his hands

in defense as the audience started booing. “Sorry, but I dunno, man, it was just kinda weird for me.”

I blinked at the TV; dude was even less articulate than me.

“Well, Cary, first of all, you look great,” said Ellen, all blue eyes and smiles. “This maybe wasn’t your best performance, but for me, it’s all about entertainment, and you know what? I was entertained. Great job.”

“This wasn’t a bad performance, Cary,” added the third judge, Kara. “You looked like you were having fun up there, and that’s important. Your stage presence has really grown over the last few weeks, as you’ve gained this experience. But now I want you to work on choosing the right song, the kind of song that’s going to present you as a relevant, contemporary artist. I’m looking for that ‘moment’ from you, and this just wasn’t it.” She scrunched up her features, offering an exaggerated, apologetic look, as some more boos rose out of the crowd.

Then it was Simon’s turn again. “I hate to be the bearer of more bad news,” he began, “but I agree with what Kara said about your needing to show us you can be relevant as a modern recording artist. We’re looking for the whole package, and that’s what’s missing from yours right now, Cary. You’re a pretty girl with a pleasant voice, but that’s not enough to set you apart from all the other pretty girls with pleasant voices who would love to be standing in your shoes right now. With you, everything’s just very old-fashioned, and I know that’s the sort of style you’re going after, but what works on stage in, say, a lounge or on a cruise ship doesn’t necessarily work on the radio. This performance was very cabaret, and if you want to stick around in this competition, you need to start being more current.”

He was cut off by the boos of the audience and the show’s theme music, as Seacrest crossed the stage to stand at Cary’s side. The number to call to vote for her appeared onscreen, just as I heard a knock on my door.

“Vitals check!” sang out a chipper voice, and I recognized my night nurse, a cute Hispanic girl named Reyna, as she came in. “Ooh, are you watching *American Idol*?” she asked, craning her neck to see the TV as the show cut to another commercial break. “Has Cary Hilst gone yet?”

“You just missed her; she sang right before the commercials,” I replied, holding out my arm so she could take my blood pressure. I was used to this routine by now; it seemed like every few hours, someone was coming to take my blood pressure, pulse, and temperature. “Why, is she your favorite?”

“We root for her on this floor,” Reyna said, as she strapped the blood pressure cuff around my upper arm. “Gotta support our own, you know?”

“She works here?” I asked, surprised.

“No,” Reyna laughed, “but she is a nurse. Nurses stick together, you know?”

“Ah, I see. She’s representin’.”

“That’s right.” She put her stethoscope in the crook of my elbow and pumped up the pressure on the cuff, squeezing my arm. “One hundred over sixty,” she said, once she’d let the cuff deflate. She unstrapped it from my arm and dropped it back into its spot on the wall behind my bed. “She sang one your songs, you know.”

“Huh?”

“Cary, on *Idol*. A couple weeks ago.” She took my hand and turned it palm-up, pressing two fingers to my wrist to take my pulse.

“Really? Which one?”

“Shh,” Reyna shushed me, staring at her watch. I shut up, waiting for her to finish counting. She jotted something on my chart, then said, “I can’t think of the name. It must have been one of your newer songs, ‘cause I have the old Backstreet Boys CDs, and it’s not on any of them.”

“Incomplete?” I guessed. I assumed the “old” CDs meant everything before *Never Gone*, and “Incomplete” was the biggest hit we’d had since then.

“No...” She stuck a thermometer in my ear.

I started naming off the rest of the recent singles in order. “Just Want You to Know?”

“Yeah!” Her eyes lit up. “That was it. It was really good, too! You should YouTube it.”

I eyed my laptop, sitting on the tray next to my bed. “Maybe I will.”

The thermometer beeped, and she pulled it out of my ear. “A hundred-and-one point eight. You’re still running a temp.”

“I know,” I muttered. “I always do at night.”

“Hm...” She pursed her lips together, looking at me seriously. “Well, I’ll let the doc know. That’s all I need from you for now; I’ll let you get back to watching *Idol*.”

I looked up at the TV; the show was already back on, and some pretty boy with a mop top hair cut was butchering Queen’s “Crazy Little Thing Called Love.” “Don’t you wanna stay and watch it with me?” I was only kidding, but I almost wished she would. It was nice just to have someone to talk to, someone who already knew what was going on with me but didn’t want to discuss it.

Reyna beamed. “Aww, you’re sweet. And if I didn’t have twenty-five other sets of vitals to take, I so would,” she flirted. “I’ll have to settle for watching it on my DVR tomorrow.” She flashed me another smile, and then she left me alone again.

I turned my attention back to the TV. The shaggy-haired kid was getting ripped a new one by the judges and grinning creepily the whole time. Weird. The show went to another commercial break after that. Jeez, it sure showed a lot of commercials. Sighing, I looked over at my phone. It seemed to be staring back at me, accusingly, as if to say, *Why haven’t you called anyone yet?*

Cause there’s nothing to tell yet, I thought, rolling away from the phone. Tomorrow... maybe tomorrow, I’d finally find out what was wrong with me.

Despite the prospect of another restless night ahead, the thought didn’t make me eager for morning to come. Maybe I would find out... but maybe I was afraid to.

Chapter 9

Nick

I was still picking at my breakfast the next morning when Dr. Submarine came to see me.

Maybe it was because I was still half-asleep or something, but at first, I was surprised to see her. As far as I knew, she hadn’t set foot inside the hospital since I’d checked in, and if she had, she hadn’t come to my room. I had only dealt with the radiologist who had done my biopsy and the nurses and residents on call on my floor – and they changed each shift. So at first it was kind of nice to see a familiar face, even if I still couldn’t pronounce the name that went with it. But then, noticing the stack of papers in her hand, I realized why she was there.

She had a diagnosis.

I looked questioningly at her as she walked into the room. “Good morning, Nickolas,” she said, but she didn’t smile. She hadn’t struck me as a particularly friendly woman at my first appointment with her in the clinic, but still, that’s when I knew it wasn’t good news.

My heart started to hammer, probably right up against the so-called “mass” that was in there with it. “Nick,” I said, my name sounding more like a croak. I cleared my throat. “Call me Nick.” I don’t know why it was so important to me right then, only that I would feel more comfortable if she wasn’t so damn formal. God, I wished she would smile...

“Nick,” she corrected herself with a nod. She still didn’t smile, and so it didn’t really help. “Your lab results are in from the procedures you had done yesterday, and I have a preliminary diagnosis for you.”

She paused then, like she was Ryan fucking Seacrest, waiting to see if I had anything to say before she continued. Of course, I didn’t; I just wanted to hear what it was, already. No – not *wanted*. I *needed* to hear.

I just stared at her, and finally, she cleared her throat, looked right into my face, and said, “I’m afraid it’s not good news. The CT scan showed a tumor in your thymus, which is a small organ in the center of your chest, above your heart. It produces special white blood cells called T-cells that help your immune system. The biopsy and analysis of the fluid samples from your lungs confirmed that the tumor is malignant. The official name for your disease is Precursor T-Cell Lymphoblastic Lymphoma – it’s a rare form of Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.”

Half of what she said had gone over my head, but I’d picked out the words “malignant” and “lymphoma.” I could put them together to figure out what that meant, but I had to double check. “It’s... it’s cancer, then?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “I’m sorry to have to give you bad news.”

She was sorry? Of course she was sorry; no one wanted the job of telling someone he had cancer. But I was the one with the cancer! I was the one who should be feeling sorry – for myself. But my reaction wasn’t what I’d have expected it to be. I wasn’t shocked. I think the shock had come back in Dr. Polakoff’s office, when he’d first suggested it might be cancer. Now that I’d dealt the possibility in my head for almost a week, it just seemed like she was telling me something I’d known all along. The only difference was that now I couldn’t hope for it to be something else.

I struggled to figure out what to say next. My doctor was still looking at me, waiting for my reaction, waiting for my questions. Later, I would have all kinds of questions, but in that moment, I couldn’t think of what to ask. Finally, I just said, “So how bad is this, exactly?”

“I can’t tell you exactly, until we know what stage it’s in. The stage will depend on whether or not it’s spread. We know it’s in your thymus and the lymph nodes in your chest, and your bloodwork showed over thirty percent lymphoblasts, the immature cells that form the cancer,” Dr. Submarine explained. “This disease often spreads to the bone marrow, the central nervous system, or other organs, so it’s necessary that you undergo more testing to check for cancer in those locations. I’m going to order another set of CT scans of your abdomen and pelvis, a bone marrow biopsy, and a lumbar puncture to check your spinal fluid. Once we have those results, we’ll be able to stage you and discuss treatment options.”

I was sorry I’d asked.

She wanted to know if I had any other questions, but I was already overwhelmed with too much information, so I just shook my head. “I’ll leave you alone to digest this news, then,” she said gently, touching my upper arm with feather-light fingertips. “I know it’s a lot to take in. Please call me if you think of any questions. If not, I’ll be back to discuss this with you again once we know more.”

For the first time, I felt some warmth from her, but then she was gone, and I was suddenly very cold. Sitting up in bed, I drew my knees to my chest and pulled the blankets up around my shoulders, hugging myself into a ball beneath them. I stared across the room without seeing a thing, my eyes out of focus, trying to wrap my head around what I’d just been told.

Cancer. It didn’t make any sense, didn’t feel real to me just yet, like these last few days of doctor visits and medical testing had all been part of a bad nightmare that was going to end any second now. Despite how crappy I’d been feeling, despite being worried enough to go to the doctor in the first place, I just couldn’t believe that it was cancer. I’d been so convinced it was my heart, I’d never even considered something like lymphoma, whatever the hell that even meant. I didn’t know, and right then, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

I’m not sure how long I stayed like that, huddled under my covers like a little kid afraid of the dark, but I only snapped out of it when an orderly showed up with a wheelchair to take me for my next round of tests, so it had to have been a pretty long time. As I reluctantly pushed the blankets off myself and slid my legs over the side of the bed, I had a sudden memory of being about seven years old and terrified that there were little gremlins living under my bed who would bite my toes if I let them hang off the side. I guess that’s what I got for staying up late to watch *Gremlins*.

It seemed funny to me now, to think that I’d once been that young and genuinely scared of something that silly. But things weren’t so different now. I was older, but still afraid of monsters. Only now I knew the monsters weren’t lurking under my bed. They were inside me.

“Hi, my name’s Bo; I’m gonna be assisting with the bone marrow biopsy today. Did your doctor explain this procedure to you?”

I looked up at the big guy who greeted me at the door of the small room I’d been dropped off at. I figured he was a nurse, since he wasn’t wearing a white coat over his scrubs. He looked more like a linebacker. I’m pretty tall, but looking up at him from a wheelchair made me feel tiny – the way Howie and Brian must feel whenever they stand by me. “Not really,” I said, to answer his question.

“No problem; I’ll talk you through it. First thing I’m gonna have you do is lie on the table, on your stomach. You can keep your gown on, but you’re gonna need to take off your boxers if you’re wearing them so the doc can access the area.”

If I'm wearing them... Right, like I'd go around the hospital in a backless hospital gown with no shorts on? I've been known to go commando from time to time, but only when there's something else to cover my ass. The way I see it, if I'm wearing pants, what's the point? But no pants? That's a different story.

Then it occurred to me what else he'd said. *So the doc can access the "area"? Uh... what??*

The look on my face must have given away my thoughts, because Bo the Male Nurse laughed and said, "Okay, so I guess your doc really didn't explain anything. Well, the point of this procedure is to remove a sample of your bone marrow – the stuff on the inside of your bones that makes blood cells – to test in the lab. For a biopsy, the marrow's always removed from your hipbone. So we'll have you lie on your stomach, and we'll cover the area with a drape so you're not totally exposed while the doc's extracting the marrow."

"Okay..." I couldn't believe I was agreeing. God, I didn't want to do this, but it didn't seem like I had much of a choice. Everyone was just expecting me to go with the flow, like this was normal or something. I grudgingly got out of the wheelchair, dropped my drawers, and looked at the padded table. How was I supposed to get on there and lie facedown without flashing my whole ass in this male nurse's face. Did it have to be a guy? A guy my age and twice my size? Then again, I supposed it wouldn't have been any better if it were a hot girl my age, a girl who might be a fan. At least I didn't think I had to worry about this dude getting on the Backstreet Boys fan club at home and blabbing about what my bare ass looked like in person.

Bo was cool enough to turn away while I got situated, and then, as promised, he covered my lower half with a sheet. A thin sheet, probably thinner than the skimpy hospital gown, but at least it was something. "The doctor who's doing the procedure should be in any minute," he told me. "What she's going to do is numb you up, then insert a special needle into your pelvic bone to get the marrow. You'll feel some pressure, but not pain. It should only take about ten minutes."

I was glad he couldn't see the look on my face this time. He sounded so casual when he talked about a needle going into my bone, I wanted to ask, *Dude, have you been through this?* But I didn't. I guess I was too freaked out to be a smartass.

The doctor breezed in a moment later and came around to the head of the bed, so that I could see her. "Hi, Nick, I'm Dr. McDaniel, and I'll be doing your bone marrow aspiration and biopsy," she introduced herself. I was disappointed to see that she was both young, probably early thirties, and hot, in a fresh-faced, girl-next-door kind of way. So now I had the linebacker *and* the cheerleader staring at my ass. Awesome. I hoped she was too busy being a doctor to visit Backstreet Boys message boards. "Has someone talked to you about what to expect?"

"Yeah," I grunted, "Bo filled me in."

“Great. Do you have any questions before we get started?”

“No.”

“Okay then. Gimme a minute to wash my hands and get set up here.” I turned my head and watched her move around the room, washing her hands thoroughly at the sink in the corner, snapping on a pair of surgical gloves, and assembling instruments on a tray that she blocked from my sight with her body. I wondered if that was intentional. Did she not want me to see the needle she was going to use? I wondered how big and thick it must be, to be able to penetrate bone... I started picturing a drill bit, rather than a needle, and getting sort of queasy. “You doing okay, Nick?” Dr. McDaniel asked.

“Fine,” I murmured, though I was anything but.

“Alright, then I’m going to begin. I’m just going to use some Betadine to disinfect your skin first; this will feel a little cold.” I couldn’t see anything, but I winced as something cold and wet was rubbed over my lower back, right above my ass crack. I kept waiting for her finger to slide in there accidentally. “Now you’ll feel a little prick, like a bee sting; this is an injection of a local anesthetic to numb the area.” I gritted my teeth and hissed in a sharp breath as I felt the needle pierce my skin. It burned at first, but in a few seconds, the pain was gone, and I could feel the numbness start to set in.

This isn’t going to be so bad, I thought at first, thinking the worst was over, that I wouldn’t feel anything else. Boy, was I wrong.

Dr. McDaniel waited until my tailbone was numb, and then she said, “Now I’m starting with the aspiration. You’re going to need to lie very still. You’ll feel some pressure as the needle’s going in and possibly a sucking feeling as I’m extracting the marrow, but you shouldn’t feel any pain.”

It didn’t sound pleasant, but since she was the second one in the room to have told me it wouldn’t be painful, I still wasn’t too concerned about that part. That all changed the moment the needle went in. I say “needle,” but although I never saw it, it really did feel big enough to be a drill bit. I felt the force she had to use to punch it through my skin and then more crushing pressure as it twisted into my bone. I could hear the bone crunching against the metal of the needle as it drilled through, and I wanted to scream. Instead, I clutched the pillow wedged under my chest and clenched my jaw. They could have at least given me a fucking bullet to bite down on, like the army doctors did when they were sawing soldiers’ limbs off back in Civil War times.

Once the needle was apparently all the way in, the pain changed. “Take a deep breath,” Dr. McDaniel said. I did, and instead of the downward pressure, I felt the opposite – a sucking sensation so powerful, it felt like she was trying to vacuum up my whole skeleton through a tiny straw. It took my breath away, and the lungful of air I’d been holding came whooshing out in a gasp of intense pain.

It was the most uncomfortable thing I'd ever experienced, and it didn't stop there – it repeated once, twice more, as she took more samples, three in all. That, I learned, was just the aspiration part – sucking out just the bone marrow fluid. Then came the biopsy, when the big needle went in a second time to get a sample of solid bone marrow. By the time it was all over, I felt sick to my stomach and didn't even care that there was a guy holding gauze over a hole just above my right butt cheek.

After lying still for a few minutes, I felt better, but I knew as soon as the anesthetic wore off, I was going to be sore. Turns out, I didn't know the half of it.

I was brought back to my room to rest, but just when I was finally starting to relax enough to take a nap, another orderly showed up to take me for my next test.

The dream team of Dr. McDaniel and Nurse Bo were back, this time to do the lumbar puncture. I didn't have a clue what that meant, until Bo said, "You might have heard it called a spinal tap." At first I pictured the movie, *This Is Spinal Tap*, which I'd watched with the guys on the tour bus I don't know how many times. Then I started really thinking about it, how the "lumbar" part of "lumbar puncture" didn't sound bad, and neither did the "tap" in "spinal tap," but when you combined the other two words – "spinal puncture" – it sounded horrific. It must have been, because if it wasn't, why wouldn't they call it a "lumbar tap" instead? A lumbar tap sounded like some kind of massage technique. A spinal puncture sounded like some form of medieval torture. I knew it was going to hurt.

They had me lie on my side, curled up into the fetal position. They opened the back of my gown again, but at least I got to keep my boxers on this time. At first, it was similar to the bone marrow biopsy, which didn't make me feel any less uneasy. Dr. McDaniel painted my back with Betadine, then injected me with a shot of anesthetic. I wasn't sure why she even bothered because even though my skin was numb, it hurt like hell when she stuck the needle into my spine. There was no crushing pressure or sucking feeling this time, just pain, pain that seemed to go on forever while I waited for her to finish getting the samples of spinal fluid that she needed.

Just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, the pain let up, and Dr. McDaniel said, "All done. You did great, Nick. Bo's going to get you cleaned up and have you lie flat for awhile before you go back to your room. You'll want to lie on your back in bed for a few hours this afternoon, so you don't get a bad headache."

The thought of lying on my back, which now had two puncture wounds from her torture methods, was not an appealing one, but I did it. I did it, and I still got the headache she'd warned me about. When Reyna came in to take my vitals that night, I was lying flat on my bed in the dark, my eyes squeezed shut, trying to block out the pain. It was so bad, it was making me nauseous, but the thought of sitting up to vomit was equally painful.

“You poor thing. I wish there was something else I could do,” Reyna sympathized, as she tightened the blood pressure cuff around my arm. “The pain meds still aren’t helping?”

“No,” I whispered, without opening my eyes.

“Sometimes migraine medications work on post spinal headaches. I’ll check with the on-call resident when I’m done here to see if he can prescribe something else for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure, hon. I can tell you’re in pain; your BP is high.” She patted my shoulder as she removed the cuff. “Maybe you need something to distract you. When you’re lying here in the dark, all you’re thinking about is how much it hurts. It’s after nine; *American Idol*’s on again, you know. Want me to turn it on for you?”

I didn’t give a flying fuck about *American Idol* right then, but maybe she was right about distracting myself. “Sure,” I muttered. I heard her fumbling around for the remote, and then I saw a flash of light through my closed eyelids as the TV came on.

“Ooh, lucky us, just in time for Miley,” remarked Reyna, and as the sound came up, I heard Miley Cyrus warbling some ballad.

“Yeah, when my... world... is falling apart, when there’s no... light... to break up the dark, that’s when I... I... I look at you...”

“She sings like a sheep,” I grumbled, and Reyna laughed.

“Yeah, I’m partial to ‘Party in the USA’ myself. *So I put my hands up, they’re playin’ my song, the butterflies fly away...*” She started singing as she moved around my bedside, putting the thermometer in my ear. *“I’m noddin’ my head like, ‘Yeah!’ Movin’ my hips like, Yeah!”*

For the first time all day, I cracked a smile, and a weak chuckle escaped my lips.

Reyna giggled. “Sorry, I know – really bad, right? There’s a reason I’ll never audition for this show.”

“Nah, you’re fine,” I mumbled, wishing I felt up to flirting with her. “Thanks for keepin’ me entertained.”

“Anytime,” she laughed, as the thermometer beeped. “Hundred-and-one on the dot. I’m starting to wonder if you just run hot.”

Okay, that was all the incentive I needed. “You kidding? Look at me... of course I run hot.” I opened one eye just a slit to peek up at her. She was grinning down at me.

“Oh, what was I thinking? Of course you do, hot stuff.” She laughed again and patted my arm, but just before she turned away, I saw her smile fade, her upturned lips falling down. “I’ll ask about the migraine meds,” she promised before she left my room. It seemed like she was suddenly in a hurry.

I got it. She felt sorry for me. She’d had to have seen my diagnosis on my chart. It wasn’t so fun, flirting with a cancer patient. The thought made me cringe, picturing girls I’d met for Make a Wish, girls who were bald and puffy-faced from chemo treatments. Was that going to be me? I couldn’t picture myself bald and sick-looking, like those girls. Just thinking it made me feel even more nauseous. What was I going to do?

All I could do right then was try to distract myself, as Reyna had suggested, so I forced my eyes open and made myself concentrate on the rest of *American Idol*, as if I really cared about the results. The bottom two turned out to be the girl Reyna was rooting for, Cary, and the weird, smiling kid who had done the Queen song. *That kid’s gettin’ the boot for sure*, I thought, so I was surprised when it turned out to be the girl, instead. Apparently, I didn’t understand how *American Idol* worked, because she wasn’t out just like that. She had the chance to sing a song – any song, it seemed – to convince the judges to save her and keep her in another week.

Her performance was exactly the opposite of the one I’d seen the night before. Alone on the stage, without a band or piano player or back-up singers, she started strumming a ukulele, and though the chords sounded familiar, it wasn’t until she started singing that I recognized the song as our own.

“Lookin’ at your picture, from when we first met... you gave me a smile, that I could never forget... and nothin’ I could do could protect me from you, that ni-i-ight...”

It was “Just Want You to Know,” the song Reyna had told me she’d performed on the show before. It was a lot different, though; she wasn’t trying to sound like us, like *me*, at all. It was a cool cover, very subdued and simplified. I could picture her singing it on the tiny stage of a coffee house or under the blue lights of an intimate bar. It just didn’t work as well in a huge studio. When the judges told her she was going home, I actually felt kind of disappointed for her. It was clear that she was talented and had something special. I watched her cry on stage as they showed a montage of clips of her on the big screen behind her and thought, *Guess I’m not the only one who got bad news today. Mine trumps yours, though, sweetheart.*

Then I realized it was the first time I’d thought of my cancer diagnosis in at least ten minutes. Impressive, considering I’d been dwelling on it constantly all day. I’d even forgotten about my headache.

Reyna was right. All I needed was a distraction. I just didn’t yet know the important role that very distraction would come to play in my life.

Chapter 10

Nick

I felt better when I woke up the next morning. My headache was gone, and my back was less sore. For a few minutes, it was almost possible to pretend I'd dreamed everything – except that didn't explain why I was still lying in a hospital bed and why it still hurt when I tried to sit up. I sat up anyway, rubbing my tender lower back, where the bone marrow had been taken out, and thought about everything that had happened in the last week.

I couldn't believe it had only been a week since I'd gotten home from the tour. I'd been dreading my appointment with Dr. Polakoff the next day, still convinced my heart condition had gotten worse. Now I knew it was cancer. I wondered how that was going to affect the rest of the tour. We were supposed to start up again at the end of May and tour the U.S. and Canada over the summer. Even before that, we were booked for a couple of small gigs – intimate, exclusive "fan events," we were calling them – in Napa and New York, one in April and one in May. The Napa Valley show was less than three weeks away. I wondered if I'd be out of the hospital by then. Dr. Submarine had said it would only be a few days, but that was before she had diagnosed me with cancer.

I was glad to see her when she came in that afternoon to go over the results of my latest tests. Now that the initial shock had worn off, I wanted more information. She had plenty of it.

"I've gone through all of your tests results from this week," she began, patting a large envelope that was thick with paperwork, "and it appears that your lymphoma is in Stage IVb."

"How bad is that?" I asked quickly.

"It's not good," she admitted, "but it's common for this disease to be in an advanced stage when it's diagnosed. Lymphoblastic lymphoma is an aggressive cancer; it starts and spreads very quickly. The results of your bone marrow biopsy show ten percent blasts – that means it has spread to your bone marrow, but not completely taken over yet. If the number were higher than twenty-five percent, it would be considered leukemia instead. The good news is that your abdominal and pelvic CT scans and your spinal fluid looked clear – that means the cancer hasn't spread to other organs or your central nervous system."

She paused then, and I nodded like I understood, even though my mind was racing with too much information to process. I wasn't sure how to react yet.

"I'd like to discuss treatment options with you," she said next, and I sat up straighter in my bed. This was the part I was most anxious to learn about.

"Am I gonna have to do chemo?" I asked, picturing again the bald, sickly-looking Make a Wish kids.

Dr. Submarine nodded, and my heart sank. "Chemotherapy yields the best results with this type of lymphoma. There are several different regimens used with adults, depending on the progression of the disease. Some are regimens designed for other types of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, and others are used with leukemia patients as well, since this disease is similar. For you, I would recommend the HyperCVAD regimen. It's used to treat some forms of both leukemia and Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, and it's proven successful in advanced cases of your type of lymphoma."

"Okay..." I said slowly, my brain still trying to catch up. "So what would that be like, exactly? Would I have to stay in the hospital, or are there just, like, pills I can take?"

"This chemotherapy treatment is given in up to eight three-week cycles. Most of the medications are given intravenously, so you would be hospitalized for a few days the first week of the cycle, a day or so the second week, and then off chemo for a week to recover," she explained. "With HyperCVAD, there are two different courses that alternate with each cycle – the one I described is the first course. The second course only requires a three-day hospitalization at the start of the first week, then two-and-a-half weeks off to recover."

I tried to keep track as she talked, doing the math in my head. "So basically, you're saying I'd have to be in the hospital three times in six weeks?"

Her eyes flickered toward the ceiling as she considered it that way. "Yes, that's right."

"But that's like once every couple of weeks! I can't do that; I'm going on tour in two months. I'll be traveling all over the country."

"I don't think you'll be up to traveling," said Dr. Submarine, looking at me with sympathy. "The chemotherapy will make you tired and lower your blood counts to the point where you might be anemic and more susceptible to infections. It's not a good idea to be out and about around large groups of people."

I snorted. That was exactly what I did for a living. "Great. So you're telling me I can't work while I'm on this? Then that ain't gonna work for me. What are my other options?"

She pursed her lips, looking less sympathetic. I'm sure she was starting to get the male diva vibe off me, but right then, I didn't care. I didn't know what the guys and our management would say when they found out I was sick, but I didn't like this doctor telling me that I couldn't keep working if I wanted to.

"There are two other regimens to consider, but they're both similar to HyperCVAD, in that most of the chemicals require IV access and need to be administered in a hospital, at least on an outpatient basis. There are chemo pumps you can be sent home with that

will dispense the medication through a central line in your chest, but even those require a medical professional to set up for you. You would still need to visit the hospital regularly as an outpatient.”

I stiffened, squaring my jaw. “What if I don’t want to do that?”

She looked at me coolly, clinically, unfazed by my stubbornness. “Chemotherapy is the only way to put your disease in remission. Radiation won’t do it alone, and surgery isn’t an option. I told you that this type of lymphoma is very aggressive and spreads quickly. If you choose not to undergo chemo, you’ll be dead in a matter of weeks. As the tumor in your thymus gets bigger, it will continue to crowd your lungs and heart. The pleural effusion will worsen, and you’ll have difficulty breathing. You’ll likely develop a complication called superior vena cava syndrome, which happens when the tumor compresses the vena cava, the large vein that carries blood to your heart. Without treatment, it will kill you within a month.”

I held her gaze, determined not to blink or look away. Inside, I was terrified; I could feel my body temperature rising, my heart was pounding, and I was sweating. But I knew that was what she wanted, to scare me, and I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of showing that I was.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” she added, after a long pause, her voice and features softening somewhat. “It’s normal to feel angry, depressed, even in denial. In a way, you’re grieving. You’re grieving the loss of your health. Just like any grief process, you’ll need support to help you get through this. Have you told your family about your diagnosis? Or friends?”

She was probably wondering why I’d had no visitors, why there was no one there with me to listen to the information she was giving me and ask the questions I hadn’t thought of yet. I shook my head. “Not yet,” I muttered. “I was waiting to get all the details first.”

She nodded. “Of course. Well, if you’d like, I brought some literature on the different chemo protocols that are available. Maybe you’d rather read about them on your own before making a decision. You don’t need to decide now, though I would suggest starting treatment as soon as possible.”

She offered me a handful of pamphlets, but I shook my head. “Nah, I don’t wanna read all that. Just tell me – which one’s gonna work the best?”

“Okay... well, as I said, I would recommend the HyperCVAD.”

“The one where I have to be in the hospital every two weeks, right,” I muttered. I still hated that part of it, but since it seemed like there was no way around it, I was willing to go with it... for now.

“Yes. To make it more convenient for you, I’ll also recommend a minor surgical procedure to implant you with a catheter. That will allow you to receive chemo without

us having to stick you and start a new IV every time. There are different options for the catheter; you could have a PICC line in your arm or a central line or portacath in your chest. They really make things a lot easier, and when you're done with treatment, they can be removed."

I stared at her like she'd grown a second head. She couldn't possibly imagine I'd say yes to having a tube sticking out of my body all the time, not just when I was getting chemo.

At the look on my face, she actually laughed, a light sort of chuckle. "It isn't as bad as it sounds, I promise. If you're concerned about the cosmetic aspect, a portacath would be your best option. The port is implanted completely under your skin, so it's not as likely to show. You might have a little bump visible, but that is all. I have a brochure on that, as well, if you'd like to see a picture."

She pushed one of her pamphlets into my hand. I set it aside without even looking at it. She sighed, then set the rest of the pamphlets on top of it. "Do some reading and some thinking on your own," she told me firmly. "I have other patients to see, but I'll drop in before I leave the hospital to discuss your decision. There's just one other thing I want you to consider before I leave you, because you'll need to pursue it soon."

My head was already swimming with information; I didn't want to hear any more. But she went on talking, anyway.

"No matter which regimen you choose, chemotherapy is very toxic. It has a number of possible side effects, many of which I'm sure you've heard of. You can read about them in the literature I've left you. One effect that you need to consider before starting treatment is sterility. Often, chemo affects your fertility – sometimes only temporary, but sometimes permanently. I don't know if you're in a serious relationship or not, Nick, but if you want to preserve your ability to father children someday, you might want to consider the services of a sperm bank. The hospital can help you arrange that, if you choose to freeze your sperm for future use."

I felt my face redden, and I shook my head, wishing she'd go away. "I really don't wanna talk about this right now..."

"I know you don't, but you need to talk about it. You need to think hard about your options and make some decisions. Please, take a look at the material. If you have no questions for me now, I'll go and come back later."

I nodded, silently dismissing her, and she left. As soon as she was gone, I knocked all of the pamphlets off my mattress with one big sweep of my arm. They fanned across the floor, glossy booklets in every color combination, covering every subject she had mentioned. I didn't want to read any of them.

I knew I was acting like a total asshole, but can you blame me? My life, as I'd known it, lived it, and loved it, was over. This new life my oncologist spoke of, a life of cancer and

chemo and catheters in my chest, was completely foreign to me and even more terrifying. I just wasn't ready to surrender to it yet.

My denial didn't last all day. At some point, I got out of bed and forced myself to pick up every last one of the pamphlets I'd thrown on the floor. The fact that it killed my back to bend over made me regret the way I'd acted, like a spoiled little kid throwing a tantrum. I wondered what Dr. Submarine must have thought of me.

I decided that when she came back, I would have some answers for her, so I spent the rest of the day skimming through the pamphlets. I read about chemotherapy side effects and portacaths and how to cope when you've just been diagnosed with cancer. I didn't think I was doing a very good job of it.

When my head started to hurt from reading and thinking about all of that, I put the pamphlets aside again and set up my laptop. I started looking through pictures I'd taken and saved over the years, pictures as recent as the Asian tour and as old as when Kevin was still in the group. I looked at the faces of my family and friends and the guys with their own families, and I knew I wasn't ready to go down without a fight. I didn't want to die. I wanted to live, even if it meant subjecting myself to the treatment my doctor had described. If that was the only way to extend my life for more than a month, then I'd do it.

I apologized to Dr. Submarine when she came back in the evening. "Sorry for acting like such an ass earlier," I mumbled, feeling awkward, my face burning with shame.

To my relief, Dr. Submarine just smiled – actually freakin' smiled! "No need to apologize," she replied quickly. "Everyone reacts differently to bad news. Now that you've come around, I hope you've had a chance to think about your treatment options?"

I nodded and took a deep breath. "Yeah. I thought about it, and I'll do whatever you think is best. I'll do anything. Just... don't let this thing kill me."

She reached out and put her hand on mine, her dark brown skin contrasting with my fading tan. Looking me in the eye, she said, "I promise you, Nick... I will do my very best to keep you alive."

Chapter 11

Nick

I started my first course of chemo on Sunday.

“Hi, I’m Allie, from Oncology,” said the nurse who came to hook me up. She was wearing scrubs with rainbows on them – double rainbows all the way across the sky of her blue scrub top. I guess you have to be optimistic when you work around cancer patients all day. “I’m going to get you started with your chemo infusion. You have a port?”

I pulled back the neck of my hospital gown to show her the piece of gauze taped over the newly-implanted portacath in my chest. It didn’t look as freaky as it had sounded; I’d seen it when the nurses changed the bandage, and it really was just a little round lump beneath my skin. It would never be noticeable through my shirt, and I couldn’t even feel it unless I poked at it. Still, it was weird to think I had a piece of metal embedded under my skin, hooked to a plastic tube that went into one of my veins.

“Great,” said Allie. She pulled on a pair of gloves and peeled off the gauze. “I’m going to use a little Betadine to sterilize the area and then put on some anesthetic cream that will numb your skin so you don’t feel me stick you,” she explained as she set to work. “Is this your first time?”

“Yeah,” I rasped; my throat had gone dry. I cleared it and added, “I’m a chemo virgin.”

She blushed and laughed lightly. “Well, you won’t be when I’m done with you. I’m going to put in a Huber needle that will hook up to the IV line,” she said, and I winced at the thickness of the needle on the end of the yellow, plastic square she held up for me to see. “I promise, you’ll hardly feel it,” she added, with a reassuring smile. And amazingly, she was right! The numbing cream had worked well; it didn’t even hurt as she slid the needle into the skin over my port.

“Wow, you’re good,” I said, impressed, looking down. The yellow thing was right up against the port now, and there was a bit of plastic tubing hanging out of it. It reminded me that chemicals were going to be flowing through that tube, straight into my chest, and I started to get nervous again.

She hooked the tube to an IV line that ran up to a bag of clear liquid that she hung on the IV pole next to my bed. “Just saline, for now,” she explained. “Your chemo will run through this infusion pump, which I have to set to drip at the right rate.” She gestured to a monitor on the IV stand. “I’m also gonna give you a dose of Zofran, which is an anti-nausea drug. If you’re lucky, it’ll keep you from getting sick later.”

My stomach turned over at the thought. I hated throwing up. “How bad are the side effects, really?” I asked.

“It varies from person to person,” she said, as she injected a shot full of the drug into my IV line. “They can be pretty bad, but not always. Some people tolerate chemo better than others. We have medications to help with some of the symptoms, like the nausea and vomiting, but not others. Even if you don’t feel sick, you’ll be tired. You may lose your appetite; sometimes people get sores in their mouth or find that things taste funny

after chemo, and that can keep them from wanting to eat, too. You'll probably lose your hair..."

I raised a hand to my head and smoothed down the front of my hair. I'd been keeping it pretty short, and maybe that was just as well – it'd make it easier to adjust to having none at all. "How long does it take for that to happen?"

"Three or four weeks. Some people lose it sooner. I've seen a lot of patients just buzz it off when it starts to fall out."

I nodded. That's what I would do. I wasn't going to go around looking worse than AJ, with big bald spots on my head.

When Allie had finished setting up the chemo, she said, "Okay, this is set to drip over three hours. If you need to, you can get out of bed and move around, use the bathroom or whatever; just make sure you wheel your IV stand with you and watch to make sure your line doesn't get tangled or caught on anything. If you start to feel sick or need anything, just use your call button. I'll be back to check on you later."

She left me with the call button connected to my bed and a small basin, in case I needed to hurl. I hoped I wouldn't have to use it. I lay back against my pillows and watched the fluid flow slowly through the clear IV tubing, into my chest, wondering how long it would take for the side effects to kick in.

I tried to keep myself occupied while the three hours passed. I watched TV. I played on my laptop. But mostly, I just thought. I had a lot to think about, a lot of decisions left to make. I'd known about my cancer for four days, and I still hadn't told anyone. I was making excuses for myself. *I'll wait till I know what chemo's like, so I can tell them how the treatment's going*, I thought, figuring that would be a more optimistic conversation than just telling them I had Stage IV cancer. I didn't want to depress anyone. *I'll wait till I'm out of the hospital, so they don't have to visit me here*. That would buy me at least another week.

I knew I was being stupid, not telling anyone, dealing with everything by myself. The guys and my family would want to know I was sick, and they'd find out eventually – it wasn't like I could keep it a secret for long, with my hair falling out and daily trips to the hospital to get chemo. But I wanted to delay that moment for as long as possible. My friends and family members were living their own lives, and they were happy. I didn't want to mess that up for them by dragging them into the shit I was going through.

It was bad enough cancer had disrupted my life. I didn't want it to disrupt theirs, too.

"Congratulations, you're all done!" My nurse, Thea, unhooked the needle and tubing from my port and covered it with a band-aid.

"For now, at least," I replied, sitting up straight in the recliner I'd been lying in for the past half hour. "That was really quick."

"I told you it would be. The vincristine infusion only takes about ten minutes, unlike the cyclophosphamide you got last week."

It had been over a week since the start of my chemo; I was now on Day 11 of my first cycle. After a week of being monitored while I got chemo as an inpatient, I'd finally been discharged from the hospital. I was only back at the oncology clinic as an outpatient to get my last dose of IV chemo of the cycle. I still had a steroid to take in pill form for three more days at home, but then I would have a week off of medications completely before starting my next cycle.

The timing couldn't have worked out much better. I had a couple days to recover before heading up to Fresno to play a club gig on Friday, then on to Napa for another performance on Saturday and the fan event on Sunday. I was actually looking forward to the trip. I'd been feeling surprisingly good – the chemo had made me tired, like everyone said it would, but other than that, I hadn't had many side effects. The Zofran they gave me before each round worked on my bouts of nausea, so I wasn't throwing up all the time, and I still had all my hair. Granted, it was a little early to start going bald – Allie had said it could take three weeks, and it had only been half that.

Still, as I left the oncology clinic, I felt pretty optimistic. It helped that it was a beautiful day in LA; as I pulled my Benz out of the dark, underground parking deck, the sunlight was so bright that I immediately reached for my sunglasses. For a minute, I thought about driving over to the beach, but decided I'd better not that day. I guess I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for those horrible side effects I'd read about to come and get me. It'd be just my luck that I'd start projectile vomiting on the Santa Monica Pier. So I went straight home instead.

But once I was home, I didn't know what to do with myself. It had been that way ever since I'd come home from the hospital. At first, I had been glad just to be able to veg out in my condo and sleep in my own bed again. But then I started getting cabin fever. I was tired, but I didn't want to just lie around, watching TV and playing video games. I'd been doing that for two weeks in the hospital. Now that I was out, I wanted to do more. I didn't want to waste any time. Ironically, I wasted plenty of it just pacing around the condo, wondering what to do.

It wasn't just that I was bored. I kept remembering what Dr. Submarine had said to me: "*If you choose not to undergo chemo, you'll be dead in a matter of weeks.*" Even though I was doing the treatment, I couldn't forget how serious my disease was. I had done some research on my own online, and I'd seen the statistics. My kind of lymphoma was pretty treatable in children, but not so much in adults. The survival rate was only about fifty percent. A coin flip. Heads, I'd be alive and well in five years. Tails, I'd be in the ground.

If I was going to be dead in five years, I wanted to make the most of the time I had left. I just wasn't sure how to do that yet.

I thought about what other people did when they found out they were dying. They made bucket lists. They did all the things they'd always wanted to do, but never had the chance. They traveled around the world. They did daredevil stuff, like skydiving and mountain-climbing. They spent time with the people they loved.

What would be on my bucket list?

I didn't really know. The thing was, I'd already done just about everything I'd ever wanted to do in my life. I had seen the world. I had tried out all kinds of crazy things. I had nice houses and fast cars and all the luxuries my money could afford. There just wasn't much I wanted to do that I hadn't already done.

So maybe that was it. Maybe I wanted to spend my time doing the things I'd already done. Doing what I'd *always* done. Living my life like normal. I loved my life the way it had been before I'd gotten cancer. If I had one last wish, like those Make a Wish kids whose dying wish had been to meet me, mine would probably be just to keep my life the same. To keep on touring, keep on making music, keep on making people happy. That was what made *me* happy. Why shouldn't it be number one on my list?

I think that, sub-consciously, I'd already decided not to tell the guys about my cancer. I knew they would never let me keep performing if they knew how sick I was, and I couldn't exactly finish the tour without them. I needed them, and that meant I needed to keep them in the dark.

Still, I knew I *should* tell them, that it was the right thing to do, so I thought I'd do it in Napa. It would be better to tell them all at once, in person, I reasoned, and the wine would make it a lot easier. But as we sat around a winery down the street from the opera house, hanging out before the show, I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

Everyone was talking, laughing, tasting the wine. It was always fun when we first got back together after a break. The time apart was good for us; everyone got to go home and be with their families and relax, and when it was time to go back on the road, we weren't sick of each other anymore. Everything felt fresh and fun again.

The guys all had stories from the three weeks we'd had off. Brian talked about spending time at home with Leighanne and Baylee. Howie told us all the new things James had learned to do. AJ shared the wedding plans he and Rochelle had started making. When they asked, "So what have you been up to, Nick?" I had my opening. But what was I supposed to say?

“Oh, not much, just doing chemo for this cancer I found out I’ve got. There’s only a fifty-percent chance it’ll work, but if I don’t give it a shot, I won’t live to see summer, so I figured, eh, why not?”

I couldn’t say that. Instead, I said, “Not much. You know – just been hangin’ out.” It wasn’t a lie; I just left out the part where I’d been hanging out in the hospital. I’d tell them after the show, I thought. It would be better that way. If they found out beforehand, they’d be preoccupied, and the performance would suffer. It wouldn’t be fair to the fans to tell them now and ruin the night when I could just wait and do it later.

Our show that night was more like a long soundcheck than an actual concert. We performed just ten songs that the fans had helped choose, accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, and answered questions between songs. I didn’t enjoy talking as much as I did just sitting on a stool, singing. It was easy to forget what was going on inside me when I could lose myself in the music and sing my heart out, and even though I was tired, I was disappointed when it was over.

We did the obligatory meet-and-greet after the show. Once the last few fans had been escorted out, I turned to the other guys. “Wanna head to a bar or something?” I asked. I figured I needed some more booze before I could break my bad news to them, and it would be good to kick back with a beer after all the froofy wine I’d had that afternoon.

Brian bailed on me first. “I think all that wine earlier was enough, buddy,” he laughed. “Besides, we’re gonna head back to LA first thing tomorrow morning, so I should probably get Baylee to bed.”

“Yeah,” Howie agreed, “I wanna go back to the hotel and check on James. Another time, man.” I was disappointed in him; Howie never used to say no to a night out on the town, but that was before he went and got all “family man” on me.

“I think Monkee and me are just gonna head back to the hotel too,” said AJ, slinging his arm around Rochelle. They were so in love, it was sickening; I didn’t want to think about what went on behind the closed door of their hotel room. He must have seen the look on my face, because he added, “We still cool?”

“We’re cool,” I muttered back. “I just kinda wanted to tell you guys somethin’...”

“You can tell us now,” said Howie. “What’s up, Nicky?”

Usually I hated when he called me that, like I was still the twelve-year-old I’d been when he’d met me (and even then, I hadn’t gone by *Nicky*), but in that instant, I felt my throat close up with a different kind of emotion. Howie loved me like a little brother, the same way he’d always been a big brother to me. He had been protective of me from the beginning, but ever since Kevin had left, he had really taken on the leadership role, watching out for the rest of us and keeping me and AJ in line. I looked at him then and wanted to protect him, too. I didn’t want to tell him something that was going to devastate him.

“Spit it out, Carter,” growled AJ, when I didn’t answer right away, and Rochelle giggled. Only Brian, I noticed, said nothing. He was just staring at me, his eyes narrowed slightly, as if he could tell I wasn’t acting quite like my usual self.

I really had meant to tell them. But instead, I put on a big grin and avoided Brian’s eyes as I said, “It’s nothin’. Just wanted to tell you I had fun this weekend. I can’t wait till we’re back on tour.”

Chapter 12

Nick

A week later, I was back in the hospital to start my second cycle of chemo. This time, I would only be given the drugs for the first three days of the cycle, which would give me the next two-and-a-half weeks off to recover. I was told the recovery time was so long because the first three days were intense.

The first day, I was put on a twenty-four hour drip of a drug called methotrexate, which had the longest list of possible side effects I’d ever seen. I’d read online that, along with treating cancer, it was also used to induce abortions. It was poison, like all the other shit they’d been pumping into my veins. Most of the other drugs I had to take in this cycle were just to counteract the effects of the methotrexate on different parts of my body. Its job was to kill the cancer cells in my body, but there was no way to avoid killing some healthy cells in the process.

I understood why people said they were “battling cancer” – it really was like a war. The cancer was the enemy, the chemo regimen was the battle plan, and the drugs themselves were the weapons. They took down the bad guys, but there were civilian deaths and friendly fire, too.

I hadn’t had any bad symptoms with the first cycle of chemo, but that all changed with the second. The methotrexate was as awful as it looked in print. I got sick to my stomach and puked over and over again into the basin I hadn’t needed the first go around. By the third day in the hospital, the nausea had gotten better, but I felt weak and exhausted, like I was just getting over a week with the flu.

As I lay in bed, watching my IV drip with the last dose of drugs, I thought about the tour. It started up again in just over a month. I would still be doing chemo then, and I had no clue how that was going to work. Even if I could arrange to get my chemo on stops along the way, I didn’t see how I was going to be able to sneak off to the hospital every day without the guys catching on. And if the guys found out, they would want to cancel the tour. That was the last thing I wanted.

The show in Napa had confirmed what I'd already been thinking: I needed to tour. I needed to be on the road, busy and having fun. I needed to escape onstage every night while I performed. I needed to be around my brothers without them hovering over me, treating me like I was sick. I needed for that one part of my life to stay the same, even while the rest of it was stuck in this cancer hell.

And I needed to find a way to make it all possible.

“I’m sorry, Nick, but it’s just not possible.”

I glared down at my cell phone, through which Dr. Submarine’s lightly-accented voice was projecting. “Look, Doctor...” I trailed off awkwardly. *Oh shit, I forgot how to say her real name again!* “...um, I don’t mean to sound like a diva here, but I’m not asking you if it’s possible. I’m telling you I *need* it to be possible.”

I was home from the hospital, and though I wasn’t back to one hundred percent, I was feeling better than I had the day before. Good enough to argue about whether or not I could continue my chemo on tour, anyway.

Even as my voice rose, hers stayed calm and rational. “Perhaps I should have said it’s just not *practical*. This regimen requires IV infusions of multiple drugs a day, intrathecal injections into your spinal canal, and regular blood tests to check your counts.”

“I could get one of those home nurses to take care of that stuff.”

“Most home care nurses don’t have the training to safely administer chemotherapy. It needs to be done in a hospital setting, by a trained oncology nurse.”

“Well, what if I found an oncology nurse who was willing to travel with me?”

“You would still need a means of getting the chemicals and having your bloodwork analyzed, not to mention the necessary medical equipment.”

“The nurse could help me get the equipment,” I said. “I can afford to pay for whatever I’d need. And couldn’t I just get the bloodwork done at different hospitals along the way?”

“If you could find a way to arrange all of that,” she replied stiffly. I knew she thought I was a complete idiot for even suggesting this scheme of mine, but I could tell she was starting to break down. I’d thought it all through, and I had a solution to every problem she brought up.

“I’m sure I can pull a few strings,” I assured her with more confidence than I felt.

"It would be possible," she allowed, "but like I already said, not practical, nor is it medically advisable. As you progress through the regimen, your blood counts will drop. You're likely to become anemic from low red cell counts, which will make you tired and weak; you may require blood transfusions if your counts fall low enough. You certainly won't feel up to performing."

"You don't know that," I cut in, annoyed by her presumption. "You don't know me. I've been doing this for eighteen years; I've performed sick plenty of times. I'll get through it."

"Even if you were able to perform," she continued smoothly, as if I hadn't interrupted her, "it won't be safe for you to be around large crowds of people. As your white blood cell counts drop, you could become neutropenic and more susceptible to infection. Your immune system won't be able to fight off germs. Even the common cold could be dangerous."

For the first time, I didn't have a counter attack. All I could come up with was, "Well, I guess that's just a risk I'll have to take. I'd rather take a chance than curl up and wait for this thing to slowly kill me."

"You would rather let a cold kill you quickly?"

"Hey, don't get sarcastic on me. I'm serious," I insisted, still annoyed. "I'm gonna find a nurse who can help me, and I'm gonna make this happen. And when I do, I'm gonna ask for your help to get started. And if you won't help me, I'll find another doctor who will."

Then I hung up on my oncologist.

So the first part of my plan – getting the go-ahead from my doctor – hadn't exactly been a soaring success. More like an epic failure. But at least I'd gotten her to admit that what I wanted to do was possible, if not "practical" or "medically advisable."

My next mission was to find someone who could take care of me on the road. But it was going to be more complicated than that. Besides finding someone qualified to set up the chemo and do the blood draws and all of the other crap Dr. Submarine had said I'd need, I needed someone I could disguise as anything other than a nurse. It wasn't like I could just bring some random woman on the tour without anyone asking questions.

I thought about making her pose as my new girlfriend, but that seemed like it would be awkward for both of us. And what would she be getting out of it, besides what I could pay her? I felt like I needed a better trade-off, a way to guarantee both her service and her silence. I couldn't risk involving someone who was gonna stab me in the back and sell me out.

And then I thought of the perfect ruse: an opening act.

If I could just find a nurse who could sing, really sing, I was sure I could pitch her to the guys and our tour manager, act like I'd discovered some fresh new talent, and get her on the bill. Good opening acts were tough to come by. I knew there was one act already being considered, a new boyband made up of four thirteen-year-old boys who danced like Usher and lip-synced like Britney Spears. They were cute, but only Howie thought they were any good, and I knew the fans wouldn't go for them. Our fan base had grown up; they didn't want to see little kids thrusting their prepubescent junk in their faces. That was the case I'd make when I found the perfect girl.

At first, I didn't even know where to start in finding a nurse who could sing. I thought about calling Reyna, who had been so sweet to me in the hospital, to see if she knew anyone, and that's when it hit me. Reyna. *American Idol*.

Cary Hilst.

I suddenly remembered the pretty girl who had performed our song with her ukulele, the girl Reyna had been rooting for because she was also a nurse. I went straight to my computer to look her up. On the *American Idol* website, I found a brief biography and videos of some of her performances and interviews. I learned that she was twenty-eight and from a town in Illinois. She liked jazz music and oldies and sang Peggy Lee's "Fever" for her audition. She only mentioned her father when talking about her family, so I assumed she wasn't married. She worked in a nursing home as a nurse practitioner, and when I googled to find out what a nurse practitioner was, I decided she was perfect.

She looked the part, and she could play the part; she could sing, and she could get the job done. The fans would remember her from the show, the guys would like her voice, and I would bribe her with everything I had to offer to get her to help me.

But first, I had to find out how to contact her. I didn't know many people who were involved with *Idol*, so I figured my best bet was Ellen DeGeneres. We had been on her show before, so I was acquainted with her, and I didn't think it would be too hard to get in touch with her. It turned out to be incredibly easy. As soon as her show people realized it was me calling, Nick Carter himself and not just his agent, they put me through to her, and she was happy to talk to me.

"I need a huge favor," I told her. "I need the number for Cary Hilst, from *Idol*."

Ellen chuckled knowingly. "Why, think she's pretty cute?"

"There's a little more to it than that," I said guardedly, "but sure, yeah, she's cute."

"A little more to it than that, huh? Hmm, so you don't just want to call and ask her out? Because even if I had her number, I'm not sure I could, in good conscience, give it to you," she teased. "You're supposed to ask *the girl* to give you her number, you know? Chicks gotta stick together!"

I was starting to get annoyed by the runaround, but I forced myself to chuckle, trying to keep my voice light and charming. “Yeah, I get the girl power thing, but how am I supposed to ask her for her number if I don’t have her number, you know?”

“I’m not sure that made any sense at all, but sure, I know. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? How can you ask Cary Hilst for her phone number if you can’t get in touch with her to ask her?”

I laughed again. “Exactly. So can you help me out here?”

“It’s not like I have her number programmed into my phone.”

“No, but you can get it, right? You’re an *Idol* judge now; you’ve got the goods, don’tcha?” I hoped the flattery would win her over. If it didn’t, I was prepared with a bribe.

“Technically, that information’s supposed to be confidential. You wouldn’t like it if I gave out your number to anyone who called asking, would you?”

I groaned; of course she had to give me a hard time, and I couldn’t tell how much of it was joking and how much was serious. At the risk of sounding like a male diva again, I said, “C’mon, I’m not just ‘anyone.’ I don’t wanna stalk her or ask her out; I have an offer for her. She’ll be glad I called, trust me. And you’ll be glad you gave me her number. I’ll make it worth your time.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked playfully. “How so, Nick Carter?”

I sucked in a breath; it was time to bust out the bribe. “There’s gonna be an announcement,” I said slowly, cryptically. “A big one, from the Backstreet Boys, sometime after our tour wraps in August. It’s not that we’re breaking up or anything like that, but it’ll be juicy. People will wanna cover it. And I’m promising you now that if you give me her number, I’ll make sure we come on your show to break the news first. Exclusive interview – it’s all yours.”

The other end of the line was quiet for a few seconds; I could tell she was considering the carrot I was dangling in front of her. It wasn’t just a tease. By the end of August, I’d be done with the tour and hopefully done with chemo, too. It would be okay to open up then, once I was well again, and once I’d gotten what I wanted. Besides, if chemo was as rough as everyone said it was, I knew there would come a time when I wouldn’t be able to hide it anymore, anyway. The promise to Ellen was one I was willing to keep.

“Okay, you got me,” she said finally. “I’ll get the number and get back to you. Just don’t let me find out you’ve been prank-calling her or sending inappropriate text messages, now, you hear?”

I chuckled. “I ain’t gonna text her... I’m gonna sext her.” It was the sort of thing she’d expect me to say.

“Nick Carter, you’re starting to make me regret this...” she sing-songed, with a note of warning.

“I’m just playin’. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

Ellen laughed. “Alright, Carter. I’ll trust you.”

I didn’t think I’d have an easier time convincing Ellen to give me Cary’s phone number than I would convincing Cary to come on tour with us, but it was a hard sell.

I’d figured an aspiring singer who had just gotten kicked off a national singing competition right before the cut to make the summer tour would jump at the chance to tour with us instead, but I hadn’t counted on the fact that Cary would recognize the offer as “too good to be true.” Not that it wasn’t true... I planned to make good on everything I had promised her. Fly her out, give her a place to stay, help her with her music, and offer her the opportunity to perform almost every night. But of course, there was a catch, and she’d sensed it all along. She just hadn’t known what it was yet.

She was different in person than I’d imagined her to be from watching her on TV. More reserved, I guess. Shy at first, but sweet. When she sang, though, she came out of her shell, and the transformation was pretty cool to watch. She really was a good musician, even if I was more interested in her nursing skills.

I hadn’t really planned to have her stay over that first night, but getting drunk together seemed like a good way to break the ice. The booze would make me brave enough to tell her the truth about why she was there, and I hoped it would make her impulsive enough to agree to what I was asking her to do.

There in my guest room, I looked her in the eye. “I need you to stay.”

She sank down onto the bed, nervously biting her lip as she stared up at me. “Nick...”

I turned my back to her, collecting my thoughts. There was no way to just come out and say it. I would show her instead. Lay it all out there and wait for her reaction. “It’s a good thing I’m drunk, or there’s no fucking way I’d be able to do this,” I muttered, as I reached for the hem of my shirt. Then I pulled it over my head, tossed it to the floor, and forced myself to turn around and face her again.

I stood there, watching her eyes dart over my body, painfully aware of the round lump of the portacath in my chest. I saw the instant of understanding, the recognition in her eyes when she saw it and realized what it was. Slowly, her eyes moved from it up to my face. “You have a portacath?” she asked, her voice small and timid. “Why?”

I glanced down at the spot her eyes had been fixed on seconds before and brought my hand up to touch the hard lump. My throat had gone cry, so I swallowed and licked my lips. It was still hard to get the words out. “Because I’m sick.”

Her mouth fell open, and her eyes went wide with fear and concern.

Looking away from them, I cleared my throat, took a deep breath, and told her the secret I’d kept from everyone else.

Chapter 13

Cary

I stared at Nick, my mouth opening and closing with the silent question I couldn’t bring myself to ask. *Sick with what?* Deep down, I suppose I already knew.

Nick cleared his throat awkwardly, his bare chest expanding as he sucked in a deep breath. “I have cancer,” he admitted in a low voice. “Lymphoblastic lymphoma. Stage IV.”

After he said it, he looked back at me like he knew I’d know what that meant. In that moment, I wished I didn’t, but I did. Stage IV was the worst stage a cancer could be in. It was terminal cancer – not always, but usually. People with Stage IV cancer made bucket lists and checked into hospices to die, like my mother had. But Nick had just been singing and dancing to Lady Gaga in the back of a taxi, without a care in the world. Nick was talking about going out on tour. How could Nick be one of those people?

I was still staring at him, in shock and in wonder. He didn’t look sick. He didn’t look like a cancer patient. He still had all of his hair, his buff new body, and a pretty good tan. He looked... healthy. Only the bump from the portacath showed that he was not.

“I... I’m so sorry, Nick,” I finally managed to say. When he didn’t say anything back, I added hopefully, “But you’re being treated, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “Chemo.”

That was what I’d figured, judging from the catheter. I nodded, too. “That’s good. I mean, Stage IV is... pretty serious... but chemo regimens are getting better and better, right?”

He shrugged. “You’re the nurse. You tell me.”

I shook my head. It had been a rhetorical question. “I’m not an oncologist. I don’t know that many specifics; I’m sorry. Um... how long have you been doing the chemo?” *How long have you known?* That was what I was really wondering.

“Six weeks.”

Six weeks... I counted back in my head, struggling to get my buzzed brain to focus. He’d been diagnosed in March. That meant he had known when he’d called me in April. He’d known when he was making plans for the tour. I tipped my head to the side, narrowing my eyes at him. “Will you be done with it before the tour starts?”

A flush crept up his neck, coloring his cheeks. “No,” he answered, looking sheepish. “I’m supposed to do eight cycles. I’ve only finished two so far.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Does that mean you’re planning to go on tour while you’re on chemo?”

He nodded.

“How’s that gonna work out?” As I asked the question, I realized with a jolt that I already knew the answer. Or, at least, I was beginning to think I did. “Wait...” I stared at him, feeling my heart start to race, my face start to heat up. “Is that... please don’t tell me that’s why you brought me out here. Why you offered me a spot on the tour.”

He pushed his lips together and turned them into a crooked smile.

My heart sank.

All this time, I had been thinking it was too good to be true, wondering what the catch was. Well, this was it. Nick was sick, and he wanted me on the tour, not to sing, but to be his traveling nurse. “You told me there was no catch!” I protested, feeling cheated. Maybe it was just the alcohol making me emotional, but I was suddenly on the verge of tears.

“I never said that,” he replied quietly. “Everything I told you was the truth. I just... didn’t tell you everything.”

Looking away, my eyes burning, I realized he was right. I had asked him about the catch, but he hadn’t answered my question, not directly, anyway. He had just dodged it instead. And I’d been so afraid he was going to withdraw his offer, I hadn’t called him on it. I looked back at him. He was still watching me, and his expression was unreadable. I sighed and shook my head. “I’m not a home nurse, Nick. I work in a *nursing home*. There’s a difference.”

“Well, I don’t need a home nurse. I need a tour nurse, and since I don’t think those exist, I thought you’d make a good one. You’re a performer; you’re a nurse; it’s perfect.”

He made it sound so simple, but it didn't feel that way at all. I felt overwhelmed, like I'd gotten myself in way over my head. "And is that my payment for being your nurse, that I get to open up for you guys every night?"

"I'll pay you money, too, if that's what you want. How much do you make at the nursing home? I'll match it."

I gaped at him for a moment before shaking my head. "No, it's not about the money."

"Then what's it about? Don't you want to help me?"

I had to look away from his puppy eyes. He was guilt-tripping me now, and it wasn't fair. "Help you how, exactly? What do you want me to do?" I already had a pretty good idea of where this was going, but I wanted to hear it from him. He'd been so vague about everything else, he owed me a clear, detailed explanation.

"Well, I need you to be in charge of my chemo. Set it up for me, make sure I get the right stuff on the right days. My doctor said I'd need weekly blood tests to check my blood counts, so you'd have to do that too."

I wiped my eyes and gave him a skeptical look. "Your doctor knows about this and is okay with it?" I asked, eyebrows raised. I knew all too well the effects chemotherapy could have on a person's body and immune system, and I couldn't imagine a medical professional would really endorse him going on tour while he was still in treatment, let alone trying to continue that treatment on the road.

Nick's face turned red and sheepish again. "Oh, she knows, but I wouldn't say she's exactly 'okay' with it. She thinks I'm a moron."

So do I, I thought, but I didn't say it. I think he could tell, from the way I was looking at him, though.

He sighed. "You probably think I am too, huh?"

I chose my words carefully. "I just don't think it's... wise... what you're suggesting. You should be under the care of an oncologist, one that you can see regularly."

"I hardly ever see Dr. Submarine anyway. The nurses are the ones who take care of me when I go to the hospital for chemo."

"Dr. Submarine?" I stifled a giggle.

He cracked a boyish smile and ducked his head. "I dunno how to say her real name; that's just what I started calling her in my head. I guess it kinda stuck."

"Hm... some doctor-patient relationship that must be, if you don't even know her name."

“You know, you’re feistier than I thought you’d be when I met you. Love the sarcasm.” His eyes sparkled with humor. I blushed. “But exactly,” he went on quickly. “I don’t know her name, and she doesn’t know me. She doesn’t understand. But you do, right?” Suddenly serious again, he fixed me with a penetrating stare, and my heart skipped a beat. “You know how important it is to me to keep working, keep making music. I know she thinks I’ll die if I do, but I know I’ll die if I don’t. And if I’m gonna die, I’d rather die doing what I love.”

My heart was pounding. I felt so sorry for him. I wanted to help him, but his plan was crazy. Okay, maybe it wasn’t crazy; maybe it actually even made sense, but it was *stupid*. It was dangerous. If he was on chemo, he needed to be closely monitored. He needed to rest. He needed to stay away from germs. Touring was the last thing he needed to be doing.

But that was just the nurse in me. The music lover in me, the *fan* in me, understood it perfectly. Touring was the only thing he *wanted* to be doing. “I... I do understand,” I said quietly. “I do, Nick, but I...” I trailed off. How could I say I agreed with his doctor, when he’d just told me she didn’t understand him like I did? I decided to try a different tactic. “What about the other guys? I can’t imagine they’d let you risk your life to finish the tour.”

He shook his head. “They don’t know.”

I wasn’t surprised. “Then I don’t even know why you’re asking me, ‘cause when you tell them you want to finish your chemo on the road, they’re gonna tell you no.” I said this with confidence, pretty sure that I was enough of a fan to know. When AJ was at his lowest and needed treatment, they had postponed their tour so he could go to rehab. And they’d always talked about how wrong it was that they hadn’t when Brian found out he needed heart surgery. There was no way they would make that mistake again with Nick.

“No,” he said, with a shake of his head, and his face flushed with guilt yet again. This time, he didn’t look sheepish, like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. This time, he looked stricken. He looked like he was about to cry. “They *really* don’t know,” he emphasized, his voice sounding congested. “I haven’t told them anything.”

I stared at him, my heart threatening to race right up through my throat. “They don’t know you’re sick?” I gasped.

He shook his head again, letting it hang so I couldn’t see the tears in his eyes. “I don’t want them to know,” he mumbled thickly.

The sound of his voice broke my heart. I wanted to cry with him. I wanted to cry *for* him. “What about your family?” I whispered. “Have you told them?”

Still staring at the floor, he shook his head a third time.

“You’ve been dealing with this all on your own for six weeks?”

A nod. A sniff.

I lost it then. Seeing him cry, my own eyes filled with tears, and before I even knew what I was doing, I was walking up to him, wrapping my arms around his lanky frame, pulling him into a tight hug. He stiffened at first, and I almost let go, feeling his bare skin and realizing he was still shirtless. But then I felt his arms come around me, too, and his chin on my shoulder, as he hunched down into my hug. I patted his bare back awkwardly, realizing he needed this as much as I apparently thought he had.

“Why?” I asked quietly in his ear.

“Because...” He sniffed. “...I don’t want them to have to deal with it, too. And I don’t want...” He trailed off and pulled out of the hug, stepping back from me. “I don’t want the sympathy,” he said, steadyng his voice. “I don’t want the whispers and the looks, like I’m already at death’s door. If I am, I wanna go out being me, and I want people to think of me as me, not... I dunno, some tragic victim of cancer. You know?”

I nodded, understanding even if I didn’t agree. “I know.”

“So will you help me, Cary?”

In that moment, as he stood there in front of me, red-faced and teary-eyed and completely pitiful-looking, how could I say no?

I closed my eyes and prayed I wasn’t making a huge mistake. “Yeah, Nick,” I agreed. “I’ll help you.”

Chapter 14

Cary

I barely slept that night. I was exhausted, but the conversation with Nick had left me wide awake, my mind racing.

After he went to bed, I unpacked my laptop and used his wireless to get online. I googled the type of lymphoma he said he’d been diagnosed with and read all the statistics about it. They weren’t very encouraging.

I finally crawled into bed, expecting to pass out as soon as my head hit the pillow, but even though I’d been awake almost twenty-four hours, I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. The bed in Nick’s guest room was comfortable, but I couldn’t stop thinking long

enough to relax. *Oh my God, I'm in Nick Carter's condo* had turned into, *Oh my God, Nick Carter has cancer.*

At some point, I must have finally drifted off because the next thing I knew, it was light in my room. Bleary-eyed, I gazed across the room, not recognizing anything at first. Then, with a jolt, I remembered where I was and sat up, the covers falling off me. I looked around for a clock, wondering what time it was, but I didn't see one. My body felt heavy, my mind groggy, like I'd woken abruptly from a deep sleep. My head pounded, and I remembered how buzzed I'd been the night before, bouncing around in the back of the cab with Nick, then breaking down into tears and throwing myself at him when he'd told me he was sick.

I hadn't forgotten that part either, and the memory of it woke me right up. I felt worried and embarrassed, sick with the realization of what I'd agreed to do. I wished I could go back to sleep and forget it all, but now that I was awake, there was no way I was going to be able to fall asleep again. With a sigh, I dragged myself out of bed and pulled on the pair of shorts I'd left on the floor the night before. I always slept in just a t-shirt and my underwear; I couldn't handle pants. They always got twisted up when I rolled around in bed.

I was grateful for the connecting door into the guest bathroom, eager to get a look at myself in the mirror and do damage control before I let Nick see the morning version of me. I stumbled in, turned on the light, and grimaced when I saw my reflection. My hair looked like a rat's nest, and my face was washed out without makeup. I found my brush and did my best to tame and untangle my hair, finally pulling it back into a bushy ponytail. I brushed my teeth to get rid of my morning breath before I finally dared to venture out of the bedroom.

The moment I opened the door, I got hit with the enticing smell of brewing coffee and frying bacon. It was such a heavenly combination, I couldn't help but follow it, still in my pajamas, right to the kitchen. Nick was there, his back to me, in a pair of pajama pants himself. He had a shirt on this time, but it was just a plain white wifebeater, and I found my eyes running up and down his bare, tattooed arms and broad shoulders, watching him tending to something on the stove. *Stop it*, I scolded myself, when I realized what I was doing.

I cleared my throat, and he turned around. "Hey," he said, one corner of his mouth jerking up into a half-smile.

I managed a smile back. "Morning. Whatever you're cooking smells great."

He stepped out of the way of the stove. There was bacon sizzling in one pan, scrambled eggs cooking in another. "Hope you're hungry."

If I hadn't been before, I was then. I nodded eagerly.

"Coffee?" he asked, pulling the pot out of his coffee maker.

“Please.”

“How do you like it?”

“Um – with cream, if you’ve got it.”

“No problem.”

As he poured me a cup and added some creamer from his refrigerator, I noticed the time on his microwave clock. It was still early, just after nine o’clock. I’d only slept a few hours. No wonder I felt so groggy. I accepted the warm mug of coffee he handed me gratefully and took a sip, hoping the caffeine would make up for the lack of sleep.

“Did you sleep okay?” he asked, as he went back to stove.

“It took me awhile to fall asleep,” I admitted, “but once I did, yeah, I slept fine.”

He was quiet for a minute, turning the bacon, stirring the scrambled eggs. Then he turned around to face me again. “Look, I’m sorry... about last night...” he said awkwardly. “I shouldn’t have sprung it on you like that. I just... didn’t know how else to do it... and I figured if I was drunk, maybe it’d be easier...”

I shrugged. “You don’t have to apologize. It would have shocked me no matter how you said it.”

He nodded. “Yeah, well... sorry for any awkwardness.”

I shifted my weight, remembering the shirtless hug. “Me too.”

He turned back to the stove, checked the food once more, and shut off the burners. “Have a seat,” he said, gesturing over his shoulder to his dining room table. As I went to sit down, I wondered how often he actually ate there. “You want toast?” he called from the kitchen.

“Sure!”

I watched him move around the kitchen, getting out a loaf of bread, adding two slices to his toaster. After another minute, he asked, “You want anything else to drink? Milk? OJ?”

“Orange juice would be great.”

He poured two glasses of juice and brought them into the dining room, setting one down in front of me and the other across from me. Then he returned to the kitchen, and when he came back, he was carrying two plates, loaded with eggs, bacon, and toast. “Crap, I forgot the silverware,” he groaned, as he put the plates down. “Hang on a sec.”

I followed him into the kitchen. “Do you have butter? For the toast?”

“Oh shit, that too. Fridge.”

I opened his refrigerator and found a bucket of spreadable margarine. “Anything else we’re forgetting?”

“I think we’re good.”

We went back into the dining room and sat down. For a few minutes, we were quiet, buttering our toast, tasting the food. “You’re a good cook,” I said, unable to hide the tone of surprise in my voice.

He smirked. “What, didn’t think I could cook? I’m a bachelor; what else am I supposed to do?”

What happened to his girlfriend? I wondered, but didn’t ask. We’d had enough awkward conversations already. “I dunno, live on pizza and take-out like other bachelors do?”

He laughed. “Been there, done that. I’ve been tryin’ to eat better the last couple years, though, so I learned how to make my own food. Not that this is exactly healthy...” He looked down at his plate of bacon shining with grease, eggs scrambled with cheese, and toast smothered with melting butter. “I’ve been tryin’ to eat a lot before I start a new chemo cycle, in case I can’t keep anything down after that.”

I watched him toy with his fork in sympathy. “Have you been getting pretty sick from it?”

“The first cycle, not at all. The second cycle was bad. But they alternate, so maybe this next one will be okay.”

“I hope so.” I raised a forkful of scrambled eggs to my mouth. Swallowing, I asked, “When do you start the next one?”

“Today.”

I nearly dropped my fork. “Today? Does that mean you expect me to start today too?”

He blinked. “Well... I thought we should make sure it works out okay before tour... so, yeah...?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Gee, thanks for the advance notice.”

“Sorry,” he said, with a crooked smile. “I’m kind of a procrastinator, if you couldn’t tell.”

“You, who waited six weeks to tell anyone about your cancer, a procrastinator? Um, yeah... I could tell.”

He offered another sheepish smile. “Are you mad?”

“No,” I sighed. “And I’m not usually this sarcastic either; I’m sorry. I’m just trying to get used to this whole idea.”

He nodded. “I feel ya. It’s been six weeks – seven, really – and I still wake up wishing it was all just a bad dream.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. He was making me feel sorry for him again – not that it was hard. I didn’t want to pity him, but he was as nice a guy as he’d always seemed, and he didn’t deserve to be in this predicament, sick and trying to hide it from everyone he loved. Even if I didn’t agree with him, I still felt sympathy for him.

We finished breakfast and cleared up the dishes together. Then Nick said, “I wanna grab a shower before you start the first infusion. It takes three hours, and I have to have it twice today.”

Wow, he really is serious about starting this today, I thought, feeling a surge of panic. “You have all the equipment to do this?” I asked, skeptical and hoping to stall.

“I think so. Wanna check it out and make sure?”

I nodded faintly, and he took me into his bedroom, which was a mess – tangled sheets hanging off the huge, unmade bed, dirty clothes lying all over the floor, a musty smell lingering in the air. It was what I’d expect a teenage boy’s room to look like, only much bigger and more maturely decorated. At least he didn’t have posters of cars and hot babes in swimsuits on his walls.

“Sorry, it’s a mess in here,” said Nick, after I’d had a chance to look around. He disappeared into his giant, walk-in closet – I peeked in curiously after him – and emerged carrying a big, plastic tub. He took it back to the dining room, set it down on the table, and pried off the lid. “Hopefully everything you need is in here. Schedule... instructions...” He handed me a packet of paper that had been laying on top. I skimmed over it, relieved to find a neatly-printed schedule of his chemo regimen, detailing which drugs he should receive when, how, and how much.

Noticing a doctor’s name on the schedule, I said, “Why don’t you go take your shower and give me a chance to look through all of this?”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Make yourself at home.”

He disappeared back into his bedroom. I waited a few minutes, looking over the other contents of the tub, and when I heard the shower start, I grabbed the chemo schedule and my cell phone and snuck back into the guest bedroom. I closed the door, sat down

on the bed, and looked at the letterhead on the piece of paper in my hand. *UCLA Santa Monica Hematology and Oncology*, it said, and below was an address, phone and fax numbers, and the name of a physician, Chanda Subramanien, M.D.

I hesitated only a few seconds. Then I dialed the number on the paper and asked to speak with Dr. Subramanien.

Nick's doctor was a polite Indian woman who told me in no uncertain terms that she thought his plan was suicide.

"It's not just that he wants to receive chemo at home," she explained. "Although it's not common for it to be administered completely outside a hospital setting, I did find an article about the benefits of home chemotherapy in patients who would otherwise be incompliant with their treatment. As long as you feel comfortable giving the chemo as instructed and monitoring Mr. Carter's blood counts, I see no problem with him choosing home care."

"My concern is this tour he's planning to go on," she continued briskly. "I warned him of the dangers of being around large crowds of people with a suppressed immune system. Perhaps if you could get him to agree to wear a mask..."

Fat chance, I thought doubtfully, knowing Nick would never be seen wearing a surgical mask when he was trying to hide his illness. "I'll see what I can do," I said. "The tour doesn't start for another couple weeks. Maybe I can convince him to change his mind."

"I hope so," she said solemnly. "Otherwise, I worry this treatment will kill him before it has a chance to save him."

Chapter 15

Cary

When Nick got out of the shower, I was back at the dining room table, as if I'd never left. I'd spread the contents of the tub out on the table in front of me, taking inventory of the medical equipment and supplies.

"Missing anything?" Nick asked as he came in.

I looked up. He was shirtless again, wearing only a baggy pair of basketball shorts. His hair was still wet from the shower, and I could smell the soap coming off his skin. I quickly looked back at the stock of supplies. "No, it looks like you've got everything we'll need. I'm impressed."

"I got help from the cancer clinic," he said, plopping down onto the chair beside me. "I don't know what half this shit is."

I laughed. "Good thing I do."

"You know how to do this, then?"

I nodded. "Some of my residents do chemo at the nursing home. It's a lot easier than transporting them to the hospital all the time. I guess this isn't much different."

"I hope I look and smell better than your usual patients," he joked, his lips curving into a playful smirk.

Feeling myself blush, I quickly changed the subject. "Have you had your blood tested recently? You shouldn't start your next cycle yet if your counts are low."

"Oh yeah. Hold on a sec." He got up and went back to his bedroom, returning a minute later with a plastic file folder. He opened it up, pulled out the piece of paper on top, and slid it across the table to me.

I studied the lab report for a complete blood count he'd had done on Friday, the day before I'd flown out. *You really did take care of everything*, I thought, as my eyes scanned the paper. His red and white blood cell counts were both lower than normal, which was a typical result of chemotherapy, since its goal was to stop the out-of-control cell growth and kill off cancer cells. They weren't too low, though, so I handed Nick back the report and said, "Looks like you're good to go."

"Awesome," he replied dryly.

"Where should we do this?" I asked, looking around.

"I guess here's as good as anyplace else, if it works for you." He got up and turned on the light fixture over the table. "That give you enough light?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that'll work. Just let me wash my hands and get set up here."

It felt weird acting like a nurse when I was still in my pajamas, but I tried to be professional. I was going to need to be, in order to separate Nurse Cary from Cary, the Backstreet Boys fan. Still, as I pulled on a pair of medical gloves and got to work, it was hard to pretend that the man sitting in front of me was just one of my regular patients. For one thing, he *did* look and smell better than my usual patients. A lot better. And then there was the fangirl side of me that was still a little starstruck, who couldn't believe she had Nick Carter sitting in front of her, shirtless. But as I opened an antiseptic wipe and started disinfecting his port, it suddenly felt very real again.

"This is gonna be cold," I warned Nick, picking up a bottle of topical anesthetic spray, designed to numb the skin for a few minutes, just long enough for me to insert a needle into his port without any pain.

He winced as I sprayed. "That is some freaky shit," he muttered, looking down at the spot on his chest where his skin had turned temporarily white with the freezing spray.

"Bet you don't even feel it now," I said, reaching for the special needle that was designed to go into the port without damaging it. My hand was steady when I slipped off the cover of the needle, but it shook as I put my other hand on Nick's chest, stretching the skin over the port taut so I could see it clearly. *Get a grip*, I chided myself, afraid I was going to miss and stab him in the chest. I took a deep breath and held it, as I slowly and carefully guided the needle to the center of the port and pushed it in. When I felt it touch the back of the port chamber, I let out my breath in relief. Nick didn't even flinch.

"Alright, we're in," I said breathlessly. "I just need to flush out the line and make sure everything's flowing right before I inject any medication."

"You're a pro at this," he commented, watching me clean the injection cap on the end of the thin piece of tubing that now hung out of the port.

"Eh, I've just had lots of practice. This part is pretty basic," I replied, inserting a syringe filled with saline into the tube. I pulled the plunger back to check for a blood return before squirting the saline in

Confident that everything was in place and working correctly, I checked the chemotherapy schedule again. A shot of Zofran came first, for nausea, followed by an injection of Mesna, a chemoprotectant that would counteract the serious side effects of the chemotherapy drug that would follow it, cyclophosphamide, which had to be infused over three hours through a portable pump. The regimen called for the cyclophosphamide to be given twice on the first three days of the cycle, so we would be repeating the whole process later in the day, twice more the next day, and two more times the day after that. I wondered again how Nick expected to stick to that kind of schedule while he was on the road, but I didn't ask.

"Zofran," I said, picking up a pre-filled syringe. The hospital had already prepared everything, so I didn't have to mix or measure anything before administering it. I double checked the label on the syringe and compared the dosage to the amount on the schedule, then injected it into the port.

"So," said Nick, while I reached for the Mesna next. "Why'd you become a nurse?"

I hesitated, feigning deep concentration over making sure I had the right dosage of Mesna in the syringe. I didn't really want to tell him about my mother yet, but I wasn't sure what else to say. Figuring I might as well be honest, I finally admitted, "Because of my mom." I stuck the syringe into the injection cap, carefully avoiding his eyes. I pushed the plunger down slowly as I talked. "She went through a serious illness when I

was little, and the nurses she had took such good care of her and were so good to me and my Dad, too. It made me want to be a nurse, so I could do the same for others.”

“That’s nice,” Nick said. “You’re good at it.”

I smiled at that. “Thank you.” I took out the syringe and set it aside. “Alright, time for the big guns,” I said, reaching for the chemo pump. I opened it up to check that the bag inside was the right stuff; then I uncapped it and connected the tubing to the port. Within minutes, the pump was up and running, sending a steady drip of the chemo up through the IV line, into the port, and on into Nick’s vein. “I think you’re all set,” I announced, smiling again with relief. “Now all you have to do is carry this thing around with you for the next three hours.”

He made a face at the chemo pump. “How am I supposed to carry it around when we’re on the road? It’s too big to fit in my pocket.”

It was hard to keep a straight face when I answered, “Most of the residents I’ve seen using one of these just wear a fanny pack.” It was the truth, but I knew he wouldn’t like to hear it. Sure enough, the horrified look on his face made me giggle.

“A fanny pack, are you fucking kidding me? I’m not walking around wearing a *fanny pack*.” He spat out the very words like they were poison. “I dunno what decade your old geezers think it is, but this ain’t 1980, and I’m not a ten-year-old girl, so...”

“Suit yourself,” I replied. “What about a little man-purse, like Brian used to carry around?”

He made another face, rolling his eyes. “Yo, Frick’s my boy and all that, but no way am I carrying one of his wife’s murses.”

“Well then, maybe you should just tell him the issue you’re having,” I suggested sweetly. “I bet Leighanne could design you something that’s not so... purse-like.”

He scowled and looked away. “Whatever,” he muttered. “I got three weeks to figure something out.”

“If you just told them, you wouldn’t have to worry about hiding it,” I pointed out.

He shook his head. “I’m not telling them. Not yet. Just drop it, okay?” I could tell by the sound of his voice that we were done kidding around, and so I nodded, knowing better than to push the issue.

“Why don’t you go get comfortable?” I suggested. “I’ll clean this stuff up.”

“Alright. Thanks.” He picked up the chemo pump and disappeared into the living room, while I disposed of the sharps, packed the rest of the supplies back into the tub, and

wiped off the table. When I went into the living room to find him, he was stretched across the couch, flipping channels on the TV.

I felt suddenly intrusive. Now that I'd served my purpose, I wasn't sure what to do. "Um – since this takes three hours," I started awkwardly, shifting my weight, "do you want me to...?"

"You can stay," he replied without looking at me. "I mean, if that's cool with you. You might as well just stay the next few days, if you don't mind. It'd be easier."

"Oh – yeah," I agreed after a moment's pause, nodding. "Yeah, it would. You're sure that's okay with you?"

"It's cool. I brought you out here, didn't I?"

"Yeah. Thanks." He seemed moody all of a sudden, and I wondered if it was just because of the chemo or because I had bugged him about telling the guys again. Whatever it was, I decided to give him some time to himself. "I think I'll go grab a shower and get dressed then," I said.

"Sure. There's towels and stuff in the bathroom closet; make yourself at home."

"Okay, thanks."

His guest bathroom was as nice as any hotel – probably nicer than the kind of hotels I usually stayed in. I lingered over my shower and took my own sweet time getting dressed and ready for the day, partly to give him time and partly because I wanted to look presentable for him. I spread all my toiletries across the counter, put on makeup, and did my hair. By the time I left the bathroom, I felt a lot better than I had going in.

Nick's mood seemed to have improved, too. "Still two hours till this finishes," he said when I came back into the living room, checking the clock. "Wanna watch a movie or something with me? There's nothin' on TV."

"Sure," I replied, smiling, as I sat down in the same chair I'd sat in the day before. "What do you wanna watch?"

"I don't care. You pick. I got a ton of movies." He gestured to a set of shelves that displayed his massive collection of DVDs.

"Okay..." I got up and went over to the shelves, pouring over the titles. There were too many to choose from; I didn't even know what kind of movie I felt like watching, let alone what he would like. I hated being the one to pick. Have I mentioned how indecisive I am that way? "I don't know..."

"Just pick one."

“Okay... fine.” I closed my eyes and pointed my finger at the shelves. “Eeny, meeny, miny, MOE!” Eyes still closed, I reached out and pulled the first DVD I touched from the shelves. I opened my eyes and looked down at the DVD case in my hand.

Brian’s Song.

Ooh... I blanched. *Definitely not.* I quickly shoved the case back into its slot on the shelf, before Nick could see, and grabbed a familiar-looking blue case from the shelf below. Turning, I held it out for Nick’s approval. “Nemo?”

“Righteous,” he said, in a perfect imitation of Crush.

I beamed. I love kids movies – Disney, Pixar, and every other kind. It was cute that Nick had some in his collection, and I figured it would do us both good to watch something light and funny. So we watched *Finding Nemo*.

“It’s weird hearing Ellen’s voice in this movie after meeting her on *Idol*,” I commented, when Dory first came onscreen. Nick chuckled. Remembering something he’d told me, I asked, “So was she really the one who gave you my phone number?”

He nodded. “I told ya, I had to bribe her with an appearance on her show.”

I glanced over at him. “An appearance to talk about...?”

“Yeah. After the tour. I’ll have no reason to hide it then, and I figure by that point, the treatment will either have worked, or it won’t have.” He shrugged. “I’ll either be announcing I’m on the road to recovery, or announcing that I’m dying.”

My heart skipped a beat and then started to race. “Let’s hope this’ll all be behind you by then,” I said quietly, turning my head back toward the TV so he couldn’t see the expression on my face.

Get it together, I scolded myself, for the second time that day. *You’re a nurse. Act like it.* But then, I’d always had a hard time building a rapport with my patients without becoming too attached. Whenever we lost a resident I’d become close to at the nursing home, I cried like I was losing my own grandparents all over again. Sometimes I wondered why I put myself through it, again and again, but it was worth it to be able to care for people who needed me, people who were in the last stage of their life and needed compassion and companionship more than just medical care.

In some ways, Nick wasn’t so different from them, but I couldn’t pretend he was just another patient. I’d only just met him, but he felt more like an old, long-lost friend, someone I’d known ever since I first saw his picture on the cover of a CD I’d gotten when I was sixteen. How could I care for him without getting too involved, when I’d been his fan for almost thirteen years?

It felt almost like a conflict of interest – I wanted to help him, and I certainly wanted to go on the tour, too, but by doing so, I worried both of us would be making the wrong decision. And when you were dealing with an illness as serious as his, the wrong decision could be a fatal one.

Chapter 16

Cary

I offered to make dinner that night. I'm a pretty good cook – my grandma taught me when I was a kid, and I've been cooking for my dad, who is hopeless in the kitchen, ever since.

Thankfully, Nick had planned ahead and gotten groceries, so when he turned me loose in his kitchen, I found I had plenty of options. I decided to go with something bland, in case he felt nauseous – baked chicken with white rice and green beans. Nick had gone to take a nap after his first chemo infusion finished, and I wasn't sure he'd even have an appetite when he got up again, so I was surprised when I heard his voice say, "Somethin' smells good."

Closing the oven door, I looked up as he staggered into the kitchen. He had clearly just woken up; his eyes were puffy from sleep, his hair was sticking up in the back, and he had a red crease on one cheek from his pillowcase. I couldn't help but smile; he looked less like a polished popstar now and more like a little boy. "Thanks! Did you sleep well?"

"I was out like a light," he replied, his voice crackling with phlegm.

I hadn't heard a peep from his room since he'd gone to lie down. I'd gone to check on him once and pressed my ear to his door, afraid to open it without knocking, yet also afraid to knock and wake him up. The chemo had clearly worn him out, but at least he hadn't been getting up to vomit. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Tired. But otherwise, okay, I guess. Hungry."

"Really? That's good," I said, encouraged. "No nausea, then?"

"Not really. That Zofran shit works pretty good. And the pill I have to take in the morning is a steroid, so it gives me an appetite. Go figure," he scoffed, "I'll probably gain weight doing chemo instead of lose it. I figured I'd be puking my guts out – gross, but hey, easy way to keep the pounds off. But just my luck – I still feel like eating, but not working out."

“Aww, I wouldn’t worry about your weight right now. I’m sure you can take a few days off to recover from chemo without messing up your fitness routine too much. Just be glad you still feel like eating and can keep food down. Speaking of which, dinner should be ready in a few minutes.”

“Awesome. Oh, and hey, afterwards, we should go and get my car, before you start the second dose of chemo. We left it at the club last night, remember?”

Had it really only been a night ago? It seemed ages ago that I’d been bopping around in the backseat of a cab, buzzed out of my mind, completely oblivious to the real reason Nick had brought me out here. “Oh yeah,” I said. “Yeah, sure, that’s fine.”

“Maybe we can get ice cream on the way,” he added. I laughed at the faraway look in his eyes; he was practically drooling.

“Ice cream sounds great.”

I was still stuffed full of chicken and rice when we set out in Nick’s white Escalade to pick up his Benz, but I got an ice cream cone anyway, when he insisted on treating me to dessert. We sat out in the parking lot in the SUV, the windows rolled down, enjoying the sea breeze while we ate our cones.

“I didn’t know they had places like this in LA,” I said, staring out the window at the rundown ice cream parlor. It looked just like the local ice cream shacks I’d frequented as a kid growing up in Illinois, and the soft serve tasted just as good. I licked a slow path around the outside of my cone, trying to keep it from dripping onto the leather seat.

Nick laughed. “What’d you expect?”

“I dunno... something more upscale? You know, where the ice cream isn’t really ice cream at all, but gelato or frozen yogurt.”

He chuckled again. “Oh, they have plenty of those places, too. But see, I’m not a true Californian; I grew up eating Dairy Queen in Florida. I like all kinds of ice cream – too much, if you couldn’t tell.”

I smiled. “Everyone has their weakness.”

He smirked back at me. “So what’s yours?”

“Mm... chocolate. Anything chocolate.” I took a huge lick of the chocolate side of my twist cone.

Nick finished his first and started the engine as soon as he’d popped the bottom of the cone into his mouth. I polished off the rest of mine on the drive over to the club we’d

been at the night before. His Benz was still parked there, a piece of paper visible on the windshield.

“Fuck!” Nick swore, ripping the parking ticket out from under the wiper. “Are you fucking kidding me, LAPD? What, would you have rather I drove home drunk? This is what I get for being responsible for once? Just my fucking luck...”

I stood back, letting him rant. When he ran out of steam, he crammed the ticket into his pocket and turned to me. “Sorry,” he said stiffly, clearly still fuming on the inside. “Let’s get the hell out of here. Which one you wanna drive?”

He was giving me a choice? I looked between the massive, white SUV and the sporty, black coupe. I knew which one I wanted to drive. “Um... the Benz?” I asked timidly.

He placed a key fob in my hand. I looked down at it. There was no key attached.

Seeing the look of confusion on my face, he explained, “It’s a smart key. Just put that in your pocket, put your foot on the brake, and hit the start button to start the ignition.”

I blinked. Back home, I drove the same car I’d had since I’d graduated college, a 1996 Honda Civic. It was the first car I’d bought all on my own, a cherry red hatchback with a sunroof, and I loved it, but it didn’t even have power locks, let alone a keyless start. I felt a little out of my league. “Are you sure you want me driving your car?” I asked.

He gave me a wary look. “Why, are you a really bad driver or somethin’? You’re not gonna wreck it, are ya?”

“I hope not...”

He chuckled. “You’ll be fine; I trust you. C’mom, get in.” He opened the driver’s side door for me, and I slid behind the wheel. To my surprise, after he closed my door, he came around to the passenger side and got in next to me. “I’ll have you follow me, but just in case we get separated in traffic, I’m gonna set up the GPS for ya so you don’t get lost,” he said. I waited while he programmed his address into the GPS. “You’ve got my number – call if you need me,” he added, before he got out.

I watched him get back into the Escalade and reluctantly shifted into drive so that I could follow him. I’m really not a bad driver, but I’ll be the first to admit that city traffic makes me nervous, especially when it’s a city I don’t know. *Please don’t let me wreck his car*, I pleaded, gripping the wheel tightly, as I inched out onto the street behind him.

After we made it back to the condo – in one piece, thankfully – it was time for Nick’s second dose of chemo. Once again, we spread the tub of medical supplies out over the dining room table and repeated the process from that morning. It must have been awkward for Nick, letting me into his home, letting me see him at his most vulnerable,

when he'd only just met me, but he didn't complain. Again, I tried to be professional, to be a nurse and not a fan. It was easier the second time.

When the chemo pump was hooked up and running again, Nick went to lie down on the couch, as he'd done before, while I cleaned up. After a few minutes, I heard him call, "Cary?"

I poked my head into the living room. "Yeah?"

"Will you make me an ice pack?"

"Um, sure..." I wondered what he needed an ice pack for. "Do you feel okay? You're not running a fever, are you?" I hadn't checked his temperature, but it was something we'd have to keep an eye on. A fever when he was neutropenic, low in white blood cells, could mean a dangerous infection.

"No, no... I'm fine," he insisted. From the other room, he shouted out instructions, telling me where to find a large Ziploc bag, how much ice to put in it, and what kind of towel to wrap it in. "Thanks," he said gratefully, when I brought it in to him. He was stretched out flat on his back, his head propped up against one arm of the couch, his feet dangling over the other. When he took the ice pack out of my hands, he laid it right on top of his head. Not across his forehead, but literally on top of his head, right over the crown of his hair. He left it there and closed his eyes.

I stared. He didn't move. "Headache?" I asked after a few seconds.

"No. It's to keep the chemo from getting to my hair cells, so I won't go bald."

I blinked. "Really? And that... works?"

"I still have my hair, don't I? They said it'd start falling out in three weeks, and it's been six."

"And you've been putting ice packs on your head this whole time?" I wondered if he had done this while I was in the shower earlier.

"Yeah, ever since I read about it while I was in the hospital."

"Where did you read about it?" I asked, sitting down. I have to admit, I was skeptical, but intrigued. I was a nurse, and I'd never heard of such a thing.

"Online." Well, that explained it.

"Isn't that uncomfortable?" I shivered just thinking about it. I couldn't even stand to go out in the winter without a hat.

“Yeah, it’s fuckin’ cold, but I can’t exactly show up to the first concert bald, can I? I think people will notice.”

“Tell the fans AJ dared you to shave your head.” I smiled. “They’d eat it up.”

“Yeah, but AJ would know he didn’t dare me to do that.”

“Then tell AJ the truth.”

He frowned. “I told you I’m not doing that. Not till after the tour.”

“Then tell AJ Brian dared you. No, better yet, tell them all that *Kevin* dared you. It’s not like they’ll call Kevin up and ask.”

Nick cracked a smile, opening one eye to squint up at me, so it looked like he was winking. “Yeah, I could see Kevin doing that. It’d be payback for the time I tried to shave off his eyebrows in his sleep.”

“You didn’t!” I gasped, laughing.

“I didn’t succeed. But I did try,” he snickered.

I laughed too, but just a little – his story had made me think of something else, a fact I wasn’t sure he knew. “You know, if you do lose your hair, you’ll probably lose all of it – not just on your head, but everywhere. Your eyebrows, eyelashes... and other body hair...” I trailed off, glad he had his eyes closed again so he couldn’t see the way my face got red. “But your excuse will still work,” I went on quickly. “Payback for the failed attempt on Kevin’s brows; he got yours instead.”

Nick chuckled a little at that, but I saw the way his forehead creased, his lovely eyebrows furrowing together. It was hard to imagine him without them. “Maybe I should be icing those too,” he muttered. Then he said, “Will you grab me a blanket or something? This really is fucking cold.”

“Sure. Where do you keep extra blankets?” He directed me to a linen closet, where I found a pile of mismatched blankets. I chose a soft, warm-looking fleece one and brought it back to him. “Here,” I said, as I covered him with the blanket, tucking it around his shoulders and under his chin, so that only his head was uncovered. It looked like he was starting to shiver. “How long do you keep the ice on?” I asked, thinking this couldn’t possibly be good for him.

“As long as I can stand it,” he replied with a grimace.

I wanted to tell him it wasn’t worth torturing himself, that he’d be lucky if losing his hair was the worst side effect he had from the chemo. But he’d already snapped at me about telling AJ the truth, and I didn’t want to get my head bitten off, so I kept my mouth shut.

After a few minutes, he asked quietly, “Do you know anyone who’s gone through chemo and hasn’t lost their hair?”

I thought for a minute. “Well... some of our residents don’t have much hair to begin with...” And the ones who did lost it to chemo. But then I did come up with an exception. “But actually, yeah! I do know of one person. Luke Menard – he was on *American Idol* a couple seasons before I was; he made the top sixteen. I actually knew of him before he was on the show; we went to the same college, Millikin. He was a couple years ahead of me, so I didn’t really know him, but he sang in an a capella group there called Chapter 6. They’re still together, and they tour and release albums and stuff.” I had prided myself on owning an album autographed by Luke from my college days when I saw him on *Idol*, having no idea I would be there myself in two more years. “Anyway, he was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma after he got voted off the show, and he did chemo and radiation and everything, but didn’t lose his hair.”

“Yeah?” That made Nick smile. “Well, see, then, this might just work. Is that guy... is he still alive?”

“Oh, yeah!” I replied quickly. “Yeah, as far as I know, he’s in remission and doing well. I read his blog and follow him on Twitter.”

“Kaw, kaw!” Nick crowed, without opening his eyes. “Did you follow me on Twitter before I followed you?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, giggling. “I follow all of you.”

“So you’re, like, an actual fan then?”

“Well, yeah... I thought you knew that. How else would I have known ‘Evergreen’?”

“Good point. You’re not, like, posting about this on LiveDaily or something, though, are you?”

At first, I thought he was just kidding, but I looked over at his face and saw no hint of a smirk at the corners of his mouth. He was asking me for real. Before I could feel too offended at the implication, though, I reminded myself that he had every reason to be skeptical. He had been screwed over by plenty of people in the past, including girlfriends and his own family. He had no reason to trust me, and yet he had trusted me. He hardly knew me, yet he’d let me into his home and let me in on a secret he hadn’t told anyone else. I was a prime position to exploit him if I wanted to, and he knew it. He was just desperate enough to take the risk, I supposed. Luckily for him, I wasn’t out to exploit him.

“No way! I would never do that!” I said emphatically. “Besides, LiveDaily sucks now.”

“But you do go there?”

“I’ve been there before...” I said slowly. “To be honest, though, I haven’t had much time for message boards lately, between doing *Idol* and then going back to my regular work hours and then coming out here.”

“What’s your screen name?”

He opened his eyes and looked over at me. I blushed furiously, picturing the username I’d registered there a long, *long* time ago and just never changed. **KFC4Dessert**. It had nothing to do with chicken. (Did I mention Brian and Kevin were my favorite Backstreet Boys?) No way was I going to tell him that one, though, so I shot back, “What’s *yours*?”

It was common knowledge among Backstreet fans that Nick knew of LiveDaily; he’d mentioned it before, and everyone was sure he secretly had an account there. But Nick admitted nothing. He just smirked and replied, “Touché.”

I smiled back and quickly tried to change the subject. “Seriously,” I said, “your secret’s safe with me. Even if I did want to spill, I wouldn’t – patient confidentiality and all.”

He chuckled. “Doesn’t that only apply if you’ve signed some kind of confidentiality agreement?”

I considered that. “Well... you wouldn’t still let me tour with you guys if I broke your confidentiality, right? There’s our contract. If you want me to sign something to make it official, I will. I would never sell you out, Nick. I’m not like that.”

“I appreciate that,” he said, and it sounded like he believed me. Good. I didn’t want him to think I was some kind of mole.

“How’s your head?” I asked to change the subject again, my eyes drifting back to the towel of ice on his head.

“Numb from cold,” he replied, deadpan. “You just had to ask, didn’t you? I had almost forgotten about how fucking cold I am.”

I giggled. “Sorry!”

“Keep talking. Distract me.” He closed his eyes again.

“Okay... um...” Well, of course, now that he’d asked me, I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Time’s up, you fail.” He heaved an exaggerated sigh. “So what’s your favorite Backstreet record?”

“*Backstreet’s Back.*”

He made a face. “Really? I was like seventeen when we recorded that thing.” He said it like it was something to be ashamed of.

I smirked, remembering how whiny his voice sounded on that album. “Oh, totally. My favorite track’s the ‘All I Have to Give’ Conversation Mix.”

“Shut up.”

I giggled again. “Sorry. Do I fail as a fan, too?”

“Do you have ‘This is Us’?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you don’t totally fail. D-minus for mentioning the Conversation Mix, though.”

“Okay, okay, so that’s not really my favorite track. My favorite is ‘If You Want to Be a Good Girl (Get Yourself a Bad Boy)’.”

Nick snorted. “Okay, now you do fail. Don’t ever bring up that song again.”

I was tempted to plug my nose and start singing it, but I wasn’t quite that brave around him yet.

“So what is your favorite track, really?”

“10,000 Promises.”

“Yeah? Good call. Man, we haven’t sung that one in forever...” Even with his eyes closed, his expression was wistful.

“You should sometime. It’s even better live.”

“Thanks.” A smile flickered on his lips. “Who’s your favorite Backstreet Boy?”

Oh, now there was a loaded question. “Kevin,” I replied quickly.

“Current Backstreet Boy,” he amended.

“Then Brian.”

His eyes flashed open, and I smiled sweetly at him. He put on a pout. “Not me? I’m wounded.”

“Sorry. It’s those Littrell genes, I guess.”

“Ouch. That’s cold.”

“Sorry,” I giggled again.

“No, I meant my head.” He sat up suddenly, sweeping the ice pack off the top of his head. “I can’t take that shit anymore.” He started to get up, forgot about the chemo pump he was tethered to, and shouted “Fuck!” when the IV line pulled taut. The ice pack fell with a splat onto the hardwood floor and burst, cold water and chunks of ice flying everywhere. “SHIT!” Nick screamed.

The laughter had died on my lips. I watched, wide-eyed, as he collapsed back onto the couch and buried his head in his knees, both hands clutching at his hair. For a second, I was afraid he was going to start tearing it out, but he didn’t. He took a shuddering breath, and I couldn’t tell if it was more from frustration or from pain. “Are you okay?” I asked hesitantly, worried the IV had pulled at his port and hurt him.

“I’m fine,” he muttered after a few seconds, his voice muffled.

“Don’t worry about the floor. I’ll take care of it.” I got up and went into the guest bathroom, where I’d found the extra bath towels for my shower. I grabbed an armload and carried them back into the living room.

“You don’t have to do that,” he mumbled when I returned.

“I don’t mind. Relax.” I started dropping towels everywhere I saw puddles, stamping down them with my bare feet to absorb as much water as possible.

After a few minutes, I saw Nick slump back onto the couch. His face was red. My heart went out to him, but I didn’t know what to say. I finished mopping up without another word, carried a towel full of melting ice cubes in to the kitchen to dump in the sink, and deposited the pile of wet towels in his laundry room. *I’ll do a load of laundry for him tomorrow*, I thought, since I’d be there another few days, anyway.

“Thanks,” Nick said stiffly when I sat down again. I could tell his good mood was gone.

“No problem,” I replied simply, turning my attention to whatever he was watching on TV. *The Simpsons*. Well, maybe that would cheer him up again.

In the middle of the show, I got a text. I looked at my phone to find that it was from Jessica. I hadn’t talked to her since the ride over to Nick’s place the day before, which felt like a century ago.

Sooo?! she’d texted. Why havent u called yet? How’s it goin? Ya havin fun? Makin beautiful music? Bangin nick carter? I want details damnit!

I smiled down at my phone. Then I glanced over at Nick, half-asleep on the couch, the blanket draped over him again with the chemo pump resting on top. This was so not

how I'd expected my time in California to be spent, but it wasn't like I could tell Jess the truth.

Can't talk now, but I'll tell you all about it later, I texted back. *I'm having the time of my life.*

Chapter 17

Cary

I slept better that night than I had the night before and woke up the next morning feeling more hopeful than I had the previous day.

Maybe Nick's plan wasn't so stupid after all, I thought as I stood at the bathroom sink, brushing my teeth. He seemed to be doing remarkably well with chemotherapy. Whether it was because of the ice packs or just a fluke, he still had his hair, and although the chemo seemed to wear him out, he hadn't had any bouts with nausea like I'd expected. If he could just get over the fatigue and keep his blood counts high enough to avoid getting sick, he might actually be able to handle the tour.

That was what I thought at the start of Day 2, anyway.

The condo was quiet when I left my room; Nick wasn't up yet. I decided I'd make breakfast that morning, since he'd done it the day before, and started whipping up some french toast. It seemed like a good choice: The eggs would be good for some protein, and the bread would be easy enough on his system. He could doctor it up as much as he felt like or just eat it plain if he wanted it bland.

I brewed coffee while I made the french toast, hoping the aroma would be enough to lure Nick out of his room, but when the coffee pot was full and the french toast was piled high on a platter, he still hadn't gotten up. I poured a cup of coffee, added a little cream and sugar the way I'd seen him do the day before, and carried it to the closed door of his bedroom. I knocked quietly before opening the door. If he was still asleep, he wouldn't even know I'd come to check on him, and if I woke him, he couldn't be too mad at me as long as I brought him coffee.

I tiptoed in. The room was dark; he had blackout shades drawn over the windows. Still, as the natural light from the condo spilled in, I could see him lying in bed, flat on his back and completely still. I inched closer. Nick was totally zonked out, his head lolled to one side on his pillow, his mouth hanging half open, his arms crossed over his bare chest, like he'd fallen asleep hugging himself. I'd never seen anyone else sleep in that position; it was odd, but kind of cute. At some point, he must have thrown his covers off; they were in a pile at the foot of the bed, hanging off the mattress. I wondered if

he'd run a fever in the night. Concerned, I set the mug of coffee down on his night stand, then reached out and lay my hand lightly on his forehead.

At my touch, his eyes suddenly flew open, and I jumped back, just as startled. "Sorry!" I said breathlessly, putting my hand over my racing heart. "I just came to check on you. And, um, I brought coffee." I picked up the mug from the night stand and held it out as a peace offering, as he pulled himself into a sitting position, leaning back against his pillows.

"Thanks," he croaked, his voice thick with sleep. He accepted the coffee and took a sip, closing his eyes again as he swallowed. His nostrils flared as he inhaled a deep breath. "Mm... what time is it?" He sounded so sleepy, his words were slurring together. I wondered if he was always like that in the morning, or if it was just the chemo making him so groggy.

"Almost ten." He'd gone to bed around eleven the night before, after his string of Sunday night FOX cartoons were over. "Did you sleep okay?"

He grunted in reply, raising the coffee mug to his lips again.

"I made breakfast," I added. "French toast. Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"You should try to eat something," I persisted. "I can bring it to you in here, if you want."

"Breakfast in bed?" He smirked, a spark of life brightening his eyes. "Alright... sold."

I smiled back. "Coming right up."

Call me backwards and pathetic, but I really didn't mind acting like his servant. I've always been domestic; I actually like doing traditional, householdy things like cooking and cleaning and sewing. I like taking care of people, too, so even if it wasn't what I had bargained for, this temporary live-in nurse gig was kind of perfect for me. Of course, it certainly helped that it was a Backstreet Boy I was taking care of; I wouldn't have done it for just anybody.

But for Nick, I dutifully fixed a plate of French toast and brought it in with a slab of butter and a little cup of syrup and a little dish of brown sugar so that he could load it up however he liked it. If he'd lived in a house with a garden, I'd have cut a fresh flower to put in a vase on his tray, too, just to be cute, but the only plants he had in his condo were made of plastic, so I didn't.

"Wow... this looks awesome. Thanks," said Nick, perking up a bit when he saw the plate of food.

“You’re welcome,” I replied, as he started slathering the bread with butter. He didn’t ask me to bring my own breakfast in to eat with him, so I ate a couple slices of french toast alone at his dining room table, opposite the tub of medical supplies. While I ate, I looked at the chemo schedule again to see what was on the agenda for that day.

It was pretty much the same as the previous one, except that another drug was added to the mix. *Methotrexate, 12 mg IT*. That one scared me a little. I knew “IT” was an abbreviation for “intrathecal,” which meant the medication had to be injected into the spinal canal. The idea was to kill off any cancer cells that managed to spread to the cerebrospinal fluid before they had a chance to set up shop in the central nervous system. Unfortunately, it required what was basically the equivalent of a spinal tap. Spinal taps were a challenge; I hated doing them on patients, and I wasn’t looking forward to doing one on Nick.

What have I gotten myself into? I wondered yet again, as the hopeful attitude I’d woken up with faded away.

I had just finished cleaning up the kitchen when Nick came out, freshly showered and looking more awake than he had before. “You’re a good cook,” he said, sliding his plate into the dishwasher before I closed it.

“Thanks! I’m glad you found your appetite.”

“It’s never lost for long,” Nick said with a smirk, as he moved around me, opening a cupboard, taking down a prescription bottle, filling a glass with water. I watched him pop a round, white tablet and knock back the water like it was a shot. He swallowed with a loud gulp, then turned back to me. “So. You ready to get this show on the road?”

I wished he was talking about the tour, but of course he meant his chemo. “So, I know you guys probably don’t really need to rehearse much or anything, since you’ve already toured Europe and Asia,” I said, hopefully off-handedly, as I got everything set up, “but I’m a little nervous about my part in all this. The performance part, I mean.” The U.S. tour started in less than three weeks, and except for our little “jam session” on Saturday, I hadn’t practiced my act in front of anybody. On *American Idol*, I’d only had a few days to prepare a song, but at least then I’d had the benefit of intensive rehearsals to get ready. “Will I have enough time to rehearse?”

“Oh yeah, yeah,” Nick replied casually. “We’ll have a few rehearsals before the first show in Miami, and you can run through your set then, too. But I was thinking, if you want, I can take you into the studio later this week or next week to mess around. AJ said he’d come, too; he wants to meet you.”

“Really?” My heart leapt with excitement at that, and even though I was standing in front of a spread of needles, tubing, and chemo drugs, I forgot, for a second, why I was really there. I wasn’t just a nurse, but a musician again. “I’d love that!”

Nick smirked. "Thought you might. You'll meet the other guys in New York. We got a gig there on the twenty-third and then a few days of TV appearances before we head down to Florida for the first show."

It was impossible to keep myself from grinning at the thought of jetting across the country with the Backstreet Boys, but then I looked down at the port needle in my hand, and my smile faded. "That sounds great," I said, "but won't you start your next cycle of chemo the week after that? How are you gonna keep up that kind of schedule when we have to follow *this* schedule, too?"

"We're not always that busy," Nick insisted. "Once the tour starts, there'll be more down time in the morning and at night after the shows."

I stared at him, flabbergasted at how casual he sounded about his little scheme. Was he delusional, or just in denial? "Nick, look at this schedule!" I said, passing the paper I'd been studying earlier across the table to him. "Two three-hour infusions of cyclophosphamide, twelve hours apart. Plus, you're supposed to get intrathecal chemo today, which basically means a spinal tap, which means you're gonna spend most of the day lying flat on your back so you don't get a killer headache."

"Ugh, that happened to me the first time; it sucked balls," Nick groaned, grimacing.

"I bet! And what are you going to do if that happens to you on tour?"

"We'll just have to do that part overnight. I usually sleep on my back anyway."

I sighed; he had an answer to everything, but he was missing my point. "I just think this is kinda crazy," I said quietly.

He scowled. "Yeah, well, crazy or not, you said you'd come along and help me. Are you gonna bail on me now?" His eyes bored into mine, and I felt myself blush.

I quickly lowered my eyes, focusing on the port in his chest. "No, Nick," I replied, plunging the needle firmly into it. "I'm not gonna bail on you." I reached for a syringe of saline to flush the port. "I just wish you'd think about what's best for you."

"Touring... living my life like normal... that's what's best for me."

I gave him a shot of the prescribed anti-nausea medication and almost wished I had another syringe of plain saline handy to inject instead. It would give him a reality check if he had to experience the full effects of the chemo drugs, but I wasn't that cruel. I hooked up the chemo pump like I was supposed to and fixed another ice pack, double-bagging it this time, so that Nick could freeze his hair while the chemo flowed into his system.

And that night, I repeated the process all over again.

Once the second dose of cyclophosphamide was infusing through the chemo pump, I packed up the tub of medical supplies and followed Nick into his bedroom. We'd decided the intrathecal chemo would be better off done there, rather than in the dining room, so that he could lie flat as soon as I was done administering it.

I turned on all of the lights to make it as bright as possible, washed my hands, and spread all of the equipment I would need across Nick's dresser. It was all familiar to me, and I was feeling okay about it right up until it was time to start. "Do you wanna lie down or sit up for this?" I asked Nick.

"Lie down," he said, and before I even had to tell him how I needed him positioned, he crawled onto his bed, rolled over on his side, and curled into a ball, hugging his knees to his chest. It broke my heart to realize that he'd been through this before; he knew exactly what to do.

I tugged on a pair of surgical gloves and got the shot of local anesthetic ready, but in the middle of probing my fingers along his lower back, trying to feel out the right two lumbar vertebrae to inject it between, I suddenly stopped.

"Everything okay?" Nick asked after a minute. "You didn't stick me already, did you? If you did, you're fuckin' good, cause I didn't feel a thing."

I forced a laugh. "No," I said. "I'm not *that* good." I was still holding the syringe in one hand and staring at the KAOS tattoo that ran down his spine, up higher on his back. To the left of it, on his shoulder blade, was an angry-looking man in the moon, and to the right, a large pair of eighth-notes. It struck me – like I really could have forgotten – that this was Nick Carter, the Backstreet Boy, the most popular member of one of the most popular boybands of my generation, and here I was, about to stick a needle into his spinal column. What if something went wrong? "Nick, I don't know if I can do this..."

He rolled over onto his back so that he could look at me. "What do you mean?" he asked, frowning. "You don't know how?"

"No, I know how..." I struggled to explain what was going through my head. "It's not just the spinal tap. It's just... what if I mess up? Or what if there's some complication that's not my fault, but still happens because I agreed to do this for you?" I was thinking suddenly of Michael Jackson, and of his private doctor, who had been charged with manslaughter for his role in the King of Pop's death. That guy must have thought he had it pretty good, too, working for Michael Jackson, preparing to go on tour with him. With a chill, I realized that his situation wasn't much different from mine. Granted, everything I was doing for Nick was legal and prescribed by a legitimate doctor, but still... what if something happened to him? And what if I was blamed for it?

"You're not gonna kill me, are ya, Cary?" His voice was teasing, but the look in his eyes was serious. I shook my head, not knowing what to say back to that. "Listen," he went on, "if you can't help me, the cancer will kill me. Personally, I'd rather take my chances on you."

"Why don't you just let me take you to the hospital for this part of it?" I pleaded.

"No." His voice was firm, matter-of-fact. "No more hospitals."

I sighed in frustration. "You have cancer, Nick! You can't just pick and choose what you will and won't do. This is your life we're talking about!"

"Yeah, that's right, I have cancer," he retorted, sounding angry now. "If nothing else, I think that gives me the right to do whatever the fuck I wanna do. I'm doing the goddamn treatment, every last form of torture the doctor ordered, but I'm doing it on my terms, okay? I thought you understood that."

Tears sprung to my eyes, and I quickly ducked my head, hoping he wouldn't see. I wasn't sure if I was crying out of frustration and fear, or if I was just upset because he was yelling at me. *Suck it up and stop being a baby*, I ordered myself fiercely. Out loud, I said, "I don't understand why you're being so stubborn." *Stubborn and stupid!* I added in my head.

He snorted. "I've always been stubborn. I'm just not gonna let this thing ruin my life – or whatever's left of it. I ain't ready to die, so I'm gonna do the chemo, but like I said, I'm gonna do it my way. With your help, of course," he added, his tone softening. The look he gave me tore at my heart. "I can't do it without you, Cary."

"Yes you could. You could find some other hopeless schmuck to do this for you."

"But I chose you. Believe me, when I say I want it that way..."

I started to reply, then cocked my head at him, my words dying on my tongue. Had he really just quoted "I Want It That Way," so deadpan like that? Yes... there it was, a little twitch at the corner of his mouth, which grew into a smirk, then broke into a full-on, shit-eating grin. I sighed, totally defenseless. I wasn't going to be able to say no to him, and he knew it. He knew how to play me like a fiddle, and I knew it, too, and still, I just let it happen.

"C'mon, Cary," he coaxed, rolling back onto his side and tucking himself into the fetal position once more. "Just get it over with, please. You said you know how to do this; you're not gonna hurt me. I trust you."

"Why?" I asked. "You hardly know me."

"Because," he said, after a moment's pause. "I got no one else to trust."

With a sigh, I steadied the syringe in my hand.

“Why won’t you trust the guys with this?” I asked later, once the spinal tap was over and Nick was lying flat in bed. “I thought you were like brothers.”

I was feeling calmer now that the intrathecal chemo was out of the way. It had gone as smoothly as I could have hoped, and now, with the lights off and the TV playing softly in the background while the rest of the IV chemo ran in, I could finally relax. I’d pulled a chair up alongside Nick’s bed, wanting to stay for a few minutes to make sure he was really okay before I left him for the night.

“We are,” Nick answered, staring up at the ceiling. “It’s not that I don’t wanna trust them. It’s not even that I don’t want them to know. I know they’d wanna know, and I’ll tell them eventually, but I’m not ready to yet. I’m not ready for things to change.”

I thought about my family, how they’d tried to keep life normal for me for as long as possible during my mother’s illness. I’d been shipped off to school every day and tucked into my own bed at night, right up until the very end. When that changed – when I was allowed to stay home from school one day, even though I wasn’t sick, and spend the night on a cot at my mom’s bedside – that’s when I knew she was really dying. Life was never the same afterwards. I could understand where Nick was coming from, his need to preserve what was normal for him for as long as he could.

“I know what you mean,” was all I told him.

“Thanks,” he said. “I mean, not just for understanding, but thanks for everything you’ve been doing. I didn’t mean to snap at ya earlier. I appreciate it; I really do. I know it can’t be easy for you. I know you’re giving up a lot to be here with me.”

“It’s okay. This isn’t really that different from what I do for a living. Really, I have it a lot easier – only one person to take care of, and it’s... *you*,” I finished awkwardly, feeling myself blush. There was so much else behind that “*you*,” so much else I could say about how much I admired him, even when he was moody and stubborn and downright foolish, but I didn’t want to embarrass myself sounding like a fangirl, so I left it at that.

He chuckled. “It takes something special to do what you do for a living. My folks owned a retirement home when I was a kid, and I liked going to entertain the residents there, but that was different from a nursing home. We didn’t have to wipe asses and change Depends.”

I smiled. “It’s not always pretty, but I like my job. I like the people. They’re interesting just to sit and talk to; they have great stories if you’re willing to listen, and they love the company. I think that’s why I like it better than when I worked in a hospital; I get to know my patients better, and the care is more personal.”

“Is that why you changed jobs?”

“That was part of it. I dunno, I guess this’ll sound weird, but I’ve always enjoyed being around old people. I was really close to my grandparents, on my mother’s side, and

when they moved into a nursing home together, I visited all the time.” A lump rose in my throat, and I swallowed hard. I missed my grandparents even more than I missed my mother; they had been a part of my life for a lot longer and had practically raised me after she died. I forced myself to keep talking so I wouldn’t succumb to tears just thinking about them. “I got to know their friends there ‘cause they loved to show me off, of course, and so it was like I had lots of grandmas and grandpas. When I was in high school, I used to go and sing for them; it was so much easier than performing in front of people my own age. That’s how I got used to singing to an audience, not just myself.”

“Same here,” said Nick, smiling. “My mom used to make me practice my act at the retirement home, back when I was doing auditions and talent competitions and stuff.”

I giggled, remembering grainy clips I’d seen of him singing and dancing as a little kid. “I’m sure they thought you were adorable.”

He snorted. “Yeah...”

We fell into silence, and when I could think of nothing else to add, I said, “Well, I should let you try to sleep. Can I get you anything before I go?”

“I’m okay. You don’t have to leave, though – I mean, if you don’t want to,” he added quickly. “I’m just gonna watch TV till I fall asleep.”

There was something about the way he said it that made me ask, “You want me to hang out for awhile?”

“Sure,” he said, with measured casualness. “If you want to.”

I smirked at the way we were tiptoeing around each other. He wanted me to stay, but didn’t want me to feel obligated. I wanted to stay, but didn’t want to impose. And neither of us would admit it, afraid the other felt differently.

“I’d love to,” I said.

“Cool. I could use the company.” He smiled over at me. “Makes for a long night when you’re not supposed to move.”

I returned his smile. “I can imagine.”

We settled back into a silence that was comfortable, not awkward, and occasionally broken by bits of conversation. In the lulls, we watched TV on the flatscreen mounted on his bedroom wall, and eventually, Nick’s breathing became deep and regular. I looked over and smiled when I saw that he had fallen asleep, his chin to his chest, his arms folded, just the way I’d found him that morning. Odd... but kind of cute.

Chapter 18

Cary

On Friday, I awoke to a text message: *luvfromdadx*

I squinted sleepily at it for a few seconds before deciphering what it said. *Love you, from Dad.* Ohh... That made me smile.

My dad's adorable – and completely clueless when it comes to technology. He doesn't own a computer; in fact, he wouldn't even know how to turn one on. He doesn't use GPS, TiVo, or any other such gadgets, and the only reason he has a cell phone is because I got him one for his fiftieth birthday. I think he only uses it to call me. And text now, apparently? I'd have to teach him how to put in spaces.

He's a creature of habit, my dad. Not so much old-fashioned as just set in his ways. He's worked in the same factory for thirty-seven years, ever since he was hired there as an eighteen-year-old, fresh out of high school. Minimum wage was only a dollar-sixty then, or so he tells me, but he got a raise every year and climbed up the job ladder to make pretty good money, considering he never went to college. It was enough to live off of, anyway, even after my mom got sick and his was the only income. Despite the medical bills, he always managed to provide me with everything I needed in life. I don't think I was spoiled, but after my mom died, it was all about me. I was all my dad had left, and he doted on me.

It made me feel a little guilty for being so far away from him now. Again. I knew he wanted me to be happy, but I also knew he got lonely without me. Ever since I'd moved out after college, I had been coming over at least once a week to have dinner with him and keep him company. *American Idol* was the first time I'd ever gone more than a week without seeing my dad. I could never do what Nick was doing and isolate myself from my family and friends. Even though I was far away, his text made my whole morning.

Hey, you figured out how to text! I'm so proud of you! I texted back, hoping he'd read the teasing tone in my words. *Just waking up here. Miss you and love you too!*

No sooner had the text sent than my phone rang. I hadn't even made it out of bed yet. Laughing, I picked up my phone again and looked down at it, not at all surprised to see that the incoming call was from *Dad*. "Morning, Dad!" I answered cheerfully, making myself sound way more chipper than I felt. I was actually still pretty tired; Nick had kept me up late watching the NBA playoffs with him. I couldn't have cared less about basketball in the beginning, but by the end of the game, he had me rooting for the Celtics just as hard as he was. My dad would be impressed; he was a sports fanatic, typical guy's guy all the way, and he had tried – and failed – for twenty-some years to get me interested in some sport, *any* sport. Unfortunately for him, the only sport I'd ever enjoyed watching was figure skating – which, to him, didn't even count.

“Hey, honey!” It was great just to hear his voice. “I didn’t want to wake you up, so I thought I’d see if I could figure out how to send a text. I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“Nope,” I fibbed. “Just getting ready. Nick’s taking me to the studio today.”

The last part was true. Just like he’d promised, Nick had arranged for us to meet AJ at a studio in Hollywood so that I could rehearse my act and maybe even record some of my songs. I was really excited and nervous about it.

“Yeah? Sounds cool, honey. So everything’s going okay out there? You’re having fun?”

“Oh, yeah!” I replied quickly and perhaps a little too brightly. The truth was, it would be the first time I’d even left Nick’s condo since we’d gone to pick up his car on Sunday. I thought quickly, trying to invent a list of fun things I’d done in the past week, in case he asked what I’d been up to. He had no idea I was staying with Nick, of course, so he probably wondered how I was keeping myself occupied.

“Yeah?” he said again, like he didn’t quite believe me. Damn. I was a bad liar; it was another reason I’d never be able to pull off what Nick was trying to pull. “Is it everything you thought it’d be?”

No, Dad. No, it’s nothing like I thought it’d be. “It’s even better. But I can’t wait for the tour to start!”

“Me neither. I can’t wait to see you.”

I smiled sadly, tears prickling in my eyes. I could tell he missed me, and the only tour stop in Illinois wasn’t for another month. “Me too,” I said. “Are you surviving without me?”

He chuckled. “I sure miss your homecooked meals and your company, but yeah, I’m doing just fine, sweetheart.”

“How about Hambelina?”

“Well, I haven’t turned her into bacon yet, so I’d say she’s doing alright,” my dad teased.

“Dad...”

“She’s fine, Cary. She misses you, too, but I think she’s adjusting. She sat on my lap to watch Idol last night.” I wasn’t sure if he was kidding or not, but the image of my dad holding my pet pig on his lap was pretty adorable. “You been keepin’ up with *Idol*?”

Before I was on the show, *American Idol* had been our thing. I always came over on Tuesday nights, and we watched it together. I’m sure he would have rather watched the

Bulls games, but he put up with *Idol* for my sake, and he'd actually gotten pretty into it over the years.

"Of course!" I laughed. "The finale's in two weeks; how could I quit now?" It had been hard, at first, to watch *Idol* after my elimination, but I'd gotten to know the other contestants pretty well, so of course I had to keep watching to cheer them on and see how the rest of the season played out. I'd even gotten Nick to watch with me on Wednesday, though he'd admitted the only reason he had seen me on the show was because he was stuck in the hospital at the time. It was weird to think that on the night I got voted off, Nick Carter had just been diagnosed with cancer. My devastation seemed trivial in comparison.

"I'm still going to come out," my dad's voice broke into my thoughts, "if you want me to."

"Really?" The thought of my dad coming to LA cheered me up, though I'd have to make some alternate living arrangements before then.

"Sure. You're still performing on the show, right?"

"Oh yeah, yeah I am." With all my excitement focused on the upcoming tour, I'd almost forgotten about the *American Idol* finale, when the top twelve contestants all got to come back and perform one last time. Rehearsals for that started on Monday, so it was convenient I was already back in LA. "I'd love for you to come out for the finale."

"You can count on it," said my dad, sounding pleased. "We can talk more about that later, though. I'll let you go, so you can finish getting ready."

"Okay. Thanks for calling, Dad."

"Have fun today, kiddo. Love you."

"Love you too, Dad. Bye." I hung up, a lump in my throat. I quickly cleared it away. I was wide awake now, so there was no point trying to go back to sleep. Instead, I got out of bed and opened the closet to pick out something to wear that day. I had completely taken over Nick's guest bedroom and bathroom. The counter was cluttered with my toiletries, makeup, hair dryer, and curling iron. The closet was filled with my clothes. I'd lived out of my suitcase for the first couple of days, but when it became clear that I wasn't heading to the hotel he had booked for me anytime soon, I'd hung up my dresses so they wouldn't get any more wrinkled, unpacked my pairs of shoes for easier access – not that I'd needed them – and started a pile of dirty laundry on the floor. Basically, I'd made myself right at home.

And surprisingly, Nick didn't seem to mind. I think he liked the company – and me waiting on him hand and foot. Even though he'd been off chemo for the past two days, I'd stuck around to take care of him. The last few treatments had really worn him out,

and I didn't like the idea of him being home all alone. Nor did I like the idea of being stuck in a hotel room all on *my* own, so it had worked out well for both of us.

It was early yet, so I knew Nick wouldn't be awake. I took a shower and got ready anyway, blow-drying my hair, spending extra time on my makeup. I was meeting AJ that day, and I wanted to look my best. By the time I came out of my room, Nick was up. He gave me the once over as I walked into the kitchen wearing a pale green sundress. "You know we're just goin' to the studio, right?" he chuckled.

I blushed. "Too much?" I asked, looking to see what he was wearing – shorts and a t-shirt, of course.

He grinned. "Nah. You're fine. You look pretty," he added, when he saw my uncertainty.

It was weird hearing him use the word "pretty," and I knew he was just saying that to be nice, but it still made me smile. "Thanks." I looked more closely at him. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Eh..." He shrugged. "Ya know. Tired. But I'm alright." He looked haggard, his face pale and drawn, with dark circles under his eyes. The chemo was taking its toll, wearing his body down, and I knew the fatigue would only get worse before it got better.

"You sure you're up to going today?" I asked hesitantly. Of course, I selfishly hoped he would say yes, but I wanted to give him the chance to say no if he wasn't feeling well. Somehow, I knew he wouldn't.

"Oh yeah." He flashed a quick grin. "Let's do this."

He'd made plans for us to meet AJ for lunch, then hit the studio in the afternoon, so when it was time, we headed to Hollywood. "You like Mexican, right?" Nick asked, as he pulled into the parking lot of what was clearly a Mexican restaurant. It was a little late for me to say no, since AJ was going to meet us there, but luckily, I do like Mexican.

"Sure!" I replied.

"Cool beans." *Cool beans?* I giggled; it had been a few years since I'd heard anyone use that phrase. Nick was such a random dork sometimes.

He parked the Benz, and we went inside. My stomach was suddenly in knots, and my heart started to race in anticipation, as I looked around for AJ. But I didn't see him – and he's not exactly the type of guy who blends in well. Nick requested a table in the back, and a waiter led us to the perfect spot to wait for AJ, tucked into a booth in the corner where no one would pay much attention to the guys. Nick sat down on the side facing the back wall, so no one would see his face, and I started to slide in across from him, but he said, "No, sit with me. AJ's probably gonna bring Rochelle, and they'll wanna sit together – they're pretty touchy feely like that."

“Oh! Sure.” So he scooted in toward the wall, and I sat down next to him. It felt a little weird, the two of us sitting together on one side of the booth with our backs to the rest of the restaurant, while the side across from us was completely empty – but then, I kind of enjoyed it, too. Sitting so close to him, I could feel the heat of his body near mine and smell his scent – the scent of clean clothes, fresh from the load of laundry I’d done for him the other day, mixed faintly with whatever cologne he wore. It made it hard to concentrate on the menu.

AJ and Rochelle showed up right after our waiter brought us water. I was taking my straw out of its wrapper and didn’t even notice, until a body slid into the seat across from me. I looked up, my heart leaping into my throat, and found myself gazing into the most gorgeous brown eyes I’d ever seen. I knew AJ had pretty eyes; I’d admired them in pictures for years, but in person? They literally took my breath away. I just gaped at him for a second, unable to speak.

“Hi,” said AJ with a big, open grin, as he scooched in to make room for Rochelle. “You must be Cary.” He extended his hand across the table, and I managed to shake it without overturning either of the water glasses.

“Hi!” I squeaked. Embarrassed by what a little girl I sounded like when I got nervous, I brought it down a notch and quickly added, “It’s so great to finally meet you!”

He chuckled. “You too. This is my fiancée, Rochelle.”

I managed to tear my eyes away from his to look for the first time at the girl who had slipped in across from me. She was petite and cute, with long, sleek black hair, bright blue eyes, and smiling red lips. “Hi, Cary!” She beamed as she reached out and shook my hand, too. “Nice to meet you.”

Her enthusiasm seemed genuine, and I grinned back easily. “Thanks – you too!”

“You were right,” AJ said to Nick. “She does look like the more wholesome version of my Monkee.”

Rochelle and I both looked at the guys – Nick’s face had turned red – and then back at each other. We started laughing. “I can see it,” giggled Rochelle, and I was glad she didn’t seem offended. It was sort of true; she had the same coloring as me, with her dark hair and fair complexion, and her lipstick matched mine. With her punk style of clothing and the tattoos that sleeved her arms, she was the hardcore version of me. “I’d love to do your makeup on tour,” she added eagerly.

“Really?” I asked, taken aback. I’d forgotten she was a makeup artist. “I’d love that!”

She grinned. “Yay! These guys won’t let me put anything on them.” She glanced over at AJ. “Well, except Monkee here, but he usually does his own.”

I suppressed a smile, my eyes flickering over AJ's smudged eyeliner. I guess if any guy could pull off the smoky eye, he could.

"Yeah, *no* stage makeup," Nick spoke up. "That shit sweats right off and makes me look even greasier." I giggled at the disgusted look on his face.

Our waiter came back to take AJ's and Rochelle's drink orders, and we were quiet for a few minutes, studying the menu. A lot of it was in Spanish, and I wasn't sure what to order. Thankfully, the waiter started with Rochelle and worked his way around the table, so after Nick had ordered, I just said, "I'll have the same." I had no idea what I was getting, but if it sounded good to Nick, I figured it'd be good enough for me.

When the waiter left again, AJ looked across the table at Nick and said, "So what's been up, Prick?"

I knew right then that keeping up this whole charade was going to be even harder than I'd thought. It was only a nickname, used with love, but I couldn't help but think, *If you only knew what's been up, you wouldn't call him that.*

But Nick was so cool and casual. "Not much," he replied, without batting an eye. "Ya know... hangin' out." He was a better actor than I'd ever given him credit for. The act had to be rehearsed, but he pulled it off naturally. "What about you?"

"Gearing up for my shows in Japan next week... and planning a wedding, of course." AJ's eyes seemed to sparkle, lighting up his entire face. Beside him, Rochelle had the same happy glow.

"That's awesome, man. Wish I could be there," said Nick.

"Aw, it's alright, dude; I don't expect you to fly halfway around the world just for my solo tour. But I do expect you at my wedding," AJ added sternly. "I gotta have my bros standing behind me when I say my vows."

He turned to smile at Rochelle, and the two of them were too busy making googly eyes at each other to see the shadow that flickered across Nick's face. But I saw it.

All Nick said was, "Wouldn't miss it, Bone." I could sense the silent "*unless...*" hanging in the air, but AJ was oblivious. He started talking about the plans they'd made so far, and Rochelle jumped in. Listening to them ramble on and on, my stomach started to hurt. AJ was going to be so devastated when he found out the truth about Nick, and he was going to feel like a jackass for babbling about wedding venues and solo gigs when Nick was dealing with chemo and cancer.

But if Nick was thinking about either of those things, he didn't show it. He listened to what AJ was saying; he commented at the appropriate times; he nodded and smiled, looking interested and happy for his friend. I realized he was doing this for AJ and the

other guys as much as for himself, trying to prolong their happiness for as long as he could. But in the end, he was only going to hurt them.

I was glad when our food came, just for the interruption it caused in the conversation, but by then, I wasn't hungry anymore. I felt sick. I picked at my plate, trying to eat just enough to keep anyone from asking questions. "Good choice," I even told Nick. "This was a lot of food; I'm so stuffed, I can't even finish it."

See, I could act, too. I just wished I didn't have to.

Chapter 19

Cary

I thought the car ride to the studio would give me a chance to talk to Nick in private, but as it turned out, Conway Recording Studios was just down the street from restaurant. AJ and Rochelle wanted to walk, but Nick said he'd rather drive and told them to get in the backseat; they could walk back. I had a feeling he was too tired to make the trek, though he'd never admit it.

"We laid down some tracks for *This Is Us* here," said Nick, as he led the way into the building. He'd brought his acoustic guitar with him, and I carried my ukulele.

"Yeah, a lot of famous people have recorded here," added AJ, and he started listing off names for my benefit, not failing to impress me. I felt overwhelmed, hearing the names of artists I admired, like Barbra Streisand, Ray Charles, Diana Ross, Patti LaBelle, James Taylor, Christina Aguilera, Jewel, even one of my idols, Etta James. To be walking in their footsteps – with two Backstreet Boys, nonetheless – felt surreal and incredible.

They gave me a little tour, and then we went into the smallest of the three recording studios, which Nick had reserved for our use that afternoon. I had sung in a real studio just twice, for *American Idol*, to record my songs for the Top 12 and Top 11, which were now on iTunes. Still, I felt like a kid in a candy store as I looked around at all of the sound-mixing equipment in the control room and the microphone and keyboard set up in the recording booth.

Just to warm up, I sat down at the keyboard, turned it on, and started tinkering around, playing a few scales and the beginning of "Chopsticks" to get a feel for how the keys fit beneath my fingers. Keyboards, just like cars, all handled a little differently. Some had eighty-eight keys, just like a real piano; others had less. Sometimes the keys were stiff, and you had to really push down hard on them to get a sound; other times, the keys felt so light and loose, they flowed like satin under your fingertips. When the keys were as big as a piano's, my hand had to stretch to play some of the chords, but when the keys

were smaller, my fingers stumbled over each other, trying to adjust to the difference in scale. I could read music, but when I played my own songs, I played from memory, played by feel. This keyboard was a perfect fit; it had all the bells and whistles of a professional piece of technology, yet felt and sounded almost like a real piano. Nothing could beat the piano I'd learned to play on, my mother's old Baldwin upright, but this was certainly fancier than the keyboard I had at home.

I tested out the pedal, my foot pumping it lightly as I played a few arpeggios. The progression of broken chords was familiar – F sharp... D flat... E... B... I smiled to myself as I played it a second time, sure Nick and AJ would recognize it. It was one of my favorites to play on the piano. Sure enough, right on cue, I heard AJ start singing, *"Empty... spaces... fill me up with holes..."* His husky voice was so soulful, it gave me goosebumps. I nearly stumbled over the notes I knew by heart, but managed to keep playing beneath him, as he continued, *"Distant... faces... with no place left to go."* Nick had gotten out his guitar by then, and he started strumming along, right in tune. *"Without you... within me... I can't find no rest. Where I'm... going... is anybody's guess..."*

The Nick launched into the chorus, I made the mistake of looking up. *"I tried... to go on like I never knew you..."* he sang, his face all scrunched up, just the way it got when he sang that song on stage. *"I'm awake... but my world is half asleep..."* AJ's voice joined Nick's in harmony, gliding smoothly beneath it. It was then that I hit my first clunker and looked down at my fingers, scrambling to catch up to the guys, who had gone on without missing a beat. *"I pray... for this heart to be unbroken, but without you all I'm going to be is... in-come-puh-lete..."* Nick's voice rang out, hauntingly beautiful.

He and I kept playing, so AJ kept singing. *"Voices... tell me... I should carry on..."*

"But I am... swimming..." I added, a third above him, taking the harmony that was usually Howie's to sing.

"In an ocean all alone. Baby, my baby... it's written on your face. You still... wonder... if we made a big mistake..."

"I tried..." sang Nick, and this time, we both joined him in harmony, AJ taking the low, while I took the high. *"...to go on like I never knew you. I'm awake... but my world is half asleep. I pray... for this heart to be unbroken, but without you all I'm going to be is... incomplete..."*

It sort of fell apart after that; Nick hit the wrong chords on his guitar, which messed me up on the keyboard, and I didn't know the right notes to sing in the bridge, so our harmony sounded disjointed. By the time we hit the chorus again, we were all laughing too hard to keep going.

"Aww, you guys, that sounded great!" said Rochelle, clapping. "I wish I knew drums or something so I could join in!"

“Aww, my Monkee,” cooed AJ. “Nick can teach you!”

“Yeah – hell, if this Backstreet thing don’t work out, we could start our own band,” Nick joked, winking in my direction. “Cary can play piano as well as Kev could.” I smiled; it was nice to see him happy, playing around, doing what he loved. And just as before, the little jam session helped me loosen up, work out the kinks and get over my nerves before I sang solo.

“You have a pretty voice, too,” AJ complimented me. “I wanna hear one of your songs.”

“Um, okay...” I got up from the keyboard and took my ukulele out of its case. Perching on a stool that had been left in the room, I said, “This one’s called ‘Sweet Sunrise.’”

I took a deep breath, then started to strum my ukulele. It was an upbeat song, which was good, since I tended to play fast when I was nervous. I watched my fingers just long enough to make sure I had the right chord; then I focused on a spot just above their heads, so I could look up without actually looking them in the eye. It was a trick I’d learned a long time ago, in my nursing home performance days.

“Broken hearts are on the mend. She’s been hurt one time too many. It’s another day, another end... to the same old story...” I sang. Without their voices beneath it, mine sounded shaky. How was it I could sing on the big *American Idol* stage in front of a full studio and millions of TV viewers, yet clam up in front of two Backstreet Boys and AJ’s girlfriend? *“You know how this goes...”*

I sucked in another huge breath, trying to strengthen my voice for the chorus. *“Up in the morning with the sweet sunrise; takes her time getting ready, then she’s off and running. She skips out on lunch, to no one’s surprise. There’s so much to get done, so little time... been a long day, but ice cream makes it better. Now the sun is setting, and it feels like a crime...”*

It was crazy how different my life was from the life I’d been living when I’d written this song. It was about a year ago, right after I’d broken up with my boyfriend of two years. I’d dealt with the pain pretty much the same way as I had my *Idol* elimination, by throwing myself into my job by day and drowning my sorrows in Ben & Jerry’s by night. I gained twenty pounds and a good deal of experience writing songs about heartbreak; now I was ten pounds lighter and just brave enough to sing any of them in front of an audience.

“She lies in bed, unable to sleep. She tries to count the tiles on the ceiling. But all she can do is weep for the love she’s lost; it’s such a pity. She’s forgotten the other fish in the sea, and that it’s a big city...” My eyes darted from Nick to AJ; they were both smiling, and that made me feel more confident. *“Yeah, you know how this goes...”*

“Up in the morning with the sweet sunrise; takes her time getting ready, then she’s off and running. She skips out on lunch, to no one’s surprise. There’s so much to get done,

so little time... been a long day, but ice cream makes it better. Now the sun is setting, and it feels like a crime..."

When I got to the end of the song, the three of them all clapped. "I think the fans are gonna love you," said AJ, nodding at me with approval. "They're used to seeing pop acts open for us, with lots of dancing and lip-syncing. It'll be nice to have a real singer-songwriter type of artist on our stage."

"Plus, some of them will already know of her," Rochelle pointed out, looking at AJ. "You know, from watching *American Idol*."

"Exactly," said Nick with a smug grin, taking credit for his idea. "She'll be perfect."

"Thanks, guys." I blushed, smiling awkwardly. I was flattered by their praise, yet worried about what AJ and the other guys would say when they found out the real reason Nick had gotten me on the tour. He could talk me up all he wanted, but I knew it had very little to do with my musical talents and far more with my other skills. I felt like I was lying, even though I didn't say a thing.

We messed around in the studio for a couple more hours, and when we walked out, I had a CD in my hand of tracks I'd recorded, my original songs and a few Backstreet Boys covers for fun. The recordings were pretty rough, but when Nick popped the CD into his car stereo in the parking lot, it still gave me chills to hear my own voice singing through his speakers.

AJ and Rochelle had walked back to the restaurant to get AJ's car, so it was just Nick and me. "Did you have fun?" he asked, as he drove me back to his condo.

"Are you serious? I had a blast!" I gushed. "Thank you so much for letting me do that."

"Sure," he said casually. "Next time I'll try to find you a stage, so you can rehearse your act for real."

I nodded eagerly. "That would be great. The next couple of weeks are gonna go by so fast, between rehearsals for the *Idol* finale and getting ready for tour."

"Yeah, you better get used to the crazy schedule, cause once we're on the road, there's no turning back. You ready for it?" He looked over at me, playfully cocking one eyebrow. "Think you can handle it?"

I giggled at the look on his face, but my smile quickly faded. "I'm ready," I said seriously, "or, at least, I will be. I like to be busy. I can handle the crazy schedule. My question is, can you?"

As he drove, I studied his profile – the drooping eye, his hollow cheek, his frown. He didn't look happy about his question being thrown back at him. When he answered, he sounded as stubborn and cocky as ever. "Oh yeah. I can handle it."

I had my doubts, but I really hoped he'd prove me wrong. I wanted him to be right. And if his body was as strong as he was stubborn, maybe he would be.

Chapter 20

Nick

I could handle it. That's what I kept telling myself over the next week, as I geared up for the tour. Cary and everyone else who'd told me that chemo was going to make me tired were right: I was beyond tired; I was exhausted, even when I slept ten or twelve hours a night. But other than that, I didn't feel too shitty, and I still had more hair than either AJ or Brian. I'd beaten the odds there, and I was hell bent on proving all of them wrong and beating the fatigue, too.

The week before tour, I went to the gym every day and worked out, while Cary was in rehearsals for *American Idol*. My stamina sucked, but I pushed myself to keep jogging, keep lifting, almost to the point of collapse. Then I went home and crashed for the rest of the day, until Cary came back. Her rehearsals lasted all day, sometimes late into the night, and it was actually weird not having her around. I had most of the week off treatments, so I didn't need her there, but I'd gotten used to hanging out with her.

I'm actually a pretty private guy anyway, but since my diagnosis, I'd all but turned into a hermit, shutting myself in and everyone else out. It was nice to have someone to confide in, someone to keep me company. I'd basically hired Cary to be my private nurse, but she was starting to feel more like a friend. I hadn't known her all that long, but I felt relaxed around her; I could be myself, and I didn't have to keep any secrets. I had a feeling that was going to be important once the tour started.

I had the whole day to myself on Wednesday, while Cary went from rehearsal to watch the live results show of *American Idol*. I looked for her on my TV while I watched from home, but all I saw was a quick glimpse of her face as the camera panned down a long line of *Idol* cast-odds sitting together in the audience. There were only three contestants left on the show, and I was glad when the long-haired guy got voted out. He wasn't bad, but the other guy who was left was better: he had a rock vibe that I liked, and he'd killed it the night before with his performances of "Simple Man" by Skynard and Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." And the girl was just awesome; I knew Cary was rooting for her to win.

Sure enough, as soon as Cary walked in late that night, she announced, "Crystal made it! Did you watch?"

I was sitting up on the couch, trying to stay awake. I still had one more session of IV chemo to do that night, since Cary had been gone all day. Luckily, it was a short infusion, so I only had to stay up another half hour. “Yeah, I watched,” I told Cary.

“Ha, I knew I’d turn you into an *Idol* junkie.” She grinned. “Did you see me?”

“Briefly. How was rehearsal?”

“Ugh.” She sagged. “Long. Way too much choreography. We danced all day.”

I laughed; she sounded just like me after tour rehearsals. “I thought you said you did better with choreography.”

“I’d rather just sing!”

“You can at our shows. One more week; then it’ll all be over.”

She smiled, came over, and plopped down next to me. “I can’t wait,” she said, throwing her head back against the couch in exhaustion.

She would be staying in LA for the finale while I flew out to New York for our fan event and a few days of TV appearances. We would meet up again in Miami, a couple of days before the official start of the tour, and then we’d find out whether or not I was going to be able to pull this off. I knew she still had her doubts, but I was determined to make it happen.

“How was your day?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Low key.” I hadn’t felt like doing much that day, not even working out, though I’d forced myself to the gym, anyway. I thought I was supposed to start feeling better now that the chemo cycle was almost over, but instead, I felt more run down than I had all week. I didn’t tell Cary that, though; she was always worrying about shit going wrong. Nothing was wrong; I had cancer, and I was on chemo, and some days, it just kicked my ass. I was tired; that was all. “You wanna change and then get my vincristine started?” I asked. “I’m gonna head to bed before long.”

“Oh, sure!” She jumped right up. “Sorry it’s so late; I told you, there’s always a big going-home dinner after the show, and it was an especially big deal tonight cause it’s the last results before the finale. We had a few drinks, and I just lost track of time.”

“It’s alright. You said you’d be late; I hope you didn’t rush home cause of me. I can wait.” I flashed her a quick smile to let her know I wasn’t annoyed or anything. She’d been spending so much time laying low with me, she deserved to go out and have fun.

“Oh no, it was starting to wrap up anyway,” she replied. “I’ll just go change real quick, and I’ll be right back out.”

She hurried off to her room, and I hauled my ass up from the couch and got the tub of medical stuff. I wondered where we were going to hide all of that on tour – put it in its own suitcase, I figured. I still hadn't solved the problem of how to carry the chemo pump around, unseen, either. I sure as hell wasn't going to wear a fucking fanny pack, no matter how many times Cary said that's what most people did.

When she came out, a few minutes later, wearing her pajamas, I was ready for her. I'd already disinfected my port, the way I'd seen her do, and sprayed the numbing stuff she used before she stuck me. "I don't know why you need me," Cary joked, as she got the first injection ready. "Looks like you know exactly what to do."

"No way. It's all you from here on out," I said, leaning back in my chair and looking away while she slid the syringe in. It didn't hurt, but still, I couldn't stomach the idea of stabbing myself with a needle. It was bad enough letting someone else do it.

"You feel warm tonight," she commented, while her hand was on my chest, holding the port steady as she pulled the needle back out. "Do you feel okay?"

"I'm fine. Just tired."

She didn't look satisfied by that answer; I didn't really think she would. Sure enough, off came one of her gloves, and up came her hand to feel my forehead, like I was a little kid. With her palm pressed flat against my head, she frowned. "You're hot."

"Thanks," I joked, smirking.

She smiled and blushed, just as I knew she would, but she didn't stay flustered for long. "I mean, you're running a fever. I need to check your temperature." Off came the other glove, the chemo temporarily forgotten, as she started rummaging around for the thermometer. It was one of the ear kind, which was good because it was quick. She stuck it in my ear, it beeped, and she pulled it out again to look. "99.5," she read off.

I scoffed. "That's nothin'. That's only a little higher than normal, right?"

"Yeah, and only a little lower than the cutoff for a neutropenic fever," said Cary seriously. "100.4. If it hits that, we have to go to the hospital."

I shook my head. "I'll be fine. I just need to sleep it off."

"I don't know if I should give you chemo tonight," she said, looking doubtfully at the chemo pump she'd been about to set up.

"No, you gotta do it," I argued. "If you don't, it'll throw the whole cycle off. I gotta be recovered by next week, so I can start the tour off right."

She sighed. "If you're neutropenic, we have to wait for your blood counts to come back up. It's not safe, otherwise."

“You just checked my blood last weekend, and it was fine.”

“No, your numbers were low. Not dangerously low, but still low. And that was four days ago. Your counts have probably dropped since then. We can’t ignore a fever; it’s your body’s way of warning you that something’s not right.”

I rolled my eyes. “Chill out. I think I know my body better than you do. It’s the fucking cancer, not the chemo. Before I was diagnosed, I ran fevers like this all the time at night; they were always gone by morning. Trust me,” I added, when she didn’t look convinced. “This is, like, normal for me.”

She sighed again, heavily. “Whatever, Nick. You’re right; it’s your body, your choice. But I’m telling you, if it goes past 100.4, you’re going to the hospital.”

“I’ll be fine in the morning,” I kept insisting, as she wordlessly hooked me up to chemo. The vincristine drip only ran for about ten minutes, which was a relief, since it seemed like Cary and I were both exhausted to the point of crankiness.

“Wake me up if you need anything,” she said curtly, as she unplugged the IV line and flushed out the port.

“Okay,” I replied, but I knew I wouldn’t bother her. She had an early start the next day, and it was pretty obvious she needed sleep. “Goodnight.”

“Night,” she replied, and she went straight into her bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind her.

I thought I would fall asleep as soon as my head hit my pillow, but instead, I lay awake, tossing and turning, unable to get comfortable. It was too hot in my room, even with the air conditioner blasting. I kicked off all my covers, turned on the ceiling fan, and lay spread-eagle on my bed in my boxers, waiting for the circulating air to cool off my skin.

Whether I wanted to admit it or not, I was definitely running a fever. I felt pretty crappy, and not just physically. I knew Cary thought I was a jackass. I hadn’t meant to snap at her; she was the expert, not me, and I knew she was probably right. I just hoped she was wrong this time. The last thing I needed was a complication four days before I was supposed to fly to New York.

I just need to sleep it off, I told myself again. I'll feel better in the morning.

But the next morning, I woke up drenched in sweat.

“Sick...” I muttered in disgust, peeling myself off the sticky sheets. I looked at the clock; it was earlier than I’d expected it to be, but even though I could have easily slept a few more hours, I couldn’t stand the idea of lying back down on my sweat-soaked mattress. So I got up and staggered out to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Cary hadn't left yet; she was sitting at the kitchen table in her workout clothes, eating a bowl of cereal. "Good morning!" she chirped, looking up in surprise as I came into the room. Then she blushed, when she saw I was just wearing boxers. Normally, I would have had some fun with that, but I felt too shitty to even mess with her.

"Morning," I croaked back, heading straight for the cupboard to get a glass. I filled it with water straight from the tap, didn't bother with ice, and chugged the whole thing. Then, figuring I might as well take my steroid, I refilled it and downed a second glass to chase my dexamethasone pill. Finally, I exhaled loudly, set my glass down on the counter, and turned around. Cary was staring at me. "What?"

"Are you okay?" she asked, looking concerned. I was getting used to seeing her look that way. "Your face is all flushed."

There was no use pretending I was fine; I knew I wasn't. The night sweats had gone away for awhile, after my first cycle of chemo. It couldn't be a good sign that they were back. "I feel like fuckin' death warmed over," I admitted.

She jumped up from the table. "Let me take your temp," she said, grabbing the thermometer. I sank down into a chair and let her put it in my ear again. When it beeped, she pulled it out, took one look, and said, "We need to call your doctor. It's 101.5."

Damn, two whole degrees higher than it had been when I'd gone to bed? How was that even possible? And it was higher than the magic number of 100.4, too. I knew that was serious, but I still said, "I'm not going to the hospital." Yeah, I know – I'm stubborn to the point of stupidity, but I had a show in New York in three days. No fucking way was I going to let myself be imprisoned in the hospital again.

"You may not have a choice," said Cary, looking at me levelly. She was such a sweet, mild-mannered girl most of the time, but damn, she could pull "the look" when she needed to. You know the one. Kevin had it down pat. "I'm going to call your doctor and see what she recommends."

Before I could protest, she got on the phone and dialed a number off a piece of paper she kept with the chemo supplies. I listened to her side of the conversation with Dr. Submarine. She did a lot of talking at the beginning, rattling off my symptoms and temperature, and then it was a lot of "Okay..." and "Mm-hm..." and "Okay, we will."

As soon as she hung up, I demanded, "We will *what*?"

"Head straight to UCLA. Dr. Subramanien agrees that your fever could be cause for concern, and you need to be checked out."

"Fuck," I swore loudly. "I don't wanna go to the hospital."

“I know you don’t, but you have to.”

“Can’t I just go take an ice bath or something? That’ll bring the fever down.”

“It’s not just the fever. The fever’s a warning sign. It might be nothing; it could just be a side effect of the chemo, but it also could be something serious. You could have an infection. You could be septic.” She said this all really fast, her voice rising in pitch the whole time. “You have to go and at least get bloodwork done. Now, am I gonna drive you, or am I gonna have to call an ambulance?”

“Uh, what?” I blinked. She didn’t.

“You heard me. Are you gonna make this difficult, or can we just do it the easy way?”

I ignored the question. “You can’t drive me; you’ve got rehearsal.”

“I’ll just have to miss part of it.” She smirked. “What are they gonna do, kick me off the show?”

“I can drive myself.”

“I don’t think you should. What if you start feeling worse and pass out or something?”

I scoffed. “I’m not gonna pass out.”

“What if you just tell me you’re gonna drive yourself and stay here instead?”

It was my turn to give her “the look.” “Cary... c’mon. Would I lie to you?”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re lying to everyone else. Why not me?”

Ouch. That one hurt. I could feel my face getting even redder, and not from fever this time.

“C’mon, get dressed,” said Cary. “The sooner, the better.”

I just sat there, not ready to move yet.

“Alright, then I’m calling 911.” Her voice had a sing-song quality that made me think she was just teasing, but she still had her phone in her hand, and I watched as she dialed nine... then one... then-

“Fine!” I hissed, hauling my butt up out of my chair. “Gimme a few minutes, alright?”

“You’ve got five.”

“Fuck,” I huffed under my breath, as I stomped off to my room. I got dressed quickly, my head filled with nightmarish visions of what would happen if I let her make that 911 call. It would be replayed on the nightly entertainment news, over paparazzi video of an ambulance parked outside the high-rise, followed by rampant speculation over what might be wrong with me. Drug overdose? Suicide attempt? Heart attack? No one would guess cancer, but that didn’t matter; I didn’t want them guessing at all.

That was why I grudgingly put on my ball cap and dark shades and let Cary drive me to the goddamn hospital herself.

Chapter 21

Nick

In the emergency room at the hospital, I was poked and prodded. They took my temperature again, drew a bunch of blood through my port, and made me wait while they ran tests on it. Cary sat with me, leaving only to call whoever she needed to call at *American Idol* to let them know she wasn’t going to make the morning rehearsal.

“You don’t have to stay,” I told her, but deep down, I was kind of glad she did. It broke up the monotony of waiting to have someone to talk to, and even if I wouldn’t admit it to her, I’ll admit now that I was kind of freaked out. Up to that point, I had done so well with chemo that I had convinced myself I would sail through the rest of it with flying colors and none of the complications I’d been warned to expect. I had finally hit my first patch of rough waters, and it sucked, really sucked.

“I want to stay at least until your bloodwork comes back,” said Cary. “If your counts are high enough, maybe they’ll let you go home with some antibiotics.”

That made me feel better. I hoped she was right, but I should have known my good luck was gonna run out. When the resident who had seen me earlier came back, he clapped his hands together and said, “Alright, so... I have the preliminary results of your bloodwork, and it looks like you’re going to need to be admitted. I just got off the phone with your oncologist, and she agrees.”

My heart sunk. I pressed my lips together, clenching my jaw, to hold back the tirade of cursing I wanted to let loose. It raged on inside my head, instead. I stared at the doctor who had talked to Dr. Submarine behind my back, smiting him with my eyes.

“The CBC shows your counts are low across the board, and your ANC is only 600,” he explained. Two months ago, I wouldn’t have had a fucking clue that any of that meant, but sadly, now I knew exactly. CBC stood for complete blood count, the test I had to have once a week while on chemo, to check the numbers of red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, hemoglobin, and all that junk in my blood. The chemo drugs I was on

lowered them all. The ANC – absolute neutrophil count – was too low. Neutrophils, I'd learned, are the kind of white blood cells that fight infection, and normal is anything above 1500. Mine was 600. Not good.

"Your blood cultures won't be back for another couple of days," continued the doctor, "but if you don't have an infection now, you're susceptible to one, so the plan for now is to admit you, start you on a course of IV antibiotics, and transfuse you to bring your counts up."

"How long?" I asked. My flight to New York left Sunday morning.

The doctor shrugged. "That's up to your oncologist, but hopefully, if your fever goes down, we can have you out of here in a day or two."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it could have been worse. "Okay," I muttered, figuring as long as I was out by Saturday night, I could still go to New York on Sunday as planned. There was no way I was going to miss our show or the promotional gigs we'd been booked for later in the week. Some of them had been rescheduled from October, when Brian had swine flu. Cancer or no cancer, management would kill me if we had to cancel them again. I wouldn't even have to wait for the lymphoma to do it.

"Sorry, Nick," said Cary awkwardly, once the doctor had left. I figured she probably felt bad for telling me I might be able to go home.

"It's alright." I wasn't mad at her, just annoyed by the whole situation. "There's no point in you sticking around, though. You should go to your rehearsal."

"Are you sure?" She looked uncertain, like she couldn't tell if I was saying that because I really wanted her to go or because I thought it was the right thing to say. Typical girl. Haven't they figured out by now that us guys usually say what's on our minds? Like, literally, say whatever we happen to be thinking, with no filter from brain to mouth? They're the ones who never say what they mean. They always have some kind of hidden agenda, some cryptic message you're supposed to be able to decipher for yourself.

I'm not good at those kind of girl games. It's why I have such a bad track record with relationships; I'm too damn trusting, to the point of being gullible. When a girl tells me she loves me, I believe her. Usually, it turns out that she just loves my money or the attention she gets when she's with me. Sometimes I hate the fact that I love women so much. But Cary was cool, and when I said, "Yeah, I'll be fine here; go so you don't miss too much," she went.

She was gone the rest of the day, and even though she said the rehearsals were long and tiring, I was envious. I wished I was at rehearsal, instead of in the hospital. I wished I felt good enough to dance. I wished I was healthy, so I could look forward to the rest of the tour without a care in the world, instead of wonder how the hell I was going to get through it, feeling like this.

But by that night, I actually felt better. I'd been moved to a private room upstairs on the oncology floor, where they hooked me up with antibiotics and a blood transfusion and gave me an injection of something that was supposed to stimulate my body to make more white blood cells. My nurse, Wei, said the blood would reenergize me, and damn, it did. I was a fucking vampire.

I was flipping TV channels, annoyed that there were no NBA playoff games on that night, when Cary came back. We had been texting back and forth all day – her out of concern, me out of boredom. I'd given her my room number and told her she was welcome to visit if she wanted to, but I wasn't sure she would – if it had been me, I'd have gone straight home to shower and just chill after a long day of rehearsal. I was glad to see her, though. The hospital is pretty lame and kind of lonely.

"I don't know if I'm supposed to be here," she said in a hushed voice, practically tiptoeing up to my bed. "I think visiting hours are over. No one stopped me when I walked down the hall, though."

I laughed. "They probably think you're my girlfriend."

The lights were off in my room, but I'm sure she blushed. I loved that about her; she said Brian and Kevin were her favorites, but I knew she dug me. I milked it, too. I always do.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, quick to change the subject.

"Tons better," I said, honestly. Then I repeated the vampire line that had gone through my head earlier, and she laughed.

"You must have been anemic. No wonder you feel better. How's your fever?" She pressed her hand to my forehead again. Her skin always felt soft and smelled like some kind of girly-scented lotion. "You still feel kind of warm."

"It's lower," I said. The nurse had been coming to check it every hour. She used a thermometer and wore gloves every time she had to touch me, and she stank of latex and Purell, like the whole damn hospital.

"And you're still on the antibiotic drip?" I saw Cary's eyes follow the IV line that was hooked into my port up to the bag on the IV stand by my bed.

"Yeah." I was about to tell her to cut the nurse crap for awhile and talk music with me instead, but she was still intent on playing Twenty Questions.

"Did your oncologist make it over? Did she say how long you'll be in here?" were her next two.

"Nope, haven't seen her. I guess she's just waiting to see me tomorrow." Ironically, I had a check-up already scheduled for the next day, before I went on tour. I was

supposed to come as an outpatient for a round of tests to see how well the chemo was working. “I guess it’s convenient that I’m already here. Just wish I wasn’t...”

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “I know. I wish you weren’t either.”

“As long as I’m out by Sunday...”

“About that...” Cary cleared her throat. “I really don’t think you should be flying across the country to do a show when your counts are this low.”

I should have known that was coming. I rolled my eyes and squared my jaw. “No, I probably shouldn’t be, but I’m gonna.”

She sighed, giving me a look of pure exasperation. “How did I know that’s what you were going to say?”

I gave her the raised eyebrow look back. “Yeah? I bet I know what you’re gonna say next, too. ‘Nick, you’re so stubborn; you’re so stupid; you’re gonna kill yourself...’ Yeah, well, if I catch a cold and die the day after the show, at least I’ll die happy, instead of miserable in this place.”

“Don’t even joke about that...” Her voice went quiet as she turned her head away from me.

“I’m not joking. I don’t plan on dying the day after the show or anytime soon, but damn, Cary, what if the tests tomorrow show that this shit isn’t even working? What if I *am* dying?” I saw her stiffen as my voice rose, but I kept talking; I had to get it out. “If this thing’s gonna fuckin’ kill me, I’d rather spend my last days on the road, seeing the world, than lying in this bed staring at a blue wall.”

Cary didn’t say anything, but her silence was interrupted by a sniffle, and with a jolt, I suddenly realized she was *crying*.

“Aw, c’mon, don’t do that,” I begged. “I was just bein’ dramatic. I’m not going anywhere. Well, I mean, I’m going to New York, but I’ll be fine. I told you, I feel way better already.”

She shook her head, and I couldn’t tell if she wasn’t talking because she was too choked up or because she didn’t want to say what was on her mind. A startling thought occurred to me then: what if, being a nurse, she knew something I didn’t? What if I really *was* dying? What if I had no chance in hell at beating this thing, and no one had told me? I’d seen the statistics; I knew how serious my cancer was. But I also felt confident that I was going to beat the odds. I really did feel better. I was tired from the chemo, but since I’d started it, my other symptoms, the shit that had sent me to the doctor in the first place, seemed to have gotten better. I wasn’t having chest pains anymore, and I had an easier time breathing, even when I was lying down. That meant the chemo had to be working, didn’t it?

“Cary?”

Finally, she looked back at me. By the light of the TV, her eyes were extra bright and glossy with tears.

“What is it? C’mon, why you cryin’? I didn’t mean to make you cry...”

She sniffled and shook her head again. “I just hate the idea of you gambling with your life like this.”

That annoyed me. “Oh, c’mon; now you’re the one being dramatic. I let you bring me here, didn’t I? Here I am!” She didn’t argue, but I still found her silence more unnerving. I kept babbling on, just to fill it. “What if you were in my place, huh? What if this had happened to you? Think about it... What if you’d found out you were sick, right before you were supposed to go on *American Idol*? Would you really not do it? Would you really let it keep you from living your dream?”

“I don’t know... I know I couldn’t do what you’re doing,” she replied. “I couldn’t handle doing treatment on the road, away from home. I’d want to do that part at home, so my dad could be there with me. I can’t imagine going through something like this without my family nearby.”

I jumped on that answer. Inadvertently, she had just proven the point I was trying to make. “Exactly,” I said. “That’s the other reason I want to tour. That way, I am with my family.”

I saw the fresh batch of tears that sprang to her eyes when she got my meaning, even though she tried to blink them away. “Tour or not, I’m sure the guys would be there for you in a heartbeat if you just told them the truth. They wouldn’t let you go through this alone.”

“Yeah, exactly – and then I’d be messing up their lives, too. That’s why it’s better this way – we’ll all get to have fun on the road together, just like old times; I’ll be with my brothers, and they’ll treat me the same as they always do, the way I want it to be. It’s the best of both worlds. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Her frown became a watery smile, as her eyes finally overflowed, a couple of tears trickling down her cheeks. “Oh, Nick,” she sighed. “You’re so misguided, it’s almost endearing.”

I smirked back at her, turning on the ol’ Carter charm. “Endearing... I’ve heard that about myself before.”

She giggled, and the sound made me feel better. I don’t like making women cry; it kinda freaks me out. Luckily, she wiped her eyes, and I changed the subject, asking how her rehearsals had gone, about the songs she was performing with the other Idol contestants

for the finale, if she knew what celebrities were going to be on the show. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have cared, but it gave us something to talk about that wasn't related to my illness. Music was the one thing we had in common; we could talk about it all night.

As it was, it was late when Cary finally snuck out of my hospital room to head back to the condo. "I'll come back tomorrow when we break for lunch," she promised. "I'll even bring some food over for you."

"You're an angel," I told her, flashing another grin. I was a lucky guy, to have found just the girl I could get to go along with my moronic plan, even if she thought it was "misguided." I knew I couldn't have done it without her. And after she was gone, when I found myself alone again in my dark hospital room, with just the TV for company, I realized I was glad I didn't have to.

Chapter 22

Nick

The next day, while Cary got to go off to rehearsal and sing and dance, I got put through a whole round of tests, the same torturous crap I had to go through to be diagnosed: a CT scan, spinal tap, and bone marrow biopsy.

Life isn't fair.

At least when Cary called me during her lunch break and complained about how much dancing she'd done that morning, I got to trump her story with my own harrowing tale of giant needles being shoved into my back. That put it all into perspective and shut her up. Being a nurse, she knew how the procedures went, but I wonder if she'd ever experienced them from the patient side of things. Somehow, I doubted it.

I spent the day lying flat on my sore back, watching TV and waiting for my test results. I'd been told Dr. Submarine had put a rush on them so that she could come talk to me about the results before she left for the weekend. I was anxious for her to get there, wondering what she'd have to say. I didn't want to hear that the cancer had spread or something, two days before I was supposed to leave for tour. I think if that were the case, I'd just say "To hell with it" and forget the chemo, screw the doctors, and go off on tour anyway, knowing it would be my last.

The thought put a lump in my throat, but I was realistic to know it might be the choice I was facing. It would be a simple one to make, though: if the chemo hadn't helped, there was no point in continuing it. I was sure of that much.

Cary's rehearsals were scheduled to last all day again, so I was alone when my doctor showed up to go over the results. "How are you feeling?" she asked in her gently-accented voice, as she sat down by my bed.

"Better," I answered shortly, not in the mood for small talk. It was true, though; I'd felt a lot better ever since the blood transfusion and antibiotics. My fever had broken in the night, and it hadn't come back yet. I took that as a good sign that I'd be able to leave by tomorrow, assuming the doctor didn't have bad news for me. I looked her in the eye, trying to read her expression, and asked, "So, how I'd do on my tests?"

I was relieved when she smiled at my little joke. "Quite well, actually," she replied, and a wonderful feeling of relief washed over me.

"Really?"

"Really. Let me show you something." She set two pictures out in front of me, which looked like X-ray slides. I tilted my head at them, trying to recognize what I was looking at. "These are your chest CT scans. They show a cross-section, so imagine you were looking down into your chest from above, rather than from the front. Here you can see your lungs and heart," she explained, pointing out the vital organs so that the pictures looked less blob-like.

I still wasn't sure what I was looking for, until she touched the picture on my left and said, "This is the scan that was taken at the time of your diagnosis, back in March. You can see the tumor here." She traced her finger around a cloudy blob near the center of the picture. I swallowed hard, realizing again how large and close it was to the white blob she'd said was my heart.

"This one," she went on, pointing to other scan, "is from this morning. Again, you see the mass here. Do you notice the difference?"

"It's smaller," I said at once, my eyes widening as they darted between the two pictures, comparing the size. All of the other structures, my lungs and my heart, looked about the same, but in the second scan, the cloudy blob was only half the size it had been in the first.

"Considerably smaller," agreed Dr. Submarine, sounding pleased. "This is wonderful news, Nick. It means the chemotherapy has been working to shrink the tumor. Perhaps you've noticed the effects? You've no doubt been breathing easier."

"Yeah," I said, nodding. I hadn't thought much about it, but she was right: it had been awhile since I'd felt that tightness in my chest, that frightening shortness of breath that had sent me to the doctor in the first place. Even in all my working out lately, I hadn't felt that sensation. I tired easily, and I got winded when I jogged on the treadmill, but that was normal. It wasn't scary, the way it had been before. "So you think I'm gonna get better?" I asked hopefully, feeling as if a huge weight had been lifted off my chest.

"I think the treatment is working," she answered, guardedly. "The mass has shrunk, and the cancer hasn't spread. Your spinal fluid looks clear, and there were no blasts detected in your bone marrow this time. Those are all good signs. I'd like you to continue the chemotherapy regimen for three more cycles and then come back for another check-up. At that point, we'll discuss your options."

That was good enough for me. When she left, I was breathing easier, both literally and figuratively. I couldn't wait to tell Cary. Since she was the only one who knew I was sick, she was the only one who could appreciate the good news that my treatment was working.

She came straight from rehearsal that evening, as she had the night before, bringing with her a huge sack of In-N-Out burgers and fries, the best on the West Coast. "You're amazing," I groaned in ecstasy, pulling a warm cheeseburger and a sleeve of greasy fries out of the bag.

Cary smiled. "I thought you could use something other than hospital food. Besides, I'm starving," she added, pulling out her own burger and fries.

"Seriously, this is perfect," I said. "We're gonna celebrate."

"Celebrate?" She raised her eyebrows hopefully.

I couldn't hold back my grin. "So I had my tests done today, and everything came out good. The doc said there were no cancer cells in my bone marrow or spinal fluid, and the tumor in my chest is shrinking."

"Oh my God, Nick, that's awesome!" Cary dropped her burger and impulsively leaned forward to hug me. It caught me off-guard, but it felt good to have someone to hug, someone to share the moment with. I wrapped my arms around her and closed my eyes, savoring the comfort it brought me, the relief in knowing that the treatment was working, that I was going to be alright. Soon, this nightmare would be over. I just had to get through three more cycles of chemo. I was halfway there. The chemo would be over before the tour was, and then my life could go back to normal.

I told Cary this, and although she was still smiling, she shook her head. "Wouldn't it make more sense to finish the chemo first and then tour? You should just tell the guys this weekend and postpone it."

"We can't cancel a week before the tour's supposed to start," I said. Of course, that wasn't true; we'd postponed mid-tour when AJ went to rehab. Cancer was just as good of an excuse. But even if what she was suggesting was the logical thing to do, I was too stubborn to do it. I was dead set on flying to New York and on to Miami as planned. I'd made it this far through chemo; I could get through the rest on the road. It would be easier now, knowing that it was working, that it would all be worth it in the end.

Cary clucked her tongue at me, but neither of us wanted to argue that night. We were both in too good a mood. So we dug into our dinner instead, devouring the burgers and fries as the conversation turned back to music – rehearsals, the finale, the tour.

I slept surprisingly well that night, with a full stomach and a clear head. Everything was going to be all right.

With my blood counts higher, I was released from the hospital on Saturday. Cary picked me up, and we stopped at a pharmacy to fill my prescription of antibiotics and stock up on the medical supplies we'd need on the road.

Once I got home, I started getting ready to leave again. I packed three big suitcases – two with clothes and toiletries, the third with all my chemo junk. “I just hope I don’t get stopped by airport security,” I grumbled, as Cary helped me take inventory and get it all neatly stored away in the suitcase.

“They’ll probably see the syringes and think you’re a junkie,” she snickered. I groaned at the thought. “I’m sure you won’t get stopped,” she added seriously. “You’re a Backstreet Boy – not exactly terrorist material.” She grinned, her eyes shining.

“What, you sayin’ we don’t look tough or somethin’?” I asked, crossing my arms and posing like I was Donnie Wahlberg in the eighties.

Cary giggled. “I’m sure the fanny pack will help your image.”

I scowled. “Fuck that. I’ll shove the damn pump down my pants before I put on a damn fanny pack.”

She smiled. “I think I have another option for you. Hang on a sec.” She left my bedroom and returned a minute later with something hidden behind her back. Shyly, she held it out to me. “I thought this might work better.”

I took it and held it up. It was a cloth pouch, like a pencil bag, just big enough to hold the chemo pump. It was made out of gray fabric, with the design of an old-school Nintendo controller sewed on the front in pieces of felt, and had cloth straps that could be connected with velcro. Brushing my thumb over the little, red, felt buttons, I grinned up at Cary. “This is awesome. Did you make this??”

She nodded and blushed as she smiled, obviously pleased with herself and my reaction. “It’s less bulky than a fanny pack. I thought you could wear it under your shirt. If you dress in layers, I don’t think it’ll be noticeable.”

“And if anyone does see it, at least it looks like something cool and not a queer-ass fanny pack,” I added, approving her design. “This rocks. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So is this what you did while you were here by yourself the last few nights?”

She laughed. “Pretty much. I stopped by a fabric store on my way home from rehearsal on Monday and have been working on it in my room all week.”

“I didn’t know you could sew.”

“My grandma taught me when I was a kid. I don’t do it a lot anymore, but this was pretty basic, really.”

She didn’t seem to want to play up her creativity, but I was stoked with the gift. The design was rad, and the whole thing was way better than a fanny pack. “Well, I love it. Thanks,” I told her again, adding it to the suitcase.

“So, you sure you’re up to this?” she asked.

“I’m sure,” I replied quickly, before my mind had a chance to decide otherwise.

She nodded, eyeing me closely. “Just checking.”

“You sure *you’re* up to it?” I threw the question back at her.

She took longer to answer than I had, but finally she said, “Yeah. I’m still in.”

I smiled at her and nodded, too. “Just checking.”

That night, I went to bed early, knowing I had to be up at the crack of dawn to catch my early flight out. But even though I was tired, the way I always felt these days, it took me a long time to fall asleep.

My mind raced, thinking hard about what I was about to get myself into. I acted all cocky and confident around Cary and my doctor, but the truth was, I wasn’t really that confident about it at all. I knew how high the stakes were. I knew how much could go wrong. I knew the chances of my actually being able to keep my illness a secret from the guys for the whole tour were slim. But I didn’t know a way out of it, at this point.

Even if I changed my mind, I couldn’t imagine calling the guys first thing in the morning, the day we were supposed to perform in New York, to tell them I’d been diagnosed with cancer and couldn’t tour. Not only would it put our manager, Jenn, and everyone else involved with the tour in a major jam, it would devastate the guys. I couldn’t do that to them. The right time to tell them had come and gone, several times over, and at this point, I had to wait for the next right time to come around again. As far as I was concerned, that wouldn’t be until after the tour was over.

Until then, I would just have to suck it up and keep it a secret. I'd done a good job of it so far; as long as my body didn't betray me, I could keep up the charade. I just prayed my body could keep up, too.

Chapter 23

Nick

Early the next morning, Cary and I took a cab to LAX. I left her at one of the car rental counters to pick up a car to get her around for the next few days. She was going to check into a hotel before her father arrived for the *American Idol* finale and pretend she'd been staying there all along. Then, in a few more days, she'd fly to Miami, where the guys and I would be waiting.

"See you Thursday," I told her, as she hugged me goodbye.

"Okay. Take care of yourself until then," she replied, giving me a serious look.

I gave her a goofy smile back. "I will, Nurse Cary," I said in a sing-song voice, making light of the situation. But neither of us could forget that I'd just gotten out of the hospital. I wasn't back to one hundred percent, and as long as the war between cancer and chemo was going on inside my body, I never would be.

I felt it as I headed off for the check-in counter, pushing a luggage cart heaped with all my crap. Even though it was on wheels, the cart felt heavy. My body felt weak. Just hoisting the suitcases onto the counter for the attendant to weigh and tag left me short of breath.

"Have a nice flight, Mr. Carter," said the woman behind the counter, smiling as she handed me my boarding pass.

"Thanks," I grunted, continuing on to the line to get through security. It was already long, but fast-moving, and soon I was through the metal detectors and heading towards my gate.

AJ was already there. He was sitting alone in a corner, but he still stood out in his dark sunglasses, his hoodie pulled up over his cap. "Goin' for the Unabomber look there, Bone?" I asked, as I walked up to him.

He grinned and flipped up his shades as he stood. "Nicky, my boy. How's it goin', dude?" He shook my hand and pulled me into a one-armed hug. I felt my body stiffen as I held back a little, afraid he would feel the hard little lump of the portacath if we got too close.

"Eh, been better. I'm gettin' over some bug," I said. It was the truth, and I also hoped it would explain why I pulled out of the hug so quickly. I'm a big hugger, usually, so I knew he would think that was weird.

"That sucks, man." AJ took a step back, looking at me warily. "Don't go spreading the plague before the tour's even started."

I chuckled; it was surprising even to me that, of all of us, he was the biggest germaphobe. "It's okay, dude, I'm on antibiotics. I'm probably not even contagious anymore." *And what I've really got, you can't catch*, I added in my head.

"Oh, good. Hope you're feelin' better by Saturday. You gonna be okay for the show tonight?"

"Oh yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I lied casually, eager to change the subject. "So when's Rochelle coming out?"

"Not till June. She's gotta work," said AJ, looking bummed. "She's doing makeup for the *Glee* tour this weekend..." I knew all I had to do was bring up Rochelle to get him talking. I sat back and half-listened while he rambled on about Rochelle and her makeup classes and their wedding plans and all of that. Before I knew it, they were calling us to board the plane.

I was dreading the flight. I hate flying anyway, but more than that, I was dreading being shut inside that cabin with AJ for five-and-a-half hours. Don't get me wrong; I love the guy, and normally when we're together, we never shut up. But that was the problem: How was I going to have a five-and-a-half hour conversation with him and not tell him I had cancer? I could avoid saying the words easily enough, but there was more to it than that; I had to avoid letting him see that something was wrong. And not just for the five or six hours we were on the plane, but for the rest of the day, and the rest of the week, and the rest of the tour.

All of a sudden, I felt completely overwhelmed. I broke out in a cold sweat, as the gravity of what I was about to do really sunk in. I had to hide a life-threatening illness from the three guys who knew me better than my own brother. AJ, Brian, and Howie could all read me like book and know right away when something was wrong.

Kevin was worse than all three of them combined, and for the first time, I was truly glad he wasn't touring with us. In some ways, touring was more fun without him anyway; we were a lot more laidback. But I still missed the guy. I still felt the hole whenever three of us tried to center ourselves behind the one who had stepped forward to sing lead, or whenever Howie sang one of his solos. A part of me had always wished Kevin would come back to us, so things could go back to how they used to be, but now I was glad he was gone. I never could have kept this from Kevin. He would have seen right through me and talked it out of me within a day or two.

But the other three weren't that intense, and I knew I could hide it from them, if I was careful not to slip up. It would be the biggest acting gig of my life. I just wished I were a better actor.

The one thing I had going for me was that the guys would have their families – or in AJ's case, fiancée – on the road with us for most of this leg of the tour. That meant we'd have separate buses and hotel rooms and wouldn't spend much time together, outside of the venues. I'd only have to keep my act up for a few hours a day.

Today would be the longest. Today would be the real test.

AJ and I boarded the plane and found our seats in first class. I wished we hadn't bought our tickets together, so we could have sat separately. That would have made it a lot easier. But there we were, side by side. I hoped he would sleep. If he didn't, maybe I would.

I closed my eyes when I heard the engine start rumbling beneath me and kept them firmly shut, not wanting to look out the window when the plane left the ground. It always kinda freaked me out to see the ground falling out from under me, everything getting smaller and smaller as we got higher and higher. I always imagined the opposite, seeing the ground hurtling towards me as the plane lost control and plummeted in a death spiral. I know they say flying is safer than driving, but with as much as I fly, I've always figured my odds of dying in a plane crash are higher than the average Joe.

But having cancer must put it all into perspective, or maybe it just made me really tired, because I somehow managed to relax enough to fall asleep. When I woke up, all I could see out the window were clouds, and AJ was zonked out beside me. *Well, that was easy*, I thought, wondering how long I'd slept. Judging by the drool on AJ's chin, we'd both been out for awhile. Sweet.

It was already three in the afternoon when we landed in New York, though it was only noon California time. "Hope they've got some good grub backstage," AJ said as we walked off the plane. "I'm starved."

Oddly enough, I wasn't even hungry, but I agreed with him, anyway. It would have looked weird if I didn't; everyone knows I love food.

We had just enough time to check into our hotel and drop off our luggage before it was time to head over to the venue for soundcheck. Since we were staying three nights in the city, I did a little unpacking, throwing some of my crap in the dresser drawers, and changed into a fresh t-shirt. The shirt was white, so I threw on an open plaid shirt over it, paranoid of the portacath showing.

I was still scrutinizing my reflection in the mirror when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I dug it out and found a text from Howie: *Are you almost ready? Meet us in my room. 514.*

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” I muttered, stuffing the phone back into my pocket. I took a sweeping glance around the room, not that I was forgetting anything, and then I left it, wandering down the hall to find Howie’s.

They were all there waiting for me; even AJ had beat me. Howie grinned widely as he opened the door. He always looks glad to see me after a break; I guess he forgets how I drive him nuts during tours. He’s always been my favorite target, but now that Kevin’s not around for me to annoy, Howie gets it double. I grinned back. “Hey, Howie.”

I got away with a quick man-hug with Howie, grasping his hand and pulling him into a one-armed embrace. No such luck with Brian. For such a little guy, he’s a fierce hugger. My only saving grace was that he’s so short, there was no chance of him feeling the hard spot under my collarbone as our chests pressed together. At least he didn’t jump into my arms, like he does for a laugh in front of fans.

“How are ya, Frack?” he asked, and I couldn’t help but smile when he used my old nickname. Frick and Frack... those were the days.

“I’m alright. How’s the fam?” I asked in return, looking over his shoulder for Leighanne and Baylee. I didn’t see them.

“They’re good. Leighanne’s at home, and Baylee’s spending the weekend with her mom. They’ll meet us in Miami at the end of the week,” Brian replied. He looked pretty bummed about being away from them, even though he’d just left and would be seeing them in a few days. But then, he and Leighanne have been basically attached at the hip for the last thirteen years, so I guess it would be pretty rough on him. I couldn’t relate.

“And yours?” I asked Howie.

He grinned just thinking about Leigh and James. “Same. Doing great. Waiting for us to make it back to Florida.”

I nodded. So it was just the four of us guys. That didn’t happen very often these days, and normally, I would want it that way. But this time, I actually wished their families were there. They would be a distraction, something to keep the guys from sensing that something was off with me. I hoped the crazy schedule of appearances we had in the city over the next three days would keep them all busy enough not to notice.

We went downstairs to the lobby to meet Jenn, our manager. “Oh good, there you guys are. Ready to go?” she asked briskly, wrangling the troops together. She’s the youngest manager we’ve ever had; she could easily pass as one of our girlfriends or even a fan. But she’s married, thank god, so there’s no awkwardness, and she’s good at her job. She keeps us in line.

We headed out to the cars that were waiting to take us to the venue. The Highline Ballroom was the perfect place to hold our fan event. It’s an intimate venue, with a

House of Blues kind of vibe – small stage, standing room in the middle, tables around the edges, and a bar in the back. I was glad our first show was going to be chill; I was still feeling pretty run down, especially after traveling all day, and not up to dancing, even though I knew I'd be doing plenty of it later in the week. I was relieved all I had to do that night was sit on a stool and sing. That much I could do.

There was already a long line of fans waiting outside when we got there. It was crazy to think some of them had probably been there since before I'd woken up in LA that morning. We didn't stop to chat; we were already running behind schedule. We had just enough time to do our soundcheck before they started letting fans in. The meet and greet would take place after the show, so there was no soundcheck party, just the four of us messing around onstage with our guitarist, Jimmy, while Jenn and our bodyguards watched. When the doors open, we hid out backstage. AJ finally got his lunch, and the rest of us nibbled on the munchies that were set out for us.

Suddenly, Jenn burst into our dressing room. As usual, while we kicked back and stuffed our faces, she'd been running around like a madwoman, making sure everything was ready to go. "You will not believe what went down outside!" she fumed. "Someone's been egging your fans!"

"What?!"

"Yeah! Some poor girl out in the line got hit with an egg!"

"Who threw it?" Brian wanted to know. He was frowning, a deep crease in his forehead.

"Whoever did, they're gonna get their asses kicked if we find them!" AJ sounded outraged. I was, too. I had my phone out already, so I got on Twitter and started tweeting just that.

"Is the fan okay? What can we do?" asked Howie. Leave it to D to be concerned for the poor girl, while the rest of us just wanted revenge on the douchebag who egged her in the first place.

"She's actually got a bruise on her arm - that's how hard it hit her - but she's okay," said Jenn. "Some other girls outside helped her get cleaned up. You'll see her after the show."

She left us to talk shit about whoever had thought it was funny to egg Backstreet fans. It was a crappy thing to have happen before one of our shows, but in an odd way, I was sort of glad it had – not because I thought it was funny or anything, but because it gave us something to talk about and took my mind off the secret I was keeping from the others. Before I knew it, the fans were all inside, and it was time to start the show.

For such a small venue, the screaming was intense as we took the stage. Normally, we jumped through a screen and started in with "Everybody," with crazy light effects to match the high-energy choreography. But on that night, we simply walked out onstage

under the regular stage lights and perched on the four stools that had been set out for us. Cameras flashed like crazy in our faces, as Howie gave an introduction. As the oldest, he'd been our unofficial leader ever since Kevin had left, so he got stuck doing stuff like that. After his little speech, we launched straight into "Shape of My Heart."

I sat on my stool, bouncing my knee and bobbing my head in time to the guitar strumming, tugging at my clothes to make sure everything was still in place while I waited for my turn to sing. *"Looking back on the things I've done, I was trying to be someone... I played my part and kept in the dark... Now let me show you the shape of my heart..."*

The shrieks in the audience crescendoed, as they always did, when we got to my solo. *"I'm here with my confession..."* I sang, pulling the mic stand closer to me. *"Got nothin' to hide no more... I don't know where to start... but to show you the shape of my heart..."*

I didn't fail to notice the irony of the lyrics. Even as I sang about confessing the truth, I was hiding a devastating secret.

Chapter 24

Nick

On our last night in New York, the guys and I sat around the hotel, watching TV. No one had felt like going out; we all had early flights out of the city in the morning. Brian was flying home to Atlanta for a couple of days, before he had to be in Miami for rehearsal. Howie and AJ were headed to Orlando to see their families. And I was going straight to Miami for some much needed R&R before the tour officially started.

After two days of almost nonstop promo appearances following the fan event on Sunday, I was exhausted. Monday had been enough to all but do me in; we'd gotten up at the crack of dawn to do *The Early Show*, then done an interview for *Talk Stoop*. Radio interviews followed that, and then a performance at the Apollo Theater for the Do Something Awards. We'd been out late after that, and then today we'd had to tape *The Wendy Williams Show* and A&E's *Private Sessions*. All that in two days would be enough to wear anyone out, but since I was still recovering from chemo and my infection, I was completely wiped.

All I wanted was to go to bed, but it wasn't even eight o'clock. We had just finished the dinner we'd ordered, authentic New York-style pizza, and I knew it was too early to call it a night without the guys suspecting something was up with me. So I kept drinking Diet Cokes and tried to keep myself awake.

Eight o'clock came and went. Howie, who had the remote, flipped through a round of channels and announced, "There's nothing good on." He passed the remote to me. "Put on whatever you want, Nicky."

"You're giving me control of the remote?" I eyed him with mock skepticism. "What, did you lick it first to get back at me or somethin'?"

Howie rolled his eyes, smirking. "No, I didn't lick it, although if I had, you'd deserve it. 'Tastes like hot sauce!'" he imitated me in a nasally, obnoxious voice that totally did not sound like me at all.

AJ snickered and added, "He just wishes he'd thought of it before you said that, Carter."

I grinned. "I know. And now I have an idea for later." I raised the remote to my mouth, stuck out my tongue like Gene Simmons, and acted like I was about to lick the back of it, just to see Howie squirm.

It worked. His eye started twitching, and he exploded, "Nick! That's sick, man! Sick! Do you know how many other people have touched that thing? Do you know how many germs are probably on that thing? We should have doused it in Purell before we started using it!"

We all started cracking up at his neurotic little outburst, and Brian joked, "Yeah, Frack, you probably just contracted tuberculosis or something just by breathing near it."

"No, bubonic plague!" chimed in AJ.

"The *BLACK DEATH!*!" added Brian in a deep voice of doom. We may have been Frick and Frack, but he and AJ could go back and forth like that forever.

AJ started quoting Monty Python. "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!"

"I'm not dead!" croaked Brian, and they both started laughing again.

"That's what we should watch," AJ suggested. "Anyone bring a copy?"

We all looked at each other. No one had. I took over Howie's flipping of channels and stopped when I heard a familiar theme song. AJ snickered again. "Did y'all know Nick's obsessed with *American Idol?*" he asked the others, as Ryan Seacrest started yammering on the TV.

"I am not," I said, annoyed, about to change the channel when AJ leaned over and ripped the remote out of my hand.

"You totally are, dude. How else did you 'discover' Cary Hilst? You've probably been watching that show in secret for years and just pretending you thought it was cheap and fake as a cover-up." AJ snickered.

“Do you watch *Glee* too, Frack?” Brian added, looking pretty gleeful himself.

AJ laughed harder. “He just watches for the Journey covers.”

See what I mean about those two?

I couldn’t even say anything to defend myself, since it was true that I’d watched *American Idol* every week since Cary had moved in with me, and, okay, so I’d started watching *Glee*, too, since it was on right after... But that’s just what happens when you let a chick control your TV! I blamed her.

Howie looked pretty pleased that it was me getting picked on for once, instead of him. “He probably owns all the soundtracks and sings Finn’s solos at the top of his lungs when he’s alone in his car,” he chimed in, but the thing about Howie is, he’s not really all that good at the whole ‘humor’ thing. As soon as he said that, I knew just how to turn it against him.

“Finn? You know the characters’ names?” I crowed. “Who’s the Gleek now, Howie?”

I used to not think it was possible for Latino people to blush, but Howie can. I can make him. His face turned dark red, as he sputtered some kind of lame defense about Leigh liking the show, and I cracked myself up imagining him singing *Glee* songs around the house. If I was Finn, he was definitely Mr. Schue, with his curly hair and cheesy personality. Or maybe Artie...

Okay, yeah, I do know all the characters’ names. But no way in hell was I gonna admit it!

Once we were done laughing at Howie’s expense, we quieted down and went back to watching TV. AJ had the remote now, but no one bothered to tell him to change the channel. I guess there really was nothing else on, or maybe they were all closet *Idol* fans now, too. In any case, we sat around and watched *American Idol*. We couldn’t even mock it much, since it was down to the last two, who were both actually pretty good.

Cary wanted Crystal to win, but I didn’t tell the guys that; they didn’t need to know she’d been living in my condo, watching this show with me twice a week, every week, for the past month. I did look for her in the audience shots and pointed her out to Brian and Howie, who still hadn’t met her in person.

“Tell me something, Nick,” AJ said, out of the blue. “Are you bangin’ her?”

“Excuse me?” I forced myself to laugh. “Why would you think that?”

“Uh, cause you practically begged us to make her our opening act for the summer, and it seemed like you were seeing a lot of her in LA.” AJ shrugged. “It’s a fair assumption.”

“Yeah, well, you know what they say about people who *assume*, AJ,” Brian jumped in, coming to my defense. He was still the Frick to my Frack, after all.

“I’m not bangin’ her,” I answered truthfully.

“Yet!” the three of them chorused in perfect unison. Yeah, so much for Brian defending me. They all thought they knew me so well.

To be perfectly honest, though, it didn’t really bother me. It would make it a lot easier when I had to sneak her into my hotel room to hook up my chemo or onto my tour bus to draw my blood if they all thought we were an item. I just hoped Cary wouldn’t mind the assumption.

But I played along. “Hey, like you should talk, AJ. Remember Kaci Brown? That name ring any bells?”

AJ grimaced. “Don’t mention that name.”

“I’m just sayin’. You’re the one with the track record for bangin’ our opening acts.”

“What about Mandy? Or should I say... ‘Willa Ford?’ *That* name ring any bells?” AJ shot back.

It was my turn to shudder. “Hey, I was bangin’ her *before* she was our opening act. Totally different.”

“This is why we should only have male opening acts,” joked Brian, and Howie chuckled and nodded in agreement.

“Maybe we should only use male models in our music videos, too, then – right, Rok?” teased AJ, winking in Brian’s direction.

“Touché,” said Brian with a good-natured grin.

We all laughed and returned our attention to the show. I was glad it was only an hour long that night; the big, two-hour finale extravaganza was the next night. At nine o’clock, when it was over, I yawned and said, “Well, fellas, I think I’m bow out for the night.”

Howie and Brian exchanged surprised looks. “At nine o’clock?” asked Brian incredulously. “And you call *us* old men.”

“Hey, I’m jetlagged!” I lied. “You wouldn’t know; at least you didn’t have to change time zones to get here.”

AJ snickered. “It’s only six p.m. in Cali, dude.”

"Yeah, and it was four a.m. in Cali when I got up this morning," I countered, doing the math. I'd been up for seventeen hours; I had every right to go to bed at nine. I couldn't understand how AJ wasn't exhausted, too.

"Well, now he knows what it feels like be in his thirties," said Howie. "No more teasing us about that, right, Nicky? Get some rest."

I loved the way he could acknowledge that I was thirty and then proceed talk to me like I was a little boy up past his bedtime. Howie took Kevin's "Daddy" role far too seriously sometimes. "Sure, Dad, I will," I replied sarcastically, as I got up. "Night, guys."

"Night, Nick," they all chorused, as I left the room and dragged myself back to my own. My body felt heavy and sluggish; my head was pounding with fatigue. Even my eyelids were starting to droop, like they had lead weights attached.

Relieved to have made my exit, I let myself into my hotel room and didn't even bother to turn on the lights. I undressed in the dark, felt my way to my bed, and collapsed onto it. So this was it, I thought, as I closed my eyes and burrowed my face into my pillow. This was what it was going to be like. I might not be throwing up, and if I was lucky, my hair wouldn't fall out, but I was going to spend the rest of the tour feeling like this, fighting this fatigue. I could use jetlag as an excuse for now, but after we had been on the road awhile, that excuse wouldn't fly anymore. I had to find some way to get my energy back, or at least act like I had.

I thought I'd done a pretty good job of it so far. If the guys suspected anything was wrong, they hadn't grilled me about it. I thought I could sense their eyes on me sometimes, watching me, but I was probably just paranoid. Keeping secrets from your closest friends will do that to you.

I felt like shit, in more ways than one, but even though I was tired, even though I wished I was in my own bed instead of this hotel one, I was glad to be out of town, away from the hospital and all the reminders of my diagnosis, just hanging out with the guys like old times. It wouldn't last; soon, their families would be with them, and we wouldn't be able to just hang out in somebody's hotel room like we had that night. Soon, it would be time for my next round of chemo, and I'd feel even shittier than I did now.

At some point, they'd find out; I couldn't keep this from them forever. I didn't want to. Just as long as I could, hopefully through this first leg of the tour. And maybe by the end, if things kept going the way they were, I'd be better. It would be nice to finally tell them the truth as I was finishing up my chemo, with a clean bill of health. They'd still be pissed at me for keeping it a secret from them, but at least they wouldn't be as freaked out.

That's what I'll do, I thought vaguely, as I started to drift off. Flopped on my stomach, with my face buried in my pillow, I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears. With every beat, I imagined my heart battering against the tumor that was so near it, pulsing

whatever was left of the chemo drugs in my system through my bloodstream to attack it from the inside.

I dreamed of the war that was going on within me, the little Nazi chemo soldiers invading every region of my body to cleanse it of the cancer hidden among all the healthy cells, while the outside world remained oblivious.

And then I woke up from the dream, disturbed and still exhausted.

Chapter 25

Cary

In the middle of the crowded airport, I buried my face in my dad's shoulder, closed my eyes, and breathed in the familiar scent of him, the scent that reminded me of home, family, and my childhood, while he squeezed me tight. His hugs were so much more powerful than his words, conveying all the feelings that he had a tough time expressing out loud. "Love you," he said, as he finally released me, but he didn't have to. I already knew.

"Love you, too," I replied, beaming up at him with too-bright eyes that were stinging with unshed tears. *I will not cry*, I told myself, knowing it would only make it even harder to turn and walk away. "Have a safe flight!" My voice was shrill. "Call me when you get home."

My dad grinned. "I'll text you." He sounded so proud of himself.

I giggled, swiping at the corner of my eye. "Okay. I'll text you back when I get to Florida."

He nodded. "You're gonna have the time of your life, kiddo. See you in a few weeks."

"Alright... bye, Dad." I forced myself to turn away. As I started toward my gate, I looked back once over my shoulder to see him striding off in the opposite direction, the same duffel bag he'd had since the early nineteen seventies slung over one of his thin shoulders. It was the only luggage he'd brought, packed neatly with three changes of clothes and his shaving kit. He was a simple man, my dad.

It meant the world to me that he had left the familiarity and routine of his simple, Midwestern life to fly all the way out to Los Angeles to see me perform in the *American Idol* finale. He'd stayed for three days, and I'd showed him as many sights as I could in the time I had, in between last-minute rehearsals. Now the show was over, and we were heading out on separate flights. His would take him back home, mine to Miami, where I would meet Nick. The tour started in two days.

It had been a long time since I'd experienced such a whirlwind of emotions. I was excited, but I was exhausted. I was glad *American Idol* was over, but sorry to see it end. I would miss the friends I'd made there, but I couldn't wait to meet the Backstreet Boys. At the same time, I was looking forward to the tour and, yet, dreading it. I was nervous about performing and anxious about the secret I'd been charged with keeping. I kept hoping Nick had come clean with the guys in the few days they'd spent in New York, but I was willing to bet money he hadn't. He was just too damn stubborn.

I couldn't wait to see him again, but I missed my dad already. It had been much harder to say goodbye to him this time, probably because we'd had such a short time together, and it would be three more weeks before I made it home to see him again. I realized that if any sort of career opportunity came out of this tour, it would be like that all the time. I couldn't be a professional singer living in central Illinois. I'd have to relocate, permanently. That was a scary thought; I'd never lived further than an hour from my dad.

I pushed the thought out of my head. I was thinking way too far ahead, counting my chickens before they had hatched. The opening act gig was essentially a ruse, I reminded myself. I'd gotten it not because of my singing talent, but because of my nursing skills. Nothing would come of it, except perhaps a friendship with Nick – if I didn't end up killing him first.

I texted him from the gate, as I waited for my boarding call. "*I'm at the airport, almost on my way!*" I started to type, "*How have you been feeling?*" but decided that was too much of a nurse thing to say. I wanted to be the friend, the fellow singer, for awhile longer before I went back to being the nurse. So I deleted it and put in its place, "*Can't wait to see you.*" I sent that one.

His reply came quickly; he must have been bored. "*Right back atcha. See u soon.*"

I smiled. It was silly how just a simple text from him could still make my stomach flutter with butterflies.

When the boarding call came, I powered down my phone, gathered my purse and carry-on bag, and joined the line of passengers waiting to get on the plane. When I handed my boarding pass to the attendant at the counter, she scanned it and then looked up at my face, a smile of recognition lighting up hers. "*You're from American Idol!*" she cried, forgetting the pleasant, but professional tone of voice that matched her crisp uniform.

Caught off-guard, I smiled back and nodded. I wasn't used to being recognized in public; on *American Idol*, you live in such a bubble world that there's hardly a chance for you to be noticed out doing something normal. Now that the show was over, though, I supposed it would be happening more often, especially once I had the added publicity of touring with the Backstreet Boys.

The attendant didn't ask for an autograph or anything, and I was glad; I would have happily given her one, but I didn't think the line of people behind me would be so happy about that, so it was just as well. Working at LAX, she had to take boarding passes from celebrities all the time, so I was surprised she had even bothered to acknowledge me. I wasn't a celebrity; I was a reality TV show contestant. There's a difference.

On the plane, I found my seat, grateful that it was in first class. It would be nice to have room to stretch out and enough privacy that I could take a nap on the flight. I felt the way I had after a tough finals week in college, both physically and mentally drained. Last night had been fun, the excitement of the show and the huge after party that followed. I'd celebrated with Lee, commiserated with Crystal, agreed with all the other cast-offs who said they were sort of glad they hadn't made it to the top two, after witnessing all the pressure that came with it, and stayed up far too late, partying and drinking. I was a little hungover and a lot sleep-deprived, though I'd done my best to be chipper and not cranky in front of my dad.

As I waited for the plane to take off and the flight attendants to come by with the drink carts so that I could sleep and not be bothered, I thought again of Nick. If I was this tired, after a couple of weeks of rehearsal leading up to this one, really long, really emotional night, how on earth did he think he was going to make it through a whole tour? I was used to a fair amount of stress, given my day job, and I knew he was, too, but the difference was, even if I wasn't used to the rigors of tour life, I knew that, physically, I could handle it. I was in pretty good shape. I was healthy. Nick wasn't, and I didn't think he had really accepted that yet. He'd been doing the treatment without a whole lot of complaining, and he'd done well with it so far, but I didn't think he realized it probably wasn't going to be smooth sailing the whole way, especially once he was on the road and not lying around his condo all the time.

I'd tried to warn him, but that's the thing about denial – no amount of telling or lecturing or warning can change the person's mind. They have to change their own mind. I'd made up my own mind that I would be there as a support, until Nick came to his senses and changed his.

He was waiting at the airport in Miami when my flight landed. I followed the stream of passengers from the plane to the baggage claim area, and there he was, waiting a safe distance away from one of the baggage carousels. He was wearing a jacket and leaning against a pillar with his head hanging down, a baseball cap low over his eyes, but I recognized him instantly and walked over.

"Hey," he said, flashing a crooked grin from underneath his cap. "You made it."

I smiled. "Here I am," I replied, spreading my arms. I remembered hugging him goodbye in Los Angeles and wondered if I'd get a hug in return, but he made no move toward me.

“They just turned on the baggage thing a few minutes ago,” he said. “Your stuff should start coming out soon.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Flight okay?”

“Yeah, it was fine. I slept most of it,” I admitted, laughing.

He chuckled, too. “That’s the best way to do it.”

While we waited, I studied him out of the corner of my eye, mystified. Was he always so tough to read? One minute, he seemed friendly, and the next, aloof. Did the mood swings just come with the territory of being who he was, hiding what he had, and worrying about what he was about to do? I wondered. It had to be stressful, trying to keep his illness a secret and go about his hectic life like everything was normal. It was stressing me out already, and for me, the charade was just beginning.

“How did everything go this week?” I finally asked. There were people milling around near us, but no one was too close, and no one was paying much attention. Their eyes were all fixed on the endlessly turning carousel, waiting for their luggage to start sliding out of the chute.

“Fine,” he said nonchalantly. Then, “We were pretty busy.”

“Sounds like it. I saw you on *The Early Show*. You guys sounded great.”

“Thanks.” He smirked. “It ain’t easy sounding good that early in the morning.”

“Early wake-up call, huh?”

“Way too early. I’m still jetlagged.” There it was, the denial again. It wasn’t jetlag making him feel run down, and we both knew it. Even with the brim of his cap shielding his eyes with its shadow, I could tell he looked tired. In the fluorescent lighting, his complexion seemed pale, and his weight loss showed in his face, where the skin looked pinched and pulled across his slightly sunken cheeks. With a little makeup and styling, he could look vibrant, the way he had on *The Early Show*, but without, he looked haggard and sallow.

“What’s on the agenda for the rest of the day?” I asked, hoping he would have time to rest.

“Nothin’ much. The other guys aren’t in town yet. Brian’s still back home in Atlanta, and Howie and AJ are up in Orlando visiting their moms. So it’s just us tonight.”

As eager as I was to meet Brian and Howie, I didn’t mind the sound of that at all.

Once we'd picked up my luggage, we took a cab back to the hotel where we'd be staying the next three nights. My room was down the hall from Nick's. He pointed his door out as he helped me carry my luggage to mine, then said, "I'll let you get settled or whatever you need to do. Come on over if you wanna hang out later."

He left it at that and went back to his room, while I took a look around mine. It was a nice room, not a suite or anything fancy, but it smelled clean and looked tastefully decorated, with a big, comfy bed, a large, flatscreen TV, a well-stocked mini-bar, and plenty of pillows and extra towels. I wondered what Nick's looked like by comparison, but figured it would sound like a lame excuse to go knocking on his door right away. He'd extended the offer to come down, but he'd also said "later," and I wasn't sure if he really meant it, or if he was just being nice. We had hung out plenty in LA, but it was kind of unavoidable when we were living in the same condo, where I was essentially the hired help, the live-in home nurse. Not that he necessarily treated me that way, like I was his employee, but did that make us friends? I wasn't sure.

In my day job, the line between patient and caretaker was clearly drawn, and I knew not to cross it. I was friendly to the residents I cared for at the nursing home, but they weren't my friends. To think of them that way would only make it harder to treat them and even harder to lose them – like losing my grandparents all over again. I'd learned that the hard way. I knew better now. Care with compassion, but don't get too close. That was the rule.

But with Nick, it was different. There were no rules, and that scared me. In this situation, I didn't know where exactly the boundaries lay, yet sometimes I felt like I was crossing into dangerous territory. Maybe staying with him in LA had been a bad idea. I'd gotten too comfortable around him, started to feel as if we *were* friends. But I couldn't forget that I was also a fan... and a nurse... and the keeper of a deep, dark secret. You combine friendship with fan worship and a hidden, life-threatening illness, and you might just have a recipe for disaster. Or, at the very least, a really awkward situation.

I should have kept my distance. I should never have gone down to his room. But the rest of the day and night loomed ahead of me, an endless string of hours to spend trying to entertain myself, and in the end, the boredom got to me. So I wandered down the hall and knocked on Nick's door. I had no idea when I entered the room that I would spend the rest of the night there.

Chapter 26

Cary

Okay, so nothing happened. Not really. We hung out. We ordered room service for dinner and a movie for entertainment, and we spent the evening watching it in Nick's suite (yes, his was a suite, and yes, it was fancy).

I know that, at some point, I went back to my own room long enough to change into my pajamas so I'd be more comfortable, and I remember Nick inviting me to stretch out on his bed, since it was huge and a lot more comfortable than the little loveseat I'd been sitting on. It was completely platonic; we lay on top of the covers with at least two feet of space between us. And the next thing I knew...

I woke up to the sound of knocking. Someone was knocking on the door.

In that moment when I became conscious of my surroundings, of the fact that I was sprawled out on my stomach on Nick's bed, in Nick's hotel room, Nick got up and went to answer the door. "Hey, so you *were* in there," a familiar Kentucky twang drifted into the room. "Bout time, Sleepin' Beauty; I've only been knockin' five minutes..."

"Sorry, dude, I friggin' overslept," I heard Nick answer. He sounded flustered, which immediately put me in panic mode. What time was it?? I rolled over and sat up, looking around for a clock.

I heard Brian joke, "Ever hear of a wake-up call?"

I would have started spouting excuses, explaining that we hadn't really meant to go to bed; we'd just fallen asleep during the movie. But all Nick said was, "My bad."

"Well, we're headin' to rehearsal in ten minutes. You gonna be ready?" Brian's voice got louder, as he came into the room. Realizing I was still in Nick's bed, in my pajamas, my face bare and my hair probably looking like a rat's nest, I scrambled off the bed and looked around for a place to hide. "You know Mark's gonna flip if you make us late the first-" Before I could duck into the bathroom, Brian rounded the corner. "-day..." He stopped, and so did I. Sheepishly, I turned around. Brian Littrell was standing there, staring at me in surprise. His eyebrows shot up, his forehead creasing underneath his wavy bangs. "Well, hello," he said. "You must be Cary."

My face was on fire. I could only imagine what I must have looked like, what it must have looked like to him. The new opening act, already sleeping with one of the headliners. I grimaced and nodded. "Yeah," I rasped, in a voice like a bullfrog's, all clogged up with sleep. Ew. I cleared it quickly and tried again. "Yeah, I'm Cary." At least I sounded human that time.

"Nice to meet ya, Cary; I'm Brian."

I stood there, wishing I could sink through the floor, thinking, *Trust me, Brian, I know who you are. You're my favorite Backstreet Boy, and this is so not how I envisioned myself meeting you for the first time.*

After a pause, he added, “I see Nick’s already welcomed you to the tour, but on behalf of all of us... welcome.” He grinned easily enough as he said it, but his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. They didn’t sparkle and crinkle up at the corners the way they did in interviews, when he was genuinely smiling, and I could see the disapproval in them.

I looked over at Nick, waiting for him to explain, but he didn’t say anything to defend my honor. I wanted to tell what had happened, but all I managed to say was, “Thanks. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

Brian nodded and turned back to Nick. “Get yourself together and meet us down in the lobby in ten.” To me, he offered a distant, “See ya later,” and then he walked out again.

As soon as the door closed, I rounded on Nick. “What was *that*!?” I cried, my voice rising shrilly. “Why didn’t you tell him we just fell asleep watching a movie? He thinks we slept together!”

Nick grinned sheepishly. “Well, technically, we did sleep together. We were on the same bed.”

I exhaled with exasperation. “You know what I mean!”

“Yeah, so? AJ already thinks we hooked up in LA. If they’re all convinced we’re sleeping together, they won’t wonder what you’re doing in my room or on my bus. It’ll make things a lot easier for us.”

“Yeah, for us to sneak around and hide your cancer. Awesome.” My voice was thick with sarcasm. “So not only am I helping you lie to your best friends, but now I have to look like a slut to do it?”

“Not a slut,” Nick corrected quickly, then flashed another impish grin. “A groupie.”

“Ugh!” I felt like crying. Maybe Nick could treat it like one big joke, but I didn’t think it was funny. I am *not* easy, and it bothered me that Brian and the other guys were going to think I was. I didn’t want to be viewed as just another groupie, another marginally-talented skank to open their show and open her legs afterwards. I wondered how many of those Girlicious girls Nick had slept with, for Brian to make that comment. “*I see Nick’s already welcomed you to the tour...*”

I glared at Nick, tears threatening. “Well, what if I don’t want to look like your groupie? What if I don’t want to sneak around behind their backs? Maybe I’ll just go explain to Brian myself, tell him the truth about *everything*.” It was an empty threat; even though I wanted to do just that, I knew I never would.

Nick seemed to know, too. For a second, the smile dropped off his face, and his eyes blazed with anger and a flash of fear, but then the smirk was back. “You wouldn’t,” he said, his eyes narrowing as they looked into mine. “You care about me too much.”

His attitude irked me. He was a stupid, selfish, pompous, pig-headed ass. “If I really cared about you, I would tell them,” I shot back. “I wouldn’t be here, helping you keep secrets, helping you kill yourself to do this tour.”

“You know, you’re cute when you’re mad,” he said, still grinning at me, acting like he hadn’t heard a single word I’d said.

I’d had enough. I turned without another word and stalked toward the door. He chased after me.

“Cary, wait! Hang on.” He caught my arm and wheeled me around to face him again. “You know I’m just messin’ with you, right?” He looked me in the eye, his face serious again. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to embarrass you or nothin’. I can tell the guys we’ve never hooked up, if you want me to. I just don’t think they’ll believe me, and if they start asking too many questions...” He trailed off, and I could see the uncertainty, the fear, in his eyes again.

I looked straight into them. “You need to tell them the truth.”

“I will, eventually. Just not yet. C’mon, Cary,” he pleaded, “we’re here; we’re so close. Let’s give this a shot and see how it goes. I got you this gig; now it’s your turn to help me.”

Had he forgotten the three weeks I’d spent being his live-in nurse, maid, and cook? *I’ve been helping you, Nick*, I thought, but I didn’t say it out loud. I knew what he meant. He’d given me the opportunity of a lifetime to tour with him, and in exchange, I’d given him my word. I couldn’t back out now. And truthfully, I didn’t want to bail. The first show was tomorrow night. I wanted to be there. But afterwards... the next day... when he was due to start his next cycle of chemo... that’s what I was dreading.

“Caaaaawee...” Nick sing-songed in this weird, high-pitched baby voice. “Pweeeeeeeeaze?” He gave me a big, cheesy grin that showed all of his teeth. He was trying to be cute again. It was endearing and obnoxious at the same time, but in the end, I guess it worked.

I sighed. “Fine. Whatever. But even if you’re not gonna tell them the whole truth, at least tell them the truth about us – that we are not sleeping together.”

“Right. We just... fell asleep... together...” Nick grinned again.

I gave him a playful push. “You’re an ass.”

“You know you love me,” he replied, still grinning. “You better go get dressed if you wanna come watch our rehearsal. You got five minutes, or we’re both dead.”

Five minutes? Five minutes to make myself presentable for the Backstreet Boys? Wonderful... just wonderful. But there was no way I was missing out on that rehearsal, so I scurried back to my own room and got ready in record time.

Okay, so it took me more like fifteen minutes than five, and Nick and I were ten minutes late in getting downstairs. I primped in the elevator, trying to fix my hair, which I'd been forced to pull back into a messy bun, and my makeup, which I'd smeared on in a matter of minutes. At least I looked better than I had when Brian had walked in on me, but that didn't make me feel much better; I was still incredibly self-conscious when I stepped out of the elevator.

It didn't help that everyone else was already in the lobby, waiting for us. "Everyone else" included not only Brian, AJ, Howie, and their tour manager, Mark, but Brian's and Howie's beautiful wives and their boys, too. Even with a diaper bag slung over her shoulder and baby James on her hip, Leigh Dorough managed to look polished and put-together. And Leighanne Littrell was so petite and cute, I felt like a giant troll in her midst. They were both incredibly sweet, though, and made me feel welcome, which took some of the awkwardness away.

AJ came over to say hi and introduce me to Howie, the only Backstreet Boy I hadn't met yet. Howie immediately put me at ease with his warm handshake and friendly smile. His whole demeanor was welcoming, rather than judgmental, and when he said it was nice to meet me, he sounded genuine. I completely understood why the fans had always called him "Sweet D."

After everyone had finished razzing Nick for being the one to oversleep and make them late, we all went outside. There was a bus waiting to take the guys to their rehearsal space and another car for the two women, who were taking the kids out for a day at the beach. I rode with the guys to the rehearsal hall, where their stage and tour set were ready to go. The four back-up dancers were there, too, and I was introduced to them as well.

It was cool to get a sneak peek of their show, but my favorite part was just watching the four guys together as they ran through their set list and practiced their choreography. Howie was focused and very serious; he rehearsed as if he were performing for a real audience. Brian was just the opposite: laidback and silly. He went through the motions and kept the crew entertained with impressions of the other guys while they sang their solos. AJ was a natural; he made everything look effortless. But I watched Nick the most. He started out strong, and the way he danced, no one could have guessed at what was going on inside his body. His moves were smooth; he oozed sexuality.

As the day wore on, though, I could see him wearing down. He tried to cover it up by messing around with Brian when he was supposed to be dancing, but even if he fooled the rest of them, he didn't fool me. "Are you okay?" I asked him in a low voice, handing him a bottle of water, when the guys came off the stage for a break.

He was out of breath and sweating profusely, but he nodded. “Fine. Just need to catch my breath.” He chugged some of the water and poured the rest over his head. Between that and the sweat, he ended up looking like he’d just stepped out of the shower.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” I warned him.

He just shook his head. “I’m not. Chillax, girl; I’m fine.”

You’re not fine, I thought, noticing the denial again, but I knew better than to say anything else.

Nick must have known he was pushing it, too, even if he wouldn’t admit it, because the next thing I knew, he was calling out to their tour manager, “Hey, Mark, how ‘bout letting Cary rehearse her set while we take a little break?”

“Yeah, let’s see the opening act,” Howie agreed almost instantly, shooting me an encouraging grin.

Thank you, Howie, I thought, smiling back. *In more ways than one*.

So I took the stage next. It wasn’t much different than rehearsing for *Idol*, but it was still intimidating to look down from the stage and see the four Backstreet Boys sitting there, staring up at me. I forced myself to focus on a spot over their heads as I ran through my three songs, afraid that making eye contact with any one of them would completely throw me off.

When I was done, they whooped and hollered and applauded, Nick the loudest. I felt myself beaming as I bounded down from the stage, flushed from the heat of the stage lights and the nervous thrill of performing in front of them. Tomorrow night, I realized, I would do this for real. I would have a whole amphitheatre of people applauding me, as I cleared the stage for the Backstreet Boys to take it.

And tomorrow night, I thought, eyeing Nick, we would all see if he was really “fine” enough to do a whole show... or not.

Chapter 27

Cary

It’s funny the way time works when you’re looking forward to something. It doesn’t count down in steady increments – or, at least, it doesn’t seem that way. It passes slowly at first, and it feels like that big day, that special moment, will never come. And

then, all of a sudden, it speeds up, and before you know it, that day, that moment, is here.

Five minutes before my first performance, I stood backstage, listening to the sound of the crowd on the other side of the curtain and thinking, *I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe I'm about to do this.*

The audience was noisy. I could hear the buzz of excited voices chattering and singing along to the dance music blasting through the theater. Even after *American Idol*, it still felt weird to be back here and not out there, the performer rather than the fan. I'd performed many times before, but this was a Backstreet Boys concert, and I was a Backstreet Boys fan. It blew my mind to think I was about to open their show. Just like when Nick had first called me to make his offer, the whole thing felt surreal.

I was hyperaware of my body, my racing heart, my shaky knees, my sweating palms. I always got super nervous before a show, and it wasn't until I started singing that I could settle down. Up until that point, I psyched myself out with horrible thoughts like, *What if I trip in these heels and totally faceplant onstage? What if my fingers are too slippery for the strings or the keys? What if I forget my lyrics, or my voice breaks?*

I was in the middle of doing this when I felt a heavy hand press down on my shoulder, and it startled me so much, I jumped in my heels. "Sorry," laughed Nick from behind me. I whirled around to see him grinning. "You doin' okay? You ready?"

He was chewing on something. He'd been grazing on the catered spread backstage all evening, whereas I'd been too nervous to eat a thing. But I remembered the steak dinner he'd taken me out for the night he'd broken the news about his cancer to me, the night before he'd started his last cycle of chemo, and I realized he was doing it again, packing away as much as he could in case he couldn't keep anything down the next day. I wondered how he could even think about the show tonight with that looming on his agenda tomorrow, but then, I'd managed to forget it for a time, too. I wished I hadn't thought of it now; it made my good-kind-of-nervous feel like a bad-kind-of-nervous. My stomach joined the rest of my body, and I felt almost sick. But I forced myself to smile tightly back and reply, "I hope so."

He squeezed my shoulder again. "You'll be fine. You'll be awesome."

"Thanks."

He flashed me another grin. "Go get 'em."

It was time. I heard the music cut off abruptly and a collective scream rise from the crowd, as the theater lights dimmed. It died down quickly once I walked out, but I still got a round of polite applause as I crossed the stage. My mic stand was set up, my ukulele waiting for me on a stool behind it. I picked it up and boosted myself onto my perch on the stool, crossing my legs at the ankles. I gave myself a second to take it all in,

staring out at the many rows of red-upholstered seats, many of them still empty. Then I started strumming.

“Broken hearts are on the mend. She’s been hurt one time too many. It’s another day, another end... to the same old story...”

I’d chosen to open with “Sweet Sunrise” because it was upbeat. I followed it with a bluesy ballad called “Medley” on my keyboard, then finished with the song I’d known this group of fans would most want to hear, my version of “Just Want You to Know” from *American Idol*.

“I’m sure you’ll already know this last song I’m about to do,” I said into the microphone before my closing number. “It’s one of my favorites, too. I performed it on this season of *American Idol*, but it belongs to the one and only BACKSTREET BOYS!” I paused for the chorus of screams I knew would come. Grinning, I added, “Thanks, guys, you’ve been a great audience. I’m Cary Hilst, and this is ‘Just Want You to Know’!”

The fans cheered as I picked up my ukulele again and sang along with me. *“Lookin’ at your picture, from when we first met... you gave me a smile, that I could never forget... and nothin’ I could do could protect me from you, that ni-i-ight...”*

I could hear their collective voice like an echo of my own, and even though I knew they were singing more out of love for the Boys than love for me, it was still cool. When I finished, they screamed and applauded louder than I’d heard them all night. I didn’t want to leave the stage, but I floated off it with my head held high, swollen with pride.

Nick was waiting in the wings, there to meet me when I came offstage. He slapped me a high five and said, “See, I told ya – you were awesome.”

I grinned and felt myself blush. “Thank you. That was amazing!”

He grinned back and nodded. “Now you get why I’m doin’ this. I gotta go get changed... I’ll catch ya after the show!” Before I could even comprehend what he meant, he wandered off to his dressing room, leaving me to come down from my performance high.

Afterwards, I thought about what he’d said. *Now you get why I’m doin’ this...* I knew I could never fully understand, but all of a sudden, I did get it, more than I had before. There was nothing like it, that feeling you got when you were onstage, performing for a crowd, knowing that you were entertaining people and hearing them cheer for you in return. Nick made people happy, and doing so made him happy, too. And he deserved to be happy. Now more than ever.

After my set, I snuck out into the theater so I could watch the Boys. Leighanne had seats near the front, far off to one side, and she'd saved me a spot next to her and Baylee. Leigh was hanging out backstage with James; she would watch from the wings.

In all my years of going to Backstreet Boys concerts, I had never been so close to the stage. When the theater went dark, the screen came on, and the countdown began, I was no longer a performer, but a fan. I screamed right along with everyone else when the four guys jumped right out of the movie screen and stood on the platform at the back of the stage, posing epically for the hundreds of cameras flashing like strobe lights. When they launched into "Everybody," I sang along, and so did Leighanne. She must have seen this show countless times already in the other countries they had toured, but she was dancing and cheering for her husband with the enthusiasm of a genuine fan. It was cute to watch.

I had always been a Brian girl, too, but this time, I found myself unable to take my eyes off of Nick. He was like a magnet, attracting my attention, drawing me in. It wasn't just concern for him that did it, either. It was the way he carried himself, the way he performed. He was so confident, so charismatic; his charm just radiated from him, and he didn't even have to open his mouth. When he did, though, it was almost magical, the way the whole crowd reacted to him. His vocals sounded strong and clear, and his dance moves were as smooth and sexy as they had been in rehearsal the day before. He was on his game tonight, and once again, he showed no sign of weakness, at least not right away.

It helped that their set list was front-loaded with three of their up-tempo, dance numbers first: "Everybody," "We've Got It Goin' On," and "PDA." After that came a couple of their classic mid-tempos, "Quit Playin' Games" and "As Long As You Love Me," and then it slowed down with a ballad section which included, "This Is Us," "Show Me the Meaning," "All I Have to Give," "She's a Dream," and "I'll Never Break Your Heart." At least that gave Nick's body a break, if not his voice.

He absolutely killed it on "This Is Us," his voice switching effortlessly between his gorgeous falsetto and rich baritone, holding his notes long and strong over the others singing the chorus. I didn't know if it was pure adrenaline or simply his experience and professionalism that made him perform like that, but now I understood how he thought he could get away with this whole scheme and fool everyone. As much as I admired his courage, it scared me.

By the end of the show, he was sweating buckets. His voice was breathier, his dance moves not nearly as sharp as they'd been in the beginning, but he made it through the encore, "Straight Through My Heart." As the guys took their final bows and stepped back through the big screen, I clapped and cheered along with the crowd around me, but I was more relieved than sad that the show was over. It had been an amazing concert, but I worried about Nick performing the hour-and-a-half-long show night after night. Even if most of the heavy dancing came at the beginning, there was choreography throughout the entire concert, and Nick had solos in nearly every song. It was going to push him to his limit and maybe even beyond.

I followed Leighanne and Baylee backstage, where the guys were celebrating. They all looked sweaty and exhausted, so Nick didn't stand out, but I could tell he was tired. He still managed to grin when he saw me and asked, "So how'd you like the show?"

I smiled back. "It was awesome! I'm impressed," I replied, giving him a meaningful look. "You were great."

He smirked in a way that said, "*I told you so,*" but all he said was, "Thanks. I'm going to shower and get changed for the after party."

I stared after him as he retreated to his dressing room, thinking, *After party? Are you kidding?*

He wasn't kidding. It was after two in the morning when we finally made it back to the hotel.

I was dead tired myself, so I couldn't even imagine how Nick must be feeling. I hadn't slept well the night before, kept awake by my nerves, but I was sure I'd sleep like a rock that night. I peeled off my clothes and pulled on a pair of pajamas the minute I stepped into my hotel room, and I was just climbing into bed when my cell phone went off.

Groaning, I rolled back off the bed and dug it out of my purse. The screen was lit up with a text from Nick. All it said was, *Come over.*

Right now? I sent back. *Why?*

The reply was so short, it scared me: *Please.*

Thinking something must be wrong, I dropped the phone on my bed, grabbed my room key, and padded barefoot out of my room and down the hall to his. I knocked lightly, and Nick opened the door right away. I looked him up and down as he stepped back to let me in. He had changed out of his club attire, too; he was wearing a pair of baggy sleep shorts, low on his hips, and a white t-shirt. He looked perfectly fine.

"What's going on?" I asked, as the door closed behind me. "Are you okay?"

He grunted in reply and motioned vaguely over his shoulder, turning away from me. I followed him further into the suite and saw that he had spread his chemotherapy supplies out across his bed. I blinked in surprise.

"Now? You want to do this now?"

He shrugged. "I wanna get it over with. This first shit takes twenty-four hours, so the sooner we start it, the sooner it's out of my system."

I looked over the chemo schedule his doctor had typed up. The first day of this cycle was intense: two thousand milligrams of methotrexate, given intravenously over twenty-four hours, along with two fifty-milligram doses of a steroid called methylprednisolone. The huge dose of methotrexate was so potent that I'd have to spend the next three days pumping him full of other drugs that would counteract its side effects and prevent it from damaging his organs along with the cancer cells it was killing.

I sighed. "I get that, but it's two a.m., Nick. I'm tired, and so are you. We both had a few drinks at the club – which, by the way, probably wasn't such a good idea. Chemo and alcohol – not a good combination. Let's just wait till morning."

"No," he persisted, stubborn as ever. "If we wait, I'll feel like shit all day *and* all night and wake up still feeling shitty on the day of the show. If we start it now, I'll still feel like shit the rest of the day, but I can sleep it off and hopefully feel okay by Monday."

My exasperation with him turned to sympathy. He seemed to have resigned himself to feeling like crap over the next day or so, which was a change from his usual denial. "Was it bad the last time?" I asked, and he nodded. I couldn't help but wonder aloud, "What would you do if we had a show tomorrow?"

Nick shrugged. "I dunno. Doesn't matter; we don't."

He was just lucky it had worked out that way. We had most Sundays off, so even though the tour had just started, the next show wasn't until Monday night in Clearwater. We could sleep in at the hotel before boarding the tour buses for the five-hour drive north later in the day.

"Alright," I finally agreed, sighing to show him I wasn't exactly thrilled about it. I looked around the room. "Where do you wanna do this?"

"Right here's fine," said Nick. He stripped off his t-shirt and stretched out flat on the other side of the bed. He folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. He looked totally relaxed at first, but when I came around to his side, I could see the lines of tension in his face.

"You know, if I was still working in a hospital, I'd be suspended for working on a patient with any trace of alcohol in my system," I remarked, as I got set up. "You sure you want me to do this?"

"It's not like you're doin' surgery on me," he replied, without opening his eyes. "Just don't pierce my heart with that needle or nothin'."

"Just don't sue me if I do," I shot back, hardly missing a beat. Finally, his eyes flew open. I smirked at the flicker of fear I saw in them. "Kidding."

"Not funny," he said, smirking back. "Just get that sucker in, or I'll do it myself."

"Now that's a scary thought," I laughed. I would never have attempted any procedure more involved than this after a couple of drinks, but really, hooking up the IV was simple, and I felt completely fine, not even buzzed. If anything, the liquor made me more relaxed than usual. My hand was steady as it inserted the needle into his port. I checked and double-checked all the labels on his medications before I administered them – a sodium bicarbonate tablet to help flush the chemo through his kidneys, an injection of Zofran to help with nausea, and finally, the chemo drip itself.

When the portable pump was up and running, I fit it into the little pouch I had made him, the one that looked like a Nintendo controller, and set it on the bedside table. "There," I said. "You're all set."

"Good," Nick mumbled. His eyes were closed again. "Hopefully I can fall asleep before it hits."

"Want me to tuck you in?" I asked jokingly.

"Sure," he replied, sounding completely serious. He didn't get up, but rolled over onto his side so that I could turn down the covers on that side of the bed. So, I did. He rolled back over, and I wrangled the sheet and bedspread out from under his long legs and pulled them up over the top, taking care to make sure they didn't get tangled with the thin IV line as I smoothed them over his chest.

"There, big guy," I said, feeling like a true nurse again. "Are you comfortable?"

He nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." I hesitated. "If you don't mind, I better stick around for a few minutes and make sure everything's okay." I was afraid to go off and leave him alone. What if the line clogged, or he had a bad reaction?

"Sure, whatever," he said. He folded his arms over the top of his covers, as if he were hugging himself. He never opened his eyes. Looking down at him, I was filled with tenderness and sympathy. Gone was the charismatic performer who sexed up the stage with his moves and his vocals and his sultry little smirks. Tucked into bed like this, with his eyes closed and his arms crossed, he looked like a little boy, worn out after a long day of playing.

I settled quietly back into a chair, watching him. I'd hoped he would sleep through the night, like he had wished, while the chemo slowly poisoned his body. But within half an hour, he was already up and out of bed, barricaded in the bathroom. I stood outside the closed door, feeling helpless as I listened to the sounds of him getting sick on the other side.

Chapter 28

Cary

I knocked lightly on the bathroom door. “Nick? Can I come in?”

A few seconds passed before he answered. Finally, I heard his muffled voice say, “Just go back to your room, Cary. You don’t wanna be here for this.” He sounded miserable.

“Trust me, I’ve seen worse.”

Puke doesn’t bother me. Working in a nursing home, I’ve gotten used to the various unpleasant odors the human body emits. As far as excrements go, I’d take vomit over urine, feces, or pus any day. Once you’ve lanced an infected bedsore, changed a pair of soiled Depends, or put in a foley catheter for a patient who’s lost control of her bladder, vomit is like cake. (Partially digested cake, mixed with stomach acid.) Seriously, though, to me, the sound of it is worse than the sight or smell.

So just standing outside the door, listening to him throw up and not doing anything to help, was killing me. But, as much as I respected his privacy, I wasn’t about to go to bed and just leave him, either.

“I’m coming in,” I announced, and tried the knob. I knew he hadn’t had time to lock it, and sure enough, it turned in my hand. I opened the door, and there was Nick, slumped on the bathroom floor in front of the toilet, one hand gripping the seat for support while he hung his head over the bowl. He wasn’t actually vomiting anymore, but he must have been nauseous enough to still feel on the verge of it, because he didn’t even look up when I let myself in.

Without a word, I turned on the faucet and ran the water until it was warm. I wet one of the hotel’s white washcloths and rung it out so it was merely damp and not dripping. “Thanks,” Nick croaked when I handed it to him, using it to wipe his mouth.

“Sure. How about some water?”

He shrugged. “Not sure if I can keep it down.”

“You should at least try. You need to stay hydrated.” I turned on the cold water and filled a plastic cup for him. He took a tentative sip, swishing it around in his mouth before swallowing.

Almost instantly, he gagged and started retching again, his upper body seeming to convulse with the force of it as he pulled himself up onto his knees and leaned over the toilet bowl. The water came right back up again, along with the drinks he’d had at the club and whatever else was left in his stomach. I ran the faucet again to mask the sound of it splashing into the toilet water and rinsed the washcloth. Once he’d been reduced to

dry heaves, I sat down on the rim of the bathtub next to him and put my hand on his back, rubbing it as soothingly as I could until the heaves subsided, too.

“So much for that Zofran, huh?” I sighed, giving him back the damp cloth.

“Ugh,” he groaned, swiping his mouth with it and setting it aside. “If the cancer doesn’t kill me, this shit’s going to.”

My heart broke for him. It was terrible, watching him get sick and knowing how bad he must have felt, wishing there was something more I could do and feeling helpless because there wasn’t. I’d already given him the prescribed dose of antiemetic; it had been in his system for at least half an hour. If that hadn’t worked, there wasn’t much else that would. The vomiting was his body’s natural response to the chemicals that were essentially poisoning it. “I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I wish I could make it stop. What else can I do?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. You should go to bed. It’s late.”

“I’m not gonna leave you here like this,” I insisted. Then I got an idea. “I’m just gonna go get some ice. Can I take your key so I can let myself back in?”

“It’s on the dresser.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

I found the key card and his ice bucket and took both with me down the hall and around the corner to the ice machine. There were several vending machines there, as well, which gave me another idea. I filled the bucket, then went back to my own room to get a few dollar bills out of my wallet. When I returned to Nick’s suite a few minutes later, I was carrying not only the bucket of ice, but two bottles of Gatorade and a roll of peppermints.

“Maybe this will help,” I said, setting everything down on the bathroom counter. “Peppermints are supposed to help soothe your stomach.” I peeled off the wrapper around the mints. “And you should try drinking some Gatorade, if you can keep it down, so you don’t get dehydrated. It’s got electrolytes in it, so it’s better than water for replacing fluids. If it won’t stay down, you can suck on ice chips.”

Nick managed a weak smile. “Thanks, Nurse Cary,” he said sarcastically, but I knew he meant it.

I gave him a mint, and he sucked on that for awhile. When a few minutes had passed without him getting sick again, I held up the two bottles of Gatorade. “Yellow or blue?”

“Blue,” he decided. I twisted open the cap and handed him the bottle. He took a sip and swallowed thoughtfully. “If I puke this up, it’ll look like that blue crap they put in toilet water,” he said.

I laughed. "Lovely."

I took the humor as a sign that he was starting to feel better, and sure enough, after a few more minutes had passed, he picked himself up from the floor tiles. "Maybe I'll try to go back to bed."

"Good idea." I followed him out of the bathroom. "I better hang out for awhile, just in case." With the way he tended to sleep on his back, I worried about him choking on his vomit while he slept.

He nodded, climbing back into bed. He set the chemo pump back in its place on the bedside table and lay down, pulling the covers up around him. The lights were all off, except for a lamp in the corner. I left it on, in case he needed to get up again. But this time, he lay still, and after awhile, I heard his breathing deepen and even out.

Relieved that he was finally asleep, but not reassured that he wouldn't aspirate, I fought sleep myself. I was utterly drained, but I didn't dare go back to my room and leave him alone the rest of the night. So I curled up on the loveseat and spent the rest of the night there.

Nick was still asleep when I woke up. I had no idea what time it was; with the blackout shades pulled down over the windows, it was still dark in the room, except for the lone lamp we'd left on in the corner. It felt like I'd been sleeping a long time, though. My back and legs felt stiff, as I rolled off the tiny loveseat I'd slept on and stood up, stretching gratefully.

I crept over to Nick's bedside, checking the time on the alarm clock. Sure enough, it was going on nine o'clock. The sun had been up for hours. I looked down at Nick. He was sleeping on his side, clutching one of his pillows like a security blanket. For a few seconds, I watched the covers rise and fall as he breathed; then I checked the chemo pump to make sure the drip was still working. Everything seemed fine. If he had gotten up in the night to throw up, I'd slept right through it, but I didn't think he had. I'm a pretty light sleeper, especially in a strange place, on an uncomfortable piece of furniture. I would have woken up. I was relieved he had managed to sleep through the night. Maybe, after the initial shock, his body had adjusted to the chemo. Hopefully, today would be better.

The hotel had a continental breakfast until ten, so I decided I would get dressed and go down to grab some breakfast. I snagged Nick's room key again, so I could let myself back in without waking him, and snuck out of the room. Well, I tried to sneak, anyway. But I took so much care to make sure the door closed absolutely quietly, I didn't pay any attention to the elevator when it dinged at the end of our floor or the soft footsteps coming up the carpeted hallway. When I turned around, there was Howie, sauntering towards his room with a big plate of breakfast and an even bigger grin on his face.

“Good morning, Cary,” he said cheerfully, winking at me.

I felt my face heat up. *Oh my god, are you kidding me??* was my inner reaction. Had this really just happened again? “Morning!” I squeaked.

“Sleep well?” he asked, a hint of teasing in his tone. Far from Brian’s look of disapproval, Howie just looked amused.

Great, now it was official: all of the Backstreet Boys thought Nick and I had hooked up. And if they thought so, then their wives would think so, and soon, the whole tour would know. Or *think* they knew, anyway. But maybe Nick had a point; maybe it would be better if that was all they thought was going on. I couldn’t imagine how much it would hurt them to know what was really happening. And even if I thought they *should* know, I wasn’t going to be the one to tell them. That was up to Nick.

So, I played along. “Eh... not really. We were up pretty late. I’m sore now,” I added, giggling, as I rubbed my lower back. The funny thing was, it was all the truth, but I knew Howie would take it to mean something completely different.

He laughed, wrinkling up his nose. “Oookay, sorry I asked!” But he grinned and added, “See you later, Cary,” as he walked past me.

I finished the walk of shame to my room without running into anyone else – not that it would have mattered, at that point. I had just solidified my role as the next gold-digging fame whore to seduce Nick Carter – in their minds, at least. I tried not to let that bother me, but of course, it did. I felt almost sick with disappointment as I slowly took off my pajamas and pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. I dragged a brush through my unruly hair, trying to tame it as much as possible before pulling it back into a bushy ponytail. Then I crammed on a pair of flip-flops and trudged downstairs.

I could smell bacon when I stepped out of the elevator in the hotel lobby. I followed the scent all the way into the dining room, where a big breakfast buffet was set up. That cheered me up a little. I was on my way across the room to get into the serving line, when I heard someone call my name. “Cary?”

I looked all around for someone I recognized, until I spotted a couple of girls waving enthusiastically at me. I’d never seen them before in my life. But I noticed that they were wearing Backstreet Boys t-shirts, so I walked over to their table. “Hi,” I said, offering what I hoped was a friendly smile.

“Oh my gosh, it is you!” gushed the girl in the white “Straight Through My Heart” tee, turning to her friend. “See, I told you it was her!”

“We loved your performance last night!” the other girl added, equally gushy. “You are so lucky you get to tour with BSB! You like their music, right?”

This time, I smiled easily. “Love it!” I replied. “I’ve been a fan of them forever. And thank you; that means a lot!”

“Sure! I thought you did; I watched you on *American Idol*,” said the first girl. “It was great to see someone perform one of the Boys’ songs on the show. Doesn’t happen very often.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I wanted to show them some love.”

The girls both grinned. “So what’s it like being on tour with them? Do you get to actually, like, hang out with them much?” asked the second girl, who was wearing a black tour shirt.

“Oh my gosh, we just saw Howie!” interrupted her friend, before I could think of how to answer. “He came down right before you did! We got him to come over and talk to us for a few minutes, too, and he was sooo nice! He signed my shirt, see?” She twisted around in her chair so I could see Howie’s autograph on her back. “I always carry a Sharpie in my purse when I go to concerts, just in case. It finally paid off! Hey, will you sign it, too?”

“Yeah, sure!” I replied, caught by surprise. The girl whipped a black marker out of her purse and handed it to me. I came around behind her and scrawled my name opposite Howie’s. It felt surreal to be signing autographs on the same canvas as a Backstreet Boy.

“Thank you so much!” she squealed.

“Can we get a picture with you?” asked the friend, without missing a beat. She looked at her friend. “Get out your camera!”

“Oh, yeah, good idea!” The girl scrambled to find her camera in her bag.

“Sure,” I agreed, laughing. They got up and found someone at a nearby table to take the picture, and the three of us posed with our arms around each other, me in the middle. I put on a big smile as the camera flashed in my face.

“Thank you sooo much!” both girls gushed, as they released me.

“Sure, no problem. It was nice to meet you,” I replied, taking a step away and hoping they’d let me leave without talking my ear off.

They took the cue and replied, “You too!!” Then they sat back down at their table, while I went to get in line at the buffet. I couldn’t keep the smile off my face; the fan encounter had cheered me up a lot. I wondered if Nick still got that feeling when he met fans, or if he found the whole thing old and annoying by now. I would have to ask him sometime.

I made my way through the serving line, filling up two plates. One I piled high with scrambled eggs, bacon and sausage links, and hash browns. On the other, I put only bland foods – a bran muffin, a couple pieces of dry toast, a miniature box of Corn Flakes. Hopefully, Nick would be able to keep something down. I had no more hands left to carry drinks, but that was okay; Nick could drink the rest of the Gatorade, and I could make coffee in the room.

I let myself back into Nick's suite, juggling the two plates, which I set down on the table in the corner. "Whatcha got?" a deep voice asked, and I nearly jumped. Spinning around, I saw that Nick was sitting up in bed, looking like he'd just woken up, but awake, nonetheless.

"Breakfast," I said, smiling. "Do you feel like eating?"

He considered this for a moment. "Yeah, I'll try," he agreed finally.

I brought over the plate with the muffin and cereal. "Try some of this first. If you think you can handle more, I'll share my bacon and eggs."

"Ohh, I see how it is," he joked, eyeing my plate on the other side of the room. "You get all the good stuff and bring me the tasteless crap."

I laughed. "Let's just see if you can keep this down."

He nodded, nibbling at his toast. "You know the one good thing about this chemo schedule?" he asked, chewing thoughtfully.

"What?"

"That other stuff you gave me, the other m-named one, is a steroid, right? So it's supposed to give me, like, a crazy appetite and make me gain all kinds of weight. Except that methotrexate shit makes me sick to my stomach so I can't eat. So they kinda cancel each other out, right?"

I smiled. "Sounds like my idea of torture, feeling hungry and nauseous at the same time, but glad you can see the positive side of things."

He chuckled. "That's me, always lookin' on the bright side," he said sarcastically. "Seriously, this whole thing is like one big contradiction. I'm sick with cancer, but the treatment makes me sicker. It makes no fucking sense."

"It's helping, too, though," I pointed out. Now it was my turn to be optimistic. "Your tests in the hospital showed that it's working. So it's worth it, right?"

"I guess." He took another bite of toast, brushing crumbs off his bare chest. I saw his fingers hesitate near the port, where the thin IV line snaked out and all the way over to

the pump on his bedside table. He was looking down at it in disgust. “They need to just find a better way to cure it, once and for all.”

I nodded, and out of nowhere, I thought of my mother. “You’re right,” I said, swallowing the lump that had risen in my throat. “They do.”

“You should get on that, Cary. Put all that medical training to good use.” He winked at me. “I’ll record a charity single to fund your research, and you discover the cure for cancer, okay?”

I laughed. “Okay, Nick. Sounds like a plan. I’ll get right on that.” *If only it were that simple*, I thought.

Chapter 29

Cary

Checkout at the hotel was at eleven, so after breakfast, I returned to my own room to shower and pack up my stuff. Then I went back to Nick’s suite to help him with his. He hadn’t thrown up again, but he was still nauseous and weak, like he had the stomach flu.

“This sucks,” he griped, sitting on the bed while I made sure all of the medical supplies were packed away in his suitcase. “My brother called and wanted to hang out today, but I told him we were on a tight schedule... which is total bullshit. He’s gonna think I just don’t wanna see him.”

“You could tell him the truth,” I replied off-handedly.

“No,” Nick said flatly. “My family’s got enough drama already. Mostly self-created, but still. The last thing they need is to worry about me. I’m the one they *don’t* worry about, the one who’s supposed to have it all together.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I couldn’t imagine going through this without my family around.”

“Yeah, well... I’m sure your family ain’t like mine. You got any brothers or sisters?”

“Only child.” I’d always wished that wasn’t the case, but my mom hadn’t been able to have any more children after me. It was actually through trying and failing to get pregnant a second time that she found out she was sick. After that, there was no chance of me getting a little brother or sister.

"You're lucky. I love my brother and sisters, but they got screwed over having me as their big brother. Aaron's always been compared to me, and the girls just got neglected. They resent me for it."

"I dunno... I always wanted a little sister," I said. "I think you're the lucky one." I could have gone on, but I wasn't out to guilt trip him. He felt bad enough already. "There," I said, zipping up the suitcase. "I think we're all ready. Are you?"

He stood up and held out his arms. "I dunno, what do you think? Can you see anything?"

I looked. He had fastened the pouch with the chemo pump around his torso, underneath a baggy t-shirt. Over that, he wore a plaid button-down, hanging open. The loose layers of clothing worked perfectly; I couldn't see any weird bulges. "Nope," I said, giving him a thumbs up. "You look fine."

"Awesome." He still checked his reflection in the mirror one more time before we headed out. Then we made our way slowly down to the ground level and outside, where the fleet of tour buses were parked. I was supposed to be sharing a bus with the four back-up dancers, but Nick said, "Just get on my bus."

I didn't argue. There was no point. Now that everyone thought we were an item, it made sense for me to ride on his bus, and of course, it would make it much easier to administer the rest of his chemo. So I boarded the bus with him.

"Swanky," I said, looking around, as he gave me a quick tour. The tour bus had its own lounge and kitchenette, a bathroom with a shower, and plenty of bunks, each with their own TV suspended from the ceiling.

"I've got Xbox in mine," Nick pointed out. "If you're nice, maybe I'll let you play with me."

I giggled. "No Wii?"

"It's in the lounge. You can't exactly play Wii in one of these bunks," he replied seriously. I raised my eyebrows in surprise; I had only been joking about the Wii. He chuckled at the look on my face. "Hey, don't forget, you're on the Backstreet tour now, baby. We travel in style. Lifestyles of the rich and Nicky."

His attempt at a stuffy British accent made me giggle again. But I was definitely impressed. "And they don't even make you and AJ share?" I could understand why Howie and Brian each got their own bus; they had their families with them. But it seemed a little extravagant for Nick and AJ to each have a bus all to himself.

"Nah... Rochelle's coming out in another week or so, and trust me—" he snorted, "-you don't wanna share a bus with those two."

I laughed. “I’ll take your word for it.”

When everyone else had apparently made it onto their buses, we pulled away from the hotel. Before long, we were on the interstate, cutting across Florida to the Gulf coast. “Clearwater’s near where you grew up, isn’t it?” I asked Nick. We were sitting in the front lounge, and I kept looking out the big, tinted windows. The urban landscape of Miami, dotted with palm trees and set against a backdrop of brilliant blue sky, didn’t look much different from LA, but it was a far cry from where I lived.

“Bout an hour from Ruskin, yeah,” he replied. “It ain’t as pretty as Miami and the Keys, but it’s nice. I’ll always be a Florida boy at heart.” He smiled faintly, settling back on the leather couch. I could tell he knew Florida well. After awhile, he said, “We’re in the Everglades now.”

I looked out the window again. The buildings and suburban neighborhoods were gone, replaced by uninhabited swampland. A shiver of excitement ran through me, as I imagined alligators lurking in the narrow creek that ran parallel to the highway and god-knocks-what skulking among the thick trees.

As if he’d read my mind – or maybe he’d just seen it in my face – Nick grinned wickedly and said, “This is where Skunk Ape lives, you know.”

I laughed and asked, “Skunk Ape?”

“Yeah, you know... Skunk Ape. He’s like the Bigfoot of the swamps. Haven’t you seen him on *MonsterQuest*? He supposedly rolls around in dead animal carcasses to get people to leave him alone, and that’s why he stinks so... bad...” Nick trailed off, the boyish grin fading from his face, which had gotten a little green around the gills. “Ugh... fuck...” he groaned and scrambled up from the couch. He staggered off to the bathroom in the back of the bus, and I cringed when I heard the unmistakable sounds of him throwing up again.

When he didn’t come back, I wandered to the back of the bus and found him on his knees, gripping the sides of the toilet again as if he were afraid to let go. It didn’t help that it was a lot bouncier back here; I felt the bus rocking over the road and the floor vibrating beneath me as I sank down beside Nick. His skin was all clammy; I could feel the cold sweat soaking through his t-shirt when I patted his back.

“Ugh... think anyone would believe I’m bus sick?” he asked miserably, his voice hoarse from the strain of vomiting.

I smiled. “You don’t have to tell anyone anything right now. Maybe you should try to lie down again.”

“Yeah... okay...” He pulled himself up slowly and flushed the tiny bus toilet. Down went the little bit of breakfast he’d managed to eat that morning. I worried again about him getting dehydrated.

When he was settled in his bunk, I brought him back another sodium bicarbonate tablet and a bottle of Gatorade to wash it down with. “Drink slowly,” I warned him, “but try to get it down.”

He sipped, and the Gatorade stayed down. “Wake me up on Wednesday,” he mumbled, and rolled over.

I stretched out in the bunk across from his, hoping to get a cat nap in myself. But instead, I lay awake, staring up at the bottom of the bunk above mine and worrying, as usual. I seemed to do a lot more worrying than Nick did, which didn’t seem fair at all. This was his stupid plan, and I was the one giving myself an ulcer over it. He didn’t seem overly concerned that he had a show tomorrow night and another one on Tuesday – both chemo days, although not as intense as this one. Wednesday was another day off, so he would be able to recuperate some then, but his body would take a lot longer than that to recover from the chemo.

Halfway to Clearwater, we stopped for lunch. I watched the others emerge from their buses and looked back at Nick, who was zonked out in his bunk. I didn’t want to wake him up, but I wondered if he’d want me to. He was so determined to act like everything was normal, and it definitely wouldn’t look normal if he hid out on his bus while everyone else ate lunch together. Besides, I thought he should try to eat or at least drink something.

I leaned into his bunk, and just as I was about to give him a poke, I heard a deep voice call into the bus, “Yo, Carter! Where are you, man?”

It was AJ. “Nick,” I hissed, “wake up.”

“Huh?” Nick sat up sleepily, bumping his head on the top of the bunk. “Fuck!” he swore, ducking under it and rubbing his head.

“Dude, haven’t you learned by now?” AJ appeared in the doorway, snickering. “We need to put a sign on your bunk, like they have in those old castles in Europe... ‘Mind your head.’” He smirked when he saw me. “What hanky-panky have you two been up to back here?”

I flushed red, but Nick just scowled and snapped, “Sleeping! And *not* together, okay?” He shot me a meaningful look, which I appreciated, after what had happened Friday morning. But I hadn’t had a chance to tell him, the damage was already done.

AJ started cackling. “Riiiiight. That’s not what D heard this morning! How ya doin’ there, Cary?” He grinned like the Cheshire Cat. “A little sore, are we, after the old Carter workout?”

Nick looked over at me again, this time in utter bewilderment. I felt my face getting hotter, but I tried to keep my dignity. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“Glad to hear it. So, are you two gonna break for lunch, or what? You’re gonna need some fuel to keep up your stamina.” He was loving this.

“Where are we?” Nick asked, ignoring the last comment.

“Fort Myers. C’mon, I’m fuckin’ starving.”

“Alright... coming,” said Nick, sighing heavily. I gave him a questioning look as he dragged himself out of his bunk, wondering how he was feeling, but there wasn’t much either of us could say with AJ around. We followed him off the bus, blinking as our eyes adjusted to the bright afternoon sun.

We were parked at a Marathon gas station, along with several of the other buses. The rest of the fleet had stopped at the Circle K across the street. There were restaurants all around us – everything from fast food places like Chick-Fil-A, McDonald’s, and Taco Bell, to sit down restaurants like Applebee’s, Bob Evans, and Steak ‘N’ Shake. I could see the sign for Wal-Mart in one direction and Target in another. It was weird, but for a moment, I almost felt like I was home again. I hadn’t seen a Wal-Mart or a Steak ‘N’ Shake since I’d left Illinois.

Brian and Howie came strolling over with their families in tow, Leigh carrying James. “Where we headed?” Brian asked, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand as he looked around.

“Well, you know where AJ’s gonna pick,” said Howie, pointing to the golden arches in the distance.

Brian made a face. “Yeah... no. How about Applebee’s?” he suggested, looking in the same direction. “Good variety, classier than Mickey D’s?”

“That sounds good,” Leighanne instantly agreed.

“Fine with us,” Howie said, and Leigh nodded. “Can you live with that, AJ?”

“Sure, sure, that’s fine,” AJ replied, sighing loftily. “Maybe I’ll just get my Mickey D’s to go and bring it in.”

Brian snorted. “Now *that’s* classy.”

“Are you guys okay with Applebee’s?” Howie asked Nick and me.

I looked at Nick. He was staring off into the distance – just spacing out, I thought at first, but then I realized what he was looking at. Across the street, cattycorner from the gas station, was a large, modern-looking building placed at the edge of a huge parking lot. I quickly recognized it as a hospital, and so had Nick. *Regional Cancer Center* was

spelled out in white letters on the side of the building. A lump rose in my throat as I read the words.

“Hello? Earth to Nick?”

“Come in, Nick, come in,” Brian chimed in, doing a muffled radio voice.

Nick finally snapped out of it. “What?” he asked, sounding annoyed.

“Lunch? Applebee’s?”

“Oh – yeah, whatever. Cool with me.”

I didn’t miss the odd looks the other guys gave him, but it must have been fairly normal for Nick to zone out on them, because no one commented. Still, as we started walking in the direction of the Applebee’s sign, I couldn’t help but think that Nick was going to have to step it up in the acting department if he didn’t want them to start asking questions. It was obvious something was bothering him. I wished he would just tell them what it was.

“Are you okay?” I asked him in a low voice, as we fell behind the others.

“I’ll be fine,” he replied, back to his usual stubborn denial.

We walked on in silence. Of course, the restaurant they’d picked had to be the furthest one away, and by the time we got inside, we were all sweating just from being out in the ninety-degree heat. While everyone else was flushed, though, Nick just looked pale.

The hostess seated us around a large table in the private back room, typically reserved for parties. I was relieved when the waiter came right away to take our drink orders. “We’ll both have water,” I ordered for Nick and myself, before he could get a word in. “Lots of ice, please.”

The waiter brought our drinks, and within a few minutes of sipping ice water, some of the color came back into Nick’s face. I still worried about him, though. I wondered what he would do if he got nauseous here at the table. What excuse would he make if he had to keep running off to the bathroom?

He ordered grilled chicken with a side of steamed veggies, and while everyone else smiled at him with approval, thinking he was just making a healthy choice, I knew he was going for the blandest thing on the menu. He was quiet while we waited for our food, but there was so much other talking going around the table, no one really noticed. Baylee and James, in particular, kept everyone entertained. Baylee was Brian’s Mini-Me, in personality as much as in looks, and James was absolutely adorable. He could only say a few words, but he made up for Nick’s lack of conversation with plenty of baby talk.

Nick excused himself once before the food came and once afterward. When he came back the second time, AJ said loudly, "You got the shits or somethin', Carter?"

"AJ!" hissed Leighanne, tossing her head toward her son. "Children!"

"Ummm! You said a bad word, Uncle AJ," Baylee chimed in gleefully.

"Yeah, I did. My bad. Bad Uncle AJ," AJ reprimanded himself. "I should have said 'runs.' Or 'squirts.'"'

"Squirts," repeated Baylee, giggling.

AJ snickered. "Or 'water butt.'"

"Water butt!" Baylee shouted and started laughing like a hyena. This made James squeal with laughter and slap the sides of his high chair, which cracked everyone else up, too. Everyone except Nick, who had turned red.

"I think I ate somethin' bad yesterday," he mumbled. "I've been sick to my stomach all day."

"Really?" said Howie, with a look of mild concern. "I've felt okay. What about you guys?" He glanced around the table, and everyone else shrugged and nodded, indicating that they hadn't had any trouble.

"I hope it's not a stomach virus!" Leighanne exclaimed, shuddering.

"Nah, I'm sure it's nothin'," Nick said dismissively. "I'll be fine."

Well, at least he'd admitted he didn't feel well so they would leave him alone. I just wondered what he would say next time. Eventually, he would run out of excuses, as the chemo kept taking its toll on him. Maybe then, he would finally realize what I'd known all along: sooner or later, he was going to have to tell the guys the truth.

Chapter 30

Nick

So it had started. One show down. Twenty-four more to go.

What the hell was I thinking??

The night of our second concert, I stood in front of the mirror in my dressing room, staring down my reflection. I was dressed in my outfit for the opening of the show –

black pants, white shirt, black vest. It was a good thing I'd been able to ditch the chemo pump; there was no way I would have been able to hide it under that tight vest. The pump was gone, for now, and on the outside, I looked ready. But the drugs were still in my system, and on the inside, I didn't feel ready at all.

The nausea had finally passed, thank god, but my stomach still hurt, maybe just from the act of throwing up. It's a good ab workout, I guess, but it takes a lot out of you. I was tired. Not just running-on-a-few-hours-of-sleep-'cause-I-was-out-too-late-partying-last-night-and-now-I've-got-a-raging-hangover tired, but can't-even-drag-myself-out-of-bed-so-just-kill-me-now-and-put-me-out-of-my-misery tired. I was tired from my head to my feet, tired all the way down into my bones. I was exhausted. Fatigued was the right word. I hadn't known the true meaning of it until now, until I tried to imagine performing an hour-and-a-half-long show feeling as tired as I did.

But what choice did I have? I couldn't exactly say, "Hey, fellas, mind if we cancel the show? I'm just too tired to sing and dance tonight." There were only two options: tell them the truth, the whole truth, about how I was feeling and why, or not say a damn thing, suck it up, and just go out there and give it all I had.

Frankly, I didn't think I had all that much to give, but I wasn't ready to throw in the towel yet either. It was only our second show. I hadn't hidden this as long as I had, as well as I had, to give up after only one show. I had known all along this wouldn't be easy, and I was determined to prove to Cary and Dr. Submarine and to *myself* that I could do it. That I didn't have to curl up and die just because I had cancer.

I thought of all the times I'd performed with the flu or a cold or a hangover. I thought of the shows I'd done in Asia with a giant tumor in my chest, thinking it was my heart, not having a clue it was cancer. The tumor was smaller now; I was better. There was nothing wrong with me; it was just the damn chemo, wearing me out. Fuck that.

"Yeah, that's right," I muttered, glaring at myself in the mirror. "Fuck you. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you." Then I cracked a can of Red Bull and chugged it, as fast as I could. Not exactly a smart move, considering I'd spent the better part of the previous day either throwing up or trying not to, but I was willing to risk it for the rush I knew it would give me.

I figured Cary wouldn't approve; she kept pushing the water and Gatorade on me, insisting I was going to get dehydrated. But there were a lot dumber things I could do, and have done. Blow, for instance. That's the pick-me-up I was really craving, a good long line of coke. But I'd stopped that shit two years ago, and I definitely wasn't stupid enough to pick up the habit again. I was already a cancer victim; I didn't need to be a crack addict too.

The Red Bull had the effect I was hoping for; I could feel the caffeine soaking into my system, revving me up. *You can do this*, I told my reflection, looking myself in the eye. I could see the fatigue there, but also the intensity. I was a performer, not a patient. I wasn't going to lie down; I was gonna get out there and dance.

I got out my iPod and crammed the ear buds into my ears. I scrolled through the thousands of tunes in my playlist until I found the one I was looking for. Then I hit play and turned up the volume, bobbing my head in time to the dead string guitar riff. It was impossible not to get pumped up to this song, right? I did my best air guitar in the mirror, loosening up a little, and lip-synched the lyrics. *"Risin' up, back on the street... did my time, took my chances. Went the distance, now I'm back on my feet, just a man and his will to survive... So many times, it happens too fast... you trade your passion for glory. Don't lose your grip on the dreams of the past; you must fight just to keep them alive..."*

Yeah, I know – I'm a nerd. Whatever works, right?

"It's the... eye of the tiger, it's the thrill of the fight, risin' up to the challenge of our rival... and the last known survivor stalks his prey in the night, and he's watching us all with the eye... of the tiger..."

I tried jogging in place a little, to get my blood pumping, push that liquid energy through my body. It just made my head hurt.

Over the music, I heard pounding on the dressing room door. I ripped the headphones out of my ears just in time to hear AJ yell, "Whaddya doin' in there, jackin' off? Let's go, Carter!"

Apparently, it was almost show time. I shut off my iPod, set it aside, and opened the door. "Just checkin' out my six pack," I retorted, puffing out my chest.

AJ jabbed his finger into my gut and snickered when I winced. "Rock solid," he replied sarcastically. I guess that's what I get for being a douchebag.

"Whatever, Bone; you know you're just jealous of my sexy body." It felt awesome to not be the fat Backstreet Boy anymore. Usually I just ripped on AJ about his hairline, but I didn't want to jinx myself. Just because the chemo hadn't made me bald yet didn't mean it still couldn't. I hadn't exactly figured out how I was going to keep icing my head on the tour bus.

AJ led the way through the backstage area, until we got to where everyone – the guys and their families, the dancers, the crew – was gathered for the prayer we always said before the show. We circled up, joined hands, and bowed our heads, as Howie led the prayer. He and Brian usually took turns doing it; they never asked me. I wouldn't have known what to say. But Howie did a good job of it, thanking God for our talents and asking Him to watch over us and our dancers and crew and the fans in the audience.

Please, God, just let me get through the show, I added internally, squeezing my eyes shut, as if that would help me pray harder. *And if you could cure me of cancer while you're at it, that'd be nifty. Thanks, God.* "Amen," I muttered out loud, along with everyone else. Then we piled up our hands and counted off.

“One...”

“Two...”

“Three...”

“Four...”

“BACKSTREET!” we chanted together, before breaking. Everyone ran to their places, and the four of us got fit with our earpieces and mics and snuck to our spots behind the big screen onstage.

We watched the opening video projected on the back of the screen, waiting for our cue to jump through it, and as I heard the music build and the screams rise from the crowd, I felt the effects of the adrenaline coursing through me. My heartbeat was rising; my palms were sweating with anticipation and fear. The screams skyrocketed as my face appeared on the screen, huge and hilariously intense, and that made me smile. I’d never quite understood the way the fans reacted to me, but I can’t say I didn’t love it.

As the opening notes of “Everybody” revved up, the four of us stepped up onto our platform and, in perfect synch, jumped through the movie screen. The audience was going nuts. We just stood there, taking it all in, soaking up the screams, while the cameras flashed in our faces. I couldn’t see anything past the first few rows of fans; it was just a blinding sea of flashing lights. The effect was dizzying, but that was okay. It sort of lit a fire in me. *I’m Nick Carter, I thought, not the sick guy, but the Backstreet Boy, and these people are all here to see me. I’m gonna give ‘em one hell of a show.*

As a single unit, we sucked in a deep breath, and then another. It was part of the choreography, part of the act, but for me, it was all real. I was steeling myself just to make it through the show. We stomped forward, still in synch. Left. Right. Left. Right. Four counts, and then we jumped, landing in a pose, our legs spread wide, arms out at our sides, heads turned left, as “Everybody” started up again. We had done it so many times, I didn’t even have to think about it anymore. I was a robot; the choreography was just a part of my programming. As long as all my circuits and gears held out, I could get through it.

“*Everybody... rock your body...*” Brian sang, drawing out the notes as long as he could. “*Everybody... rock your body right...*”

“*BACKSTREET’S BACK, ALRIGHT!*”

There was no going back now, I thought, as I followed Howie down the stairs on our side of the platform. Before I knew it, I was singing, “Am I sexual?” and thrusting at the fans in the front row like I always did, because you know what they say...

The show must go on.

So, on went the show, but I ain't gonna lie: I was damn glad when it was over.

The Clearwater fans may have gotten screwed, but I lucked out because there was no soundcheck party before the show and no after party afterwards, so once I got done showering and changing at the venue, I got to go back to my bus and crash.

I literally collapsed into my bunk and lay there, too tired to move, just thinking about what a miracle it was that I'd actually made it through the whole concert. I really wasn't sure how. Now that it was over and my Red Bull-fueled performance high had gone down, I felt completely beat. I didn't even bother to sit up, let alone get up, when I heard Cary come on board.

"Back here," I croaked when she called my name. I was so tired, I could barely form words, let alone make my voice carry anymore. The show had taken that, along with the last of my energy.

She suddenly appeared next to my bunk, kneeling down so she could see my face. She gave me a sympathetic smile. "How ya doin'?" she asked.

"Ugh..." I groaned in response.

I expected her to say "I told you so," but she didn't. Sweet girl. Instead, she said, "I don't know how you did that, but you killed it out there."

"I think I 'bout killed myself, too," I muttered.

"Yeah... that too. So now will you give it up and tell the guys what's going on?"

I shook my head. "Nope. Now I'm gonna go to bed and sleep it off, and tomorrow I'm gonna get up and do it all over again. Eventually it'll get easier."

"It'll get worse before it gets better."

I just grunted. There wasn't much I could say back to that. She was probably right. I was just counting on the fact that we had another day off on Wednesday. I was so looking forward to it. I would need it to rest up, because after that we had four shows in a row. I wasn't looking forward to that.

"Before you go to bed, you better let me hook up your other dose of chemo," Cary added, and I groaned again. "Come on," she insisted, poking me. "Get up so you can get it over with."

It took all the willpower I had to drag myself out of my bunk and follow her up to the lounge, where there was more room and more light. Even as I took off my shirt and

stretched out on the leather couch, I was tempted to say, “Fuck it,” and go back to bed. But I knew she wouldn’t let me, and even if she did, I’d only be fucking myself over. I wanted the cancer gone so I didn’t have to mess with this shit anymore, but I had to take it to make that happen.

Cary hooked me up with the same cocktail of crap I’d had pumped into my body that morning – a whopping dose of a chemo drug called cyta-something, along with a steroid I also couldn’t pronounce, plus a handful of pills that were supposed to help protect my healthy cells from the chemo. It seemed like, for every chemo drug on the regimen, I’d also been described two or three other things to counteract the side effects – one thing to prevent nausea, another to prevent infection, yet another to prevent kidney damage... the list went on and on. I couldn’t keep it all straight; I was impressed that Cary could.

“Here, put these in,” she said when she was finished, handing me a little bottle of eye drops. I’d been prescribed those because one of the drugs I was getting today was supposed to cause eye irritation. I’d tried to put some in that morning, without much luck.

“I suck at putting in eye drops,” I complained. “I always blink them out.”

“Want me to try?” she offered.

“Sure, whatever.” I gave the bottle back, not really caring either way. So what if the drugs made my eyes red? Maybe the guys would just think I was high. I could pass for a junkie anyway, I thought, looking down at the IV running into my chest and the used syringes lying on the table. It would have been great if the constant flow of drugs into my bloodstream actually gave me a good buzz, instead of making me feel like shit. Maybe if I complained enough, I’d qualify for medical marijuana. I looked thoughtfully at Cary, wondering if she was licensed to prescribe it. “Hey, you think you could score me some weed? You know, for medicinal purposes?”

She blinked at me. “Yeah, that’s all you need, another thing to hide from the guys. How would you explain toking up on the tour bus?”

I gave her a look, like, *Are you kidding me?* “You think we’ve never smoked pot before?”

She blushed and mumbled, “I thought you’d given up that kind of stuff.”

“Well, I did, but...” I trailed off; I could see where she was going with this. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Cary smiled triumphantly and then held up the little bottle of eye drops. She moved around me, trying to figure out the best angle to put them in from, and finally climbed onto her knees on the couch next to me, so she was taller than me. “Open wide,” she said, and I figured she meant my eyes and not my mouth. I tipped my head back against

the couch and bugged my eyes out as much as they would go. I must have looked pretty funny because Cary giggled, and I saw her hand shake as she brought it close to my face.

“Don’t blind me,” I begged, trying to fight the blinking reflex. It didn’t work; as soon as she squirted the bottle near my eyes, I squeezed them shut, and the drops ran down my cheeks and into my ears instead.

“Don’t blink!”

“I can’t help it!”

She tried a second time; I blinked again. “Hold your eyes open,” she ordered, and so I tried to literally hold them, but with my arms up in front of my face, she couldn’t seem to get in at the right angle. “Ugh,” she huffed, flopping down beside me. “This should not be this difficult. Let’s try this. C’mere, lie down.” She patted her thigh.

Realizing what she wanted me to do, I changed positions and lay down flat so my head was in her lap. I could smell not just her perfume, but the laundry detergent she’d used on her clothes. She was still all dolled up from the concert, and when I looked up at her, leaning over me, I couldn’t help but notice how pretty she was, in that old-fashioned pin-up girl kind of way. She was wearing bright red lipstick and had her hair curled, and I thought of how hot she’d look in one of those naughty nurse costumes, with the little white hat and miniskirt. As she put one hand on my cheek, gently pulling down my lower eyelid, I said impulsively, “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

Her other hand hesitated in midair, and she let go of my face. “What?”

I grinned up at her. “You ever been a naughty nurse for Halloween?”

Now it was her turn to give me the *Are you kidding me?* look. “Uh, no.”

“I just thought you’d be hot in one of those costumes,” I admitted truthfully, smirking at the way she blushed.

But then her eyes brightened, and she added, “I do have a uniform my grandmother wore when she was a nurse during World War II.”

“No lie?”

“Really. She was a nurse, stationed at Pearl Harbor. That’s where she met my grandpa. He was in the Navy.”

“Wow... so your grandma’s like Kate Beckinsale.”

Cary laughed. “I guess so, yeah.”

“And your grandpa’s... Ben Affleck?”

“Quit making me laugh, or I will blind you!” she giggled helplessly.

“I need you like Ben Affleck needs acting school... he was terrible in that film...” I sang quietly, grinning when she cracked up even more. *“I need you like Cuba Gooding needed a bigger part... he’s way better than Ben Affleck, and now... all I can think about is your smile, and that shitty movie, too... Pearl Harbor sucked, and I miss you...”*

“Stop!” she gasped, swatting me playfully. “Just shut up and hold still so I can get these drops in, and then you can talk and sing all you want.”

“Alright, alright.” I tried to relax so I wouldn’t flinch and mess her up again. She pulled down my eyelid again and rested her other hand on my forehead as she tipped the bottle of drops over my eye. I forced myself to keep my open as she squirted this time, and finally, the drops ran in. They stung a little.

“Don’t squint,” she warned me. “Just close your eye gently.”

I tried to do what she said. It must have been good enough, because she moved on and did the other eye. My vision blurred when the drops went in, her face swimming above me for a few seconds, but when I opened my eyes again, they had cleared. Cary used a Kleenex to blot the moisture from around my eyes. Her touch was so gentle, it felt nice after all the discomfort of the eye drops. Call me weird, but I’ve always liked people touching my face. Whether I’m making out with a girl or just getting a facial (Paris got me into getting them; she made me so fucking metrosexual) or stage makeup, it feels really good. I guess my face and neck are just sensitive that way. “That feels good,” I groaned, closing my eyes.

She laughed. Then she ditched the Kleenex and used her fingers to rub around my eyes, along the tops of my cheekbones and brow bone and down to my temples. It felt awesome, like a face massage. “You’re gonna put me to sleep doin’ that,” I muttered, as she ran her fingers up into my hair, working my scalp with her nails.

“Maybe that’s the plan,” she replied. I could hear the smile in her voice.

I smiled back. “I like this plan.”

“Before you go to sleep, can I ask *you* a question?” Her hands had come out of my hair now and were kneading my forehead, her fingers working in tiny circles.

“What?”

“Do you pluck your eyebrows?”

I started laughing, my eyes flying open. “Uh, no,” I said, mimicking her. I’d been known to manscape a bit when I was dating Paris – metrosexual, remember? – and, of course,

they always clean me up before photoshoots, but usually, I don't even like shaving, let alone tweezing my eyebrows. That fucking hurts!

"Really? 'Cause you have, like, *perfect* eyebrows." I closed my eyes again as she traced the lines of my brows with her fingers, and I heard her sniff. "It's so not fair."

"Sorry."

"I forgive you, I guess." She massaged away in silence for a few more minutes, and then she said, "Are you ready for bed now?"

"You kidding?" I muttered. "I was ready before you reminded me I had more chemo coming, remember?" I opened my eyes and sat up. I was still exhausted, but relaxed and feeling pretty good, otherwise. I picked up the chemo pump as I pulled myself up from the couch and carried it with me back to my bunk, where I lay it down next to me as I crawled in and got comfortable.

Cary followed me back, making sure I got settled. "Night, Nick," she said softly, before she pulled the curtains closed around my bunk. In the darkness, I closed my eyes and listened to her footsteps pad back to the bathroom, probably to get herself ready for bed. I was asleep before she made it back to her own bunk.

Chapter 31

Nick

When I woke up on Saturday morning, I thought, *One week down. I made it. I can do this.*

It hadn't been an easy week. Between all the chemo and all the shows, I was exhausted. Even on our one day off, Wednesday, I'd had to keep up my act. We were in Orlando, and the guys had wanted to go to Universal Studios, like old times. How could I say no to that? They knew how much I loved roller coasters; it would have been weird if I'd spent the day in bed, the way I wanted to. So, of course, I'd gone with them. At least I was done with chemo for the next couple of weeks. I thought that would make things a lot easier.

But I hadn't counted on the fact that, just because the chemo wasn't being pumped into my body anymore, didn't mean it had worked its way out of my body, either. The puking had stopped, but I'd had diarrhea all week. I didn't feel like eating, what with everything I did coming out of one end or the other, and as a result, I got even more tired and dehydrated. I tried to drink as much water and Gatorade as I could keep down, but Red Bull was the only thing that gave me energy, so I knocked back those

when Cary wasn't around to get on my case about it. Overall, I was still feeling pretty shitty – no pun intended.

It was the weekend now, but when you're a touring musician, weekends don't mean much. We had a show that night and another one on Sunday; our next day off wasn't until Monday. As I pulled back the curtains and rolled out of my bunk, I tried to remember where we were. It came to me after a few seconds: Georgia. We were back in Georgia – Valdosta this time. We had driven there overnight from Biloxi, Mississippi, where we'd played last night's show. Tonight's concert was at an amusement park, so I figured I'd spend the better part of the day riding roller coasters again, whether I wanted to or not.

Then again, maybe not. The sky was overcast, I noticed, as I wandered up to the front of the bus. The shades were up, but there was no morning sun streaming through the windows. Maybe it would rain, and I'd get out of going to the park. Maybe there'd be a freak lightning storm so bad, they'd have to cancel the show, and then I could stay on the bus and sleep. Then again, maybe not.

"Good morning, Nick," I heard Cary say. I looked around. She was sitting on one of the leather couches, her legs stretched out in front of her, a book in her lap. She closed it as I walked up.

"Morning." I frowned; it hurt to talk. It felt like there was something pinching the inside of my mouth.

Cary gave me a look of concern. "You okay?"

"Yeah... hang on." I went back to the bathroom, turned on the light, and leaned in close to the mirror over the sink. I opened my mouth and tried to look inside, pulling my lips back so I could see my gums and the insides of my cheeks. The skin there was bright red, instead of its normal pink, and had broken out in big canker sores, with white in the middle. "Eww..." I groaned in disgust, making a face at my reflection. I got out my toothbrush and toothpaste and tried brushing my teeth, thinking it would help to clean out my mouth, but it stung like hell. Rinsing with lots of cold water helped take the edge off, but my mouth was still hurting when I slammed my toothbrush down on the edge of the sink and stomped back up to the front of the bus.

"Look at this," I said to Cary. She moved her legs out of the way so I could sit down next to her. I pulled down my bottom lip and jutted out my lower jaw to show her. "What the fuck is this?"

I'm sure that's exactly what she wanted to see first thing in the morning, but hey, at least I brushed my teeth first. Anyone else would have pushed me away, but I guess when you're a nurse, you're used to gross sights and smells, because Cary actually looked. "Ouch," she said, frowning. "That looks like it hurts..."

“Yeah, no shit. It hurts just to talk,” I said, taking my hands out of my mouth. “How’d I get a bazillion canker sores all of a sudden? You didn’t, like, dump a Pixie Stick in my mouth while I slept last night, did you?” That was the sort of douchey thing I’d do to one of the other guys, but of course, I knew Cary wouldn’t.

She smiled, but shook her head. “No. It’s a side effect from the chemo. It’s called mucositis.”

“Ew,” I said again. That was the grossest name I’d ever heard.

She nodded, making a face. “The chemo kills the cells in your mucus membranes that line your digestive system, and the tissue breaks down and forms ulcers.”

I blinked at her. Well, this was why she was the nurse practitioner, and I was just the patient. She actually knew what she was talking about. “So how do I make it go away?”

“It should heal on its own in a week or two. But we’ll have to watch that the sores don’t get infected. You should start rinsing with warm salt water and baking soda; that’ll help with the pain, too. I’ll pick up some salt and baking soda when I go to the FedEx place to mail this off today.” She gestured at the table between the two couches, where I noticed, for the first time, she had set out a bunch of the same medical supplies she used for chemo.

“Uh, hold up,” I said, putting up my hands. “What is all that? I don’t start my next cycle for two more weeks.”

“I have to draw your blood. That was part of the deal with your doctor, remember? Weekly bloodwork while you’re on chemo. I wanted to get it out of the way first thing this morning so we don’t forget.”

Fuck, I *had* forgotten about that. The last bloodwork I’d had was in the hospital, before the start of the tour. But Cary wasn’t going to let me get by another week without it. “Take off your shirt,” she ordered, picking up the little spray bottle of stuff she used to numb the area around my port.

Grudgingly, I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it aside, leaning back against the couch to let her work. This sucked so much, I wondered if it was even worth all the hassle. But if I wasn’t on the road, I’d probably be in the hospital having the same thing done, so I decided this was better. At least here, when I was done being stuck with needles, I could go out and pretend my life was normal. Not the case in a hospital.

Cary drew the blood from my port, which was good because it didn’t hurt or leave a mark that way, and squirted the blood sample from the syringe into a plastic test tube, which she sealed with a stopper. I watched her fill out my name and the date in neat, tiny letters on a label, which she stuck to the outside of the tube. Then she wrapped it in bubble wrap and sealed it in a plastic bag that had the orange biohazard label on it.

Pretty intense for a little vial of blood, but I guess they don't want mailmen accidentally getting AIDS or something. She packed everything in a clear, plastic FedEx envelope.

"I need to get dressed and take this to get mailed off," she said, looking at me. "Are you still planning on checking out the theme park before the show?"

"Yeah, probably. I mean, I assume that's what the guys will wanna do," I replied.

I could tell she didn't like the idea of that, but all she said was, "Just make sure you wash your hands a lot, until we hear back about your blood counts. The last thing you need is to get another infection, especially with open sores in your mouth."

"Don't worry, I'll bring along my Purell. I'll wash my hands till they bleed, like I'm OCD," I said, grinning. Damn, it even hurt to smile too wide.

She shuddered. "*Don't* wash your hands until they bleed," she replied seriously. "Open sores, remember? Low platelets."

I laughed. "Chill out; I'm just kidding. I'll be fine."

She sighed. "You always say that, Nick, but do you not realize how dangerous it is for you to be out in public, around crowds, when your blood counts are low? You're more susceptible to infection. You could get sick."

"I'm already sick."

She glared at me, which I guess I deserved for being a smartass. "Sicker. You could get septic. You could die." I saw her eyes fill with tears before she looked away.

I felt an eerie sense of *déjà vu*; we'd had almost this same conversation before, and she'd reacted the same way. I felt bad for making her cry, but what was I supposed to say? I reached out and put my hand on her shoulder, which went rigid. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'm stupid. What do you want me to do?"

"I'm not gonna tell you what to do. It's your life. If you wanna go to the theme park, go. I'm just reminding you to be careful."

She'd make a good mom someday, I thought. "I will be careful," I promised. I don't think it meant much to her.

"I've got to get this to the FedEx place," she mumbled, picking up her purse and the package with my blood sample inside. "I'll be back."

How the hell does she think she's going to get there? I wondered, as she walked right off the bus. I watched out the window as she took out her cell phone and made a call, then sat down on a curb, hugging her knees to her chest. About ten minutes passed, and just

when I was about to go out and get her, I saw a cab pull up. Cary got in, and the cab drove away.

I admired her for having it all figured out. She thought of everything. I tried to think of nothing, except what I absolutely had to. She was always looking ahead, and I was just trying to get through one day at a time.

I needed her, more than I wanted to admit, and it made me feel guilty to realize how much I was putting her through. And for what? An opening act gig? An open door into the music business? When was the last time I'd even tried to give her advice or help her with her music? I'd been so busy and felt so bad lately, I hadn't even been thinking about that. Was she even having any fun on this tour? Was I?

I sighed and ran a hand over my short hair. I always did that when I was frustrated or upset, but this time, I was hit with a sudden wave of panic. I quickly looked down at my hand, to make sure there were no stray hairs. I was still paranoid about my hair falling out from the chemo; it was the reason I had cut it so short before the tour, so it would be less noticeable.

But there was nothing. I reached up and tugged gently on just a couple of hairs. They stayed put. I sighed again in relief. At least one thing was going right.

I love amusement parks. I always have. The guys know that about me, so there was no doubt in anyone's mind we'd be hitting up the Wild Adventures theme park before our show there that night. We didn't have a soundcheck party scheduled, so we had more time than usual. It was perfect... you know, except for the fact that my ass was dragging, and my mouth was full of canker sores, and Cary thought I was a moron for even doing the show, let alone the theme park beforehand.

Minor details.

Still, I was gonna go, and I was gonna make Cary go with me, and we were gonna have fun! We deserved to have a little fun. I made some coffee and drank a Red Bull while she was out, so that by the time she was back and the guys came knocking, I had the energy I needed to get through the day.

As soon as I walked under the big sign that said *Wild Adventures*, I got that jittery, excited feeling in my stomach, like a little kid at Christmas. Caffeine and carnival rides do that to a guy, I guess. "DUDE!" I cried, pointing past the ticket kiosks to a pirate ship ride – you know, the kind with the big boat that swings back and forth – just inside the park and to the right. This one had an Egyptian theme, with a big, golden King Tut head on the front of the boat, and I could swear I'd seen it before, even though I didn't think I'd ever been to this particular theme park. "Have we been here before?" I asked the guys.

They were all looking at me like I was, you know, “special.” I get that look a lot. “I don’t think so,” Howie said, but what does Howie know? I wished Kevin were with us; Kevin remembered everything.

“Have you seen the movie *Zombieland*?” asked the girl at the ticket counter, overhearing our conversation.

“Yeah!” I cried, and it suddenly made sense why the place looked so familiar.

She nodded, with a knowing smile. She probably got that a lot. “Yeah, *Zombieland* was filmed here.”

“Awesome,” I said, suddenly that much more excited. “That movie was epic.”

“Hell yeah!” AJ chimed in. “The Bill Murray part...

“EPIC,” we agreed together. Everyone else just looked at us. “What?” I said. “You’ve never seen *Zombieland*? ”

“I wanna see *Zombieland*,” said Baylee, his eyes lighting up.

Leighanne shook her head. “Not till you’re older.”

“Aww...”

We all walked into the park, Leighanne holding Baylee’s hand, Leigh pushing James in his stroller. AJ stuck close to Cary and me; I guess he would have felt like the third wheel no matter who he was with, without Rochelle on tour. I could relate to that feeling, especially since Cary and I weren’t even a couple, despite that they all seemed to think. Once Rochelle joined us, I’d be the odd man out.

After walking around together for awhile, we split up; Brian and Howie took the wives and kids to the little kid section of the park, while AJ and Cary and I went to find some big kid rides. “You like roller coasters?” I asked her, as we stood in line for one called The Boomerang.

“Love them,” she replied, flashing me a little smile. “How about you? Is your tummy gonna be able to handle this?” She winked, and I realized she was just playing with me.

“Guess we’ll find out. I’m gonna sit right by you, okay?” I gave her a big, cheesy grin back, even though it hurt.

“Aww... listen to you two go back and forth,” said AJ, loudly and sarcastically. “You’re just too damn adorable.”

He looked annoyed. Cary blushed, and I smirked, but inside, I was surprised. He really thought we were an item? Was my acting *that* good?

We made our way slowly through the line. The sky was overcast; it looked and smelled like rain. I had lucked out both of the days we'd spent at theme parks that week; I didn't think I would have made it standing under the blazing sun for too long. Luckily, with the sun behind the clouds, it wasn't too hot.

It started raining while we were on the roller coaster. By the time the cars rolled back into the loading station, we were already soaked. Cary's hair was a frizzy mess. AJ's skull cap was plastered to his head. I kept tugging at my wet t-shirt, afraid it would show the bump of my port if it clung too much to my skin. Laughing, we ran to the nearest building, a food pavilion called Congo Wings.

"Damn, might as well get me some wings while we're here," said AJ, getting in line. The smell of buffalo wings and barbecue sauce normally would have made my mouth water, but it was so full of sores that, instead, it just stung. No way was I gonna add some hot wings to that burn. When he realized I wasn't following him, AJ turned around and gave me a questioning look. "You're passing on wings?"

I shrugged. "I had a big breakfast."

He shook his head incredulously. "Cary?"

She glanced at me before answering, "Um, no thanks. Maybe later."

"Alright. Well, go grab us a table or something then."

I nodded, and Cary and I went to find an unoccupied table in the corner. The pavilion was filling up with other people trying to get out of the rain. All of a sudden, I heard my name: "Nick?!"

I turned around, and a large woman was barreling towards me. "Oh my God!" she squealed, throwing herself into my arms – really, I was yanked into hers. I spat out a mouthful of her long brown hair as she squeezed me like a python, her big boobs and gut squishing up against me. I don't mind hugs from fans, but seriously? Personal space? "Long time no see!" she gushed, loosening her grip on me just long enough for me to get a breath in. "Do you remember me? You called me sexy once." She giggled.

I was either really drunk, really high, or really lying, I thought, but I forced myself to smile and be polite. "Aw, nice to see you again."

"Aww, you too! I've been a fan for twelve years, and you've always been my favorite." She moved up alongside me like we were old friends, her arm hooked around my waist, still pressing her body up against mine. She was so close, I was ready for her to start humping my leg like a dog. She was practically drooling already.

"Well, thanks; that's nice to hear," I said blandly. "You comin' to the show tonight?"

“Oh, I’ll be there! Front row center! Taking lots of photos!” She grinned, as if she expected me to be thrilled to hear this. “Will you give me your rose?”

“Aww, now wouldn’t all the other sexy ladies be disappointed if I promised you my rose this early?” As I winked at her and flashed my trademark smirk, a nauseous feeling that had nothing to do with chemo gurgled up inside me. Sometimes I even sickened myself, the way I played these fans. But it was all part of the gig; it kept them wanting more.

She looked up at me with what she must have thought was a seductive smile, fluttering her eyelashes. “Not if you tell them about *us*,” she whispered, drawing out the “s” so that she sounded like a python, too. “They’re just stupid, jealous whores.” Her arm snaked around mine, and she rose up on her toes. Before I could twist out of her grip, I felt her wet, slimy tongue slithering up my cheek. She was licking me!!

I quickly turned my head and pulled away, giving her a look, like, *Are you fucking kidding me?* Wiping her spit from my cheek, I choked out, “Hope you enjoy the show,” and started to walk away. Cary quickly fell in step next to me.

“Wait!” called the crazy dog-snake girl. “Can I ask you a question? I’ve always wanted to ask you about fan-”

“Sorry, I gotta go,” I blew her off, not turning around.

She chased me for a few steps, shouting, “See you tonight! Look for me in front! I’ll be making eye babies with you! I’m a journalist!”

“Oh my god!” hissed Cary, once we were a safe distance away, hiding out in the building that housed the bathrooms. She looked at me with wide eyes. “How do you put up with that??”

I shook my head. “Sometimes I don’t know. Wait there, will ya, while I go decontaminate my face?” I slammed into the men’s bathroom and washed my face and hands with soap and water, remembering Cary’s concern that I was going to pick up germs out in public. Well, being licked by some random girl would probably do it. If I got sick – well, sicker – I would know who to blame.

My phone rang. It was AJ. “Dude, where are you??” he demanded.

“Sorry – crazy fan; I had to bail. We’re hiding out in the bathrooms. Meet us outside. And watch out for...” I did my best to describe the psycho licker chick to him, as I walked back out of the bathroom.

Cary still looked sort of stunned. “Tell me again why you wanted to do this?”

I flashed her a big grin. “C’mon... roller coasters in the rain, rabid fans... aren’t you having fun?”

She just laughed. Well, at least, for a few minutes, neither of us were thinking about bloodwork or canker sores, chemo or cancer. And that, I realized, was the whole reason we were doing this.

Chapter 32

Nick

The show in Valdosta that night was not one of my best. Dancing wore me out, and singing just plain hurt. I couldn't even make the fans scream with one of my trademark smiles, let alone belt the high notes or hold the long ones, without the inside of my mouth screaming in pain.

I tried to fight through it, but it didn't help that in the front row, center, right where she'd said she would be, was the psycho dog-snake girl who had licked me in the park. She kept looking at me like I was a piece of meat, and when she wasn't drooling over me like she wanted to eat me, I could practically see her undressing me with her eyes. I'm used to getting that look from girls, but it made me really uncomfortable.

Just to spite her, during "I'll Never Break Your Heart," I tried – *tried* – to give my rose to the girl standing next to her. I leaned down and held out the long stem of the rose and said, all seductively, "Do you want this?" But just as the girl reached out to take it, this other girl – Cujo, I'm calling her – smacked her arm out of the way, shoved her aside, and snatched it right out of my hand. I just had to laugh at the craziness of it all. So much for our fans growing up. This chick had to be at least thirty, but she acted no better than the teenyboppers who almost overturned our bus in Rio ten years ago. I guess some things will never change.

So after the show, when I got back onto the bus, I was not in the best mood. "How ya doin'?" asked Cary when I came onboard. She had beat me back this time and was chilling on one of the couches, a can of cream soda in her hand.

"Ugh," I croaked. My throat was raw. I eyed her soda longingly. "Will you grab me one of those?"

She reached into the mini fridge and pulled out a bottled water instead. With an apologetic smile, she handed it to me and said, "Pop's only gonna make your mouth hurt worse."

Wordlessly, I took the bottle, twisted off the cap, and downed about half of it in one long swig. *That's what I get for touring with a nurse*, I thought, but of course, she was right.

"I'll mix you up some of the saltwater and baking soda stuff to rinse your mouth with," she added, moving to the tiny kitchen area. I watched her heat a cup of water in the

microwave, then dump a teaspoon of salt and baking soda into it and stir until it dissolved. She handed me the cup; the water was warm and cloudy, like dirty bathwater. I made a face at it. “Don’t swallow it,” she said. “Just swish and spit. Trust me, it’ll help.”

I gave it a shot. She was right; the warm water actually did feel good in my mouth, sort of soothing, and it didn’t taste bad either. But I’d always loved the taste of saltwater; I got yelled at a lot for swallowing ocean water as a kid. I didn’t swallow this stuff, though; I gargled it a little and spit it out.

“Better?” Cary asked, with a hopeful smile.

I nodded. “Yeah... thanks!”

“Sure! You should do that a few times a day, till it goes away.” She slipped past me, heading to the back of the bus. “I’m gonna go change, and then I’ll do your eye drops.”

Watching her walk off, I remembered what I’d been thinking of earlier that day. This so wasn’t what Cary had signed up for when she had agreed to come out to LA and go on tour with us. She never complained, but I couldn’t imagine she was having the time of her life playing nurse to me instead of partying like a rock star. “Hey, Cary!” I called, ignoring my scratchy throat.

“Yeah?” I heard her muffled voice shout back.

“We should jam again sometime, maybe write some stuff together. Whaddya think?”

“That’d be fun!” The tone of her voice told me she didn’t believe me, though. She was just humoring me. That hurt a little; was I that lame? I looked down at myself. I’d thrown on a baggy t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts after the show; it wasn’t even midnight yet, and I was basically ready for bed. My head hurt, my body hurt, and the inside of my mouth hurt like a bitch. Yeah, I was pretty lame, alright.

“We’ll have a long day on the bus Monday to get to Boston,” I said, as she came back out to the lounge. “Maybe we can get some jam time in then.”

She smiled and nodded. “Okay.” Her smile seemed to last a little bit longer than usual, and when I gave her a second glance, I saw why. She was wearing a Backstreet Boys t-shirt, one of our new tour designs with our faces printed in black and white on red ticket stubs. It was weird seeing my face under her right boob.

I snorted. “Nice shirt.”

Her smile widened, and she blushed. “Well, I had to get some souvenirs of this whole experience.”

“Did you buy that yourself?” I asked, laughing. “I could have gotten you one for free.”

She shrugged. "It's okay. Don't forget, I'm a fan, too. Just supporting my Boys."

"Aww..." I gave her a cheeky smile. "You love us."

She grinned back. "Maybe not as much as that crazy girl in the park, but..."

I groaned. "She got my rose."

"What??" Cary gasped.

"She was in the front row. I tried to give it to the girl next to her, but she grabbed it right out of my hand."

Cary looked outraged. "You should have made security get it back!"

I shrugged. "I guess it ain't that big of a deal. Probably made her night."

"Yeah, but still... the nerve of some people." She shook her head, as she climbed back onto the couch and patted a spot next to her. "Bring your eye drops over."

We had settled into a routine. I stretched out on the couch with my head tipped back into her lap, and she put the drops in for me. "Wish they made something like this for my mouth," I muttered, closing my eyes as I waited for the sting of the drops to go away. The pain in my mouth was still worse. It seemed to go all the way down my throat, like someone had poured kerosene down there and lit a match.

"There are some prescription topical rinses we can try. I'll look into them tomorrow and see what I can get."

I liked how she said "we." It was my mouth, my treatment, my problem, but it made me feel like I wasn't alone. She was on my side, looking out for me. After so many weeks of keeping my diagnosis to myself, it was nice not to have to deal with this completely on my own anymore. "Thanks, Cary."

"Sure," she replied softly, stroking my brow the way she had the other night. It's weird the way the simplest touch can do so much, but it totally relaxed me and distracted me from the burning in my mouth.

"Did they teach you this in nursing school, too?" I asked, only half kidding. I knew she was used to taking care of people, that she did it for a living, but it still amazed me, the way she seemed to know just what to do to make me feel better.

She laughed lightly. "No. Most nurses don't have time for this. I used to this for my mom, when she was sick."

I opened my eyes and looked up at her. It occurred to me that although she talked about her dad pretty often, she never said much about her mom. My relationship with my own mother being what it was, I didn't find that strange, but now I wondered. I vaguely remembered Cary mentioning once that her mother had gone through a serious illness when she was a child, but she hadn't told me anything more than that, and I'd never asked. "What was she sick with?" I asked now, feeling like, since she'd brought it up, I wasn't being too nosy.

Something about the look on Cary's face told me the answer before she could. "She had cancer," she said quietly, and even though I'd guessed it, the word hit me like a ton of bricks dropped into my stomach. "Ovarian cancer."

"I'm sorry," I said. It came out a whisper. "Did she...?" I wanted to ask if she had survived, but wasn't sure how. I already suspected the answer was no.

"She died when I was nine." I heard Cary's voice catch as she said it, and again, although I'd figured as much, it was like a kick to the gut. "She'd had it for years, though," she added quickly. "She was diagnosed when I was three and had surgery to treat it, and she was fine for a few years, but then it came back and spread."

The way she said it, I could tell she was trying to make me feel better, to make me feel like her mom's illness was completely different from mine. It didn't work. I felt sick in a way that had nothing to do with my own cancer. People died from what I had – and what Cary's mom had had, and Kevin's dad and Howie's dad, too, and Denniz Pop and countless other people I either knew of or had known personally. Now that I thought of it, it seemed like I knew way more people who had died of cancer than beaten it. The odds definitely weren't in my favor.

For the first time since I'd started treatment, I felt scared, really scared. Of course I'd been terrified when I'd gotten the diagnosis, but chemo hadn't been nearly as bad as I'd been expecting, and it was working - I was actually feeling better than I had at the end of the Asian tour, right before I was diagnosed. I had started to feel like everything was going to turn out okay, but now I thought, *Who am I kidding? I have Stage IV cancer. I'm not going to be okay.*

It must have shown in my face, because Cary shook her head and said, "That was twenty years ago, though. They've made so many advances in cancer treatment since then..."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "I'm really sorry about your mom," I said – not just because it seemed like the right thing to say, but because I didn't want to talk about what was really going through my mind.

"Thanks," Cary whispered. Her green eyes were shiny with tears, which actually caught me off-guard, after how calmly and matter-of-factly she'd been talking. I felt awkward, not sure what else to say or how to comfort her. I realized it must be hard for her, to be so involved in what I was going through after watching her mom die of cancer when she was a kid. She had to be sort of used to it, working in the medical field, but at least she

had chosen that; I had just sprung all of my shit on her and expected her to go along with it.

“I’m also sorry for doing this to you, for putting you through this again,” I added, swallowing hard. My throat felt tight and raw.

She gave me a watery smile. “You don’t have to apologize, Nick. I know I give you a hard time sometimes, but I’m glad I can do something to help you through this. I don’t mind it. It’s what I do.”

“But isn’t it hard...?” I left the question hanging, hoping she would get what I meant.

She did. “Sure, it’s hard. That’s why I quit working in pedes oncology once I got certified as a nurse practitioner.”

“You worked in oncology?” I wondered why she hadn’t told me that before. There was probably a lot I didn’t know about her; most of our conversations revolved around me – *my life, my career, my body, my treatment, my feelings*. I’d never really stopped to consider hers, let alone ask.

“For a couple of years, yeah. I was drawn to it because of what I’d gone through with my mom. I know that probably sounds like self-inflicted torture, but I wanted to help other people who were going through it, and I thought being able to empathize would make me a better nurse. Honestly, the oncology part didn’t bother me half as much as the pediatric part did. I’ve always liked kids, so I thought I would enjoy working with them, but you combine kids with cancer, and...” She rubbed the corners of her eyes. “It was just too hard. I’d get attached to the ones who were on the floor for extended stays, but, of course, those were the kids who were the sickest. Those were the kids who would end up dying. As much as I wanted to help them, I just couldn’t take that kind of grief. It was too sad to lose them.” She sniffed deeply. “That’s why I went the opposite route and started working with old people, instead. They may be at the end of their lives, but at least they’re supposed to be, you know? It’s still sad when a resident dies, but it feels more natural.”

“And now I’ve got you back to the cancer crap,” I said, flashing her a crooked smile. “Sorry.”

She smiled back sadly. “Like I said, don’t apologize. It’s been worth it, just to get to know you and to have this opportunity you’ve given me. And if I can do anything to make this easier for you, then I’m doing the job I’ve always wanted to do... Of course, you’d make my job a lot easier if you weren’t so damn stubborn all the time,” she added, winking.

“Hey,” I retorted, “I gotta be stubborn, or else this thing’s gonna kick my ass. I’m not gonna go down without a fight.”

“I know you’re not,” she replied quickly, but I could still see the sadness in her smile. She was probably thinking the same thing I was: that her mother had fought, too, and still lost.

It was gonna be an uphill battle to beat this thing. But hell, I was gonna try my damndest. I was only thirty years old... not a kid anymore, even though I sometimes still felt like it, but decades away from being at the end of my life, like her nursing home residents. There was nothing natural about this.

Chapter 33

Nick

The next morning, my throat hurt even worse. When I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue in the bathroom mirror, I saw that the whole inside of my mouth was still bright red and dotted with patchy, white sores. My throat was just as red, and my tonsils were like golf balls. I wondered if that was all from the mucositis, or if I was getting sick again, on top of everything else.

“Fuck my life,” I muttered into the mirror. I immediately regretted it when I remembered the conversation I’d had with Cary the night before. *No, don’t fuck my life. I like my life. I’d like to keep living it, thanks,* I thought desperately, pleading to whoever it was who controlled these things. God? If there was a god, sometimes I hated him for the cruel joke he’d played on me when he gave me cancer. My life was so awesome before all this, and now... well, now it kind of sucked. But I wasn’t in much of a position to piss him off, so I would have to try to have a more positive attitude.

It wasn’t easy, though. I felt like crap, and when I walked to the front of the bus, I saw a dreary, gray sky full of clouds. We were in a completely different state by now – North Carolina, I thought – but it still looked like it was going to rain. At least there were no amusement parks to visit that day. We had a typical schedule: soundcheck in the afternoon, soundcheck party in the evening, and a show that night. There was no after party, thank god, and with the second NBA playoff game on that night, I knew I’d have an excuse to go back to my bus right after the show and stay in for the night without anyone wondering why I was being so lame lately.

As usual, Cary was already up. She had the TV on, and I was surprised when I heard my own voice coming out of it. I looked and saw the four of us on the screen; we were singing “This Is Us.”

“*Private Sessions?*” I asked, recognizing the set behind us.

She turned, startled. “Yeah. You sound terrible.”

I frowned, my feelings hurt. I thought I'd sounded damn good on that performance, all things considered.

It must have shown on my face, because Cary giggled and quickly added, "In real life! Not on TV. You sound awesome on TV."

"Oh – thanks." She was right; my voice was about an octave lower than usual and gravelly. "Not sure I'm gonna be able to hit those high notes today," I croaked.

She looked worried. "Are you feeling okay?"

I shrugged. "Not especially, but when was the last time I really felt 'okay'? It's all relative now."

"You know what I mean. Come here." She beckoned me over, and when I sat down, she said, "Open up and say 'ahh.'"

I laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious! Open up!"

So I opened my mouth wide and stuck out my tongue as far as it would go, seeing if I could gross her out. "Ahhh..." I said loudly, breathing my morning breath all over her, and waggled my tongue.

"Ugh..." She made a face. "I can't see anything in this light. Hang on." She jumped up and scurried to the back of the bus, returning with a big pink bag with lots of pockets. She set it next to her on the couch and opened it up, and I saw medical equipment poking out of all the pockets on the inside – a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, stuff like that.

"Where'd all that come from?" I asked, watching as she fished out one of those little penlights doctors shine in your eyes.

She looked surprised by the question. "This is my medical bag," she said. "I wanted to have my own equipment with me on the road."

"Did you bring that to LA?" I'd never seen her use it back in my condo.

"No, I had my dad bring it when he came for *American Idol*."

"Did you tell him about-?"

"No, of course not. I just said I thought it would be a good idea to have my stuff with me, in case of an emergency. You never know when you're going to need a nurse." She winked at me.

“Oh.” I relaxed a little. “Okay.”

“Open up again,” she said, clicking on her penlight. I did, normally this time, and she shined the light into my mouth. I saw her grimace as she got a load of what I’d seen in the mirror. “Wow, your tonsils are huge,” she breathed, her eyes widening. “Are you running a fever?” She felt my forehead. “You’re warm, but not that not...”

“I dunno, most fans think I’m pretty hot,” I joked. “Especially with my voice all husky like this.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty sexy,” she played along, smirking. “Your swollen tonsils, however, are not. Let me take your temperature.” She got out a thermometer from her bag and stuck it in my ear. When it beeped, she looked at the reading and pursed her lips. “99 on the nose.”

I was relieved. “That doesn’t even count as a fever, does it?”

“It’s mild,” she admitted. “We just have to watch it. If it goes above 100.4...”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Then we call the doctor.” That was how she had gotten me to go to the hospital the last time, but I was only humoring her. I had no intention of making any hospital visits this time. If I got admitted, the way I was before, it would mess up our whole tour schedule and ruin everything.

Cary nodded, but she didn’t look satisfied. “I wish we had the results of your bloodwork. If you’re neutropenic again...”

“I’ll be fine,” I interrupted her, before she could say I shouldn’t perform. I had this conversation memorized by now; I didn’t need to hear it again. “Hey, how ‘bout you go mix me up some of that saltwater stuff before *Private Sessions* comes back from commercial?” I added, glancing at the TV.

She gave me a look, like, *I know you’re just trying to distract me*. But I guess it worked because she got up and went into the kitchen, and after we had watched the end of the show together, I didn’t hear anything more about not performing.

“You sound like shit, dude,” AJ said that day at our soundcheck, the real one we did before they let the VIP fans in. “You sick or somethin’?”

“I think I got some bug,” I replied, clearing my throat. It didn’t help; it still felt scratchy and raw, and my voice was still a lot lower than usual. I didn’t mind that part, but it was going to make singing difficult. “I feel like I’ve got a golf ball in my throat; my tonsils are all swollen.”

“Ew... well, don’t breathe on me.” AJ backed away, holding his fingers up like a cross to ward me off.

“You gonna be okay to sing tonight, Nicky?” asked Howie, looking at me with concern. “Do you wanna get checked out?”

See, this was why I didn’t want them to know how sick I really was. Maybe it was because he was taking Kevin’s role too seriously, or maybe it was just because he was a father himself, but Howie tended to overreact about stuff like that, and Brian was getting almost as bad. We had cancelled a show on the last tour because I had the flu, which was unheard of in the old days. Ever since I’d gotten the cardiomyopathy diagnosis, they’d been keeping a closer eye on me, staying on my back about taking care of myself. If they knew what was really going on with me, they would completely freak out.

My answer was to downplay everything. “Oh, you know plenty of ladies’ll be checkin’ me out tonight, Howie,” I replied, putting on my most smoldering smirk.

Unfortunately, there were no ladies around to squeal at it yet. Howie just rolled his eyes. “Nah, it’s all good,” I added seriously. “I had Cary look at my throat already.” I glanced out into the rows of empty seats. She was standing in the back with Leigh and Leighanne, while Baylee pulled James up and down the aisles in his little, red wagon.

AJ snickered. “You two better lay off the tonsil hockey tonight, or you’re gonna infect hers, too.”

It cracked me up that they still thought Cary and I were hooking up, since they’d never seen us show the slightest bit of PDA, but then, we had been spending every night alone on my bus. What else would they think we were doing? As long as they didn’t figure out what we were really up to, I was fine with it, but I think Cary had minded, at first. She was coming around, though; she’d been playing along.

“Drink hot tea,” was Brian’s suggestion.

“I’m on it,” I replied. Cary had been pushing the fluids on me all day, insisting that my mouth would feel better if I kept it moist and that it would be worse if I got dehydrated. When I wasn’t drinking something or gargling saltwater, she had me sucking ice chips on the tour bus, and I had to admit, it did help. All I needed was Red Bull or two backstage before the concert, and I’d be good to go. It wouldn’t be my best show, but I’d probably done worse shows, too.

The soundcheck party turned out to be pretty laidback, and the fans who came let me off easy. Two of the songs they requested were “Drowning” and “I’ll Never Break Your Heart,” which meant I didn’t have many solos to sing. I sat on my stool and jumped in my harmonies while Brian and AJ did most of the solos and most of the goofing off.

“Panic” was the only real test; that had been one of my favorite songs to perform on the *Unbreakable* tour, but we hadn’t really sung it since then. The music brought it all back,

though. AJ even started doing the choreography, and if I'd felt better, I would have, too. Singing took enough effort, though. "*Go, stop and go; I just hit static; I used to read you loud and clear, not like this; it's so erratic...*"

Brian took over, "... and I'm not rational, when I see you around... your inconsistency, and you know it's dragging me down... you're so conflicted, baby..."

"*You're always walking away,*" we sang together. "*One step and everything's over, and you're running back to me. You say I let you down... Baby, take me in or just take me out... I'm already dead. I already said... I'm sorry.*"

I knew my solo came next, but as soon as I hit my cue, I completely forgot the lyrics. "I... da-da-da..." I trailed off and looked helplessly at AJ, my mind a blank. "I dunno the words," I confessed over the music that was still playing.

"I was tryin' to think of the bridge right now," AJ laughed, waving me off as if to say, "Who cares?"

I was still racking my brain, and some of it came to me then. "... *you're not immune to the panic, when somebody turns on you...*"

"*When the snow hits your skin,*" Brian came in, "*the cold don't last forever. Maybe we'll take it in, if you don't let seasons change...*"

Well, at least I wasn't alone in forgetting lyrics. Still, it bugged me that I had. "Blame the chemo brain," said Cary when I told this later, in the privacy of her dressing room.

I laughed. "Chemo brain?" I thought she was making a joke. Turns out she was serious.

"No, really. It's a side effect of some kinds of chemo. It's actually a form of mild cognitive impairment that affects your memory and concentration."

"Cognitive impairment?" I repeated. "You mean, like, brain damage??"

"Yeah, sort of. It's usually not a permanent thing, though."

"Well, fuck, that's all I need, is more problems concentrating and trying to remember shit," I ranted, dragging a hand over my hair. I stopped and looked at my hand to make sure there were no stray hairs in it. There weren't. "I mean, hell, I take enough crap from the guys for being so ADD."

She smiled and put a hand on my shoulder. "Relax, Nick. I didn't mean to make you upset. Just give yourself a break; you've got a lot on your mind. It's not like you forgot the words to 'I Want It That Way' or something."

I snorted. "It would take some serious brain damage to make me do that."

“Yeah, then you can start worrying,” she joked, digging her cell phone. She flipped it open and shut again before adding, “I gotta get ready; I’m on soon.”

“Are you kicking me out?”

She smirked. “As much as I’m sure you’d love to watch me change... yes, I’m kicking you out. Go get some dinner before your show.”

I made a face. Food had lost its appeal; it hurt my mouth to eat, and everything I did manage to get down tasted funny. Cary said that was the chemo’s doing, too. I hoped it was at least still killing off cancer cells while it fucked with the rest of my body; I was getting pretty sick of these weird new side effects.

“At least try,” Cary begged. “You need some energy before you try to perform.”

I promised her I would try. But once I left her dressing room, I went and drank a Red Bull instead. It was better than food for boosting my energy, and it was a lot smoother going down.

When Cary went onstage, I stood backstage, hidden in the wings, and watched her perform. She’d changed into a short, red dress and heels that showed off her legs as she stood in the center of the stage, wiggling in time to the strumming of her ukulele. *“Off in the morning with the sweet sunrise, takes her time getting ready, then she’s off and running...”*

Her voice sounded as clear and pretty as it ever had, and if she still got nervous, I couldn’t tell. She wasn’t exactly a seasoned performer, but she had a charisma about her that made people want to watch and listen to her. I was so engrossed, myself, I didn’t even notice Brian standing next to me until he put his hand on my shoulder.

I turned in surprise. “Sup, Frick?”

“How ya doin’?” Brian asked in return.

I shrugged. “Meh. Being sick sucks, but I’ll live.” The irony of saying the one thing I couldn’t guarantee was not lost on me, but it was all I could think of to say. I didn’t want sympathy, and I didn’t want him to worry about me.

“Good medicine?” Brian asked, smirking, as he tipped his head toward the stage.

I followed his line of sight back to Cary and smiled. “I keep tellin’ her I want to see her in a naughty nurse costume, but that red dress sure ain’t bad, either.” I’ve always had a thing for legs. Lauren had killer legs. And Paris... legs for miles. Big feet, though. Cary’s feet looked dainty in her little heels, the way girls’ feet are supposed to be.

“She’s cute,” Brian acknowledged. “You like her?”

“Sure, I like her,” I said. And it wasn’t a lie. She wasn’t my usual type, but if circumstances were different, I might have pursued her. Besides being pretty, she was a sweet girl, a shy girl, the girl next door. She would have been a nice change from the badass chicks and just plain bad girls I’d dated in the past, the Mandys and Parises of the world. But I knew it was the wrong time to get involved with anyone right now.

Brian nodded. He slung his arm around me and sidled up closer, his eyes still fixed on Cary. Then he said, in a low voice just loud enough for me to hear, “She seems nice. But just... be careful with her, alright, Frack? They all start out nice, and then they start using you.”

I looked over at him, feeling my eyebrows shoot up. “You sayin’ she’s another gold digger?”

Brian shrugged. “All I’m sayin’ is, take your time. Get to know her better before you get too serious. I’m not trying to criticize, but I know you, Nick. I know how you tend to fall head over heels for a girl and get too wrapped up in her, too fast. And then you get burned.”

I resented that. “I haven’t been that way since Paris. Lesson learned. I wasn’t like that with Lauren.”

Brian considered that, then nodded. “No, you weren’t. I know you’ve grown up since Paris, but you and Cary have been spending so much time together...”

I shook my head. “It’s not that serious, Brian, trust me. I just like being around her. We’re just havin’ fun.” *Yeah, that’s it. Lots and lots of fun,* I thought sarcastically, pissed off that I was even having this conversation with my best friend. If he only knew what was really going on. *Butt the hell out, Brian,* I wanted to tell him, but of course I would never really say that to him. I knew he was just being the big brother, trying to protect me. That seemed all too familiar. “You know, you act a lot like your cousin sometimes.” That I would say to him; he’d heard it more and more often over the last few years, since Kevin had left.

Brian just shrugged and grinned, unoffended and unapologetic. “Well, someone’s gotta fill the void,” he said cheerfully, slapping me on the back. “I’m glad you’re havin’ fun. I just don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“I won’t. Not by her, anyway.”

He gave me a questioning look, but I shook my head, shrugging him off. “We should go get dressed.”

“Yeah...” Brian looked over at me again as we walked backstage to our dressing rooms. “You sure you’re all right to sing tonight?”

I nodded. “Thanks for your concern, but I’m fine, Brian.”

I guess he could tell he'd pissed me off, 'cause he left me alone after that. I could understand where he was coming from, but in this case, he didn't have a clue what he was talking about, and I knew it would hurt Cary if she knew what he thought of her. *You're her favorite, Bri, not me,* I wanted to tell him. *And she's not using me. If anything, I'm using her.*

But he would probably still hold it against her if he knew what she was helping me to do. And he would find out, eventually. Unless the chemo cured me and the cancer never came back, I would have to come clean at some point, after the tour. It wasn't going to be pretty when I did. At this point, I was in way over my head, and I dreaded the day when I'd have to tell them the truth about everything. But when you've got cancer, you take things one day at a time. And today wasn't that day.

Chapter 34

Nick

We had the next day off, which was awesome. I didn't have to worry about singing or even talking much, let alone actually performing. I spent most of the fourteen-hour bus ride to Boston lying around in my bunk, napping, watching DVDs, playing video games. Cary would come lie down in her bunk across from mine, and we'd talk across the aisle. I think she was all too happy to keep me quarantined in the bus, where the germs couldn't get me. My tonsils were still swollen, but at least my fever hadn't gotten any higher.

Eventually, we moved out to the lounge, where I got out my guitar and picked out chords for her, while she made up melodies and words to sing along – the jam session I'd promised her.

When we finally got to Boston and checked into our hotel, Cary said, "What do you wanna do about dinner? I'm starving, and you need to eat something. What do you feel like?"

Nothing really sounded all that appealing, but finally, I decided on lobster. I'd learned over the years of touring to get my seafood fix while we were on the coast, where it's the freshest and the best. Next week, we'd be heading to the Midwest, and the seafood there just isn't as good. After days of gray skies and rain, the weather was finally decent, so we found a seafood place with patio seating and ate our dinner outside. Even with the mouth sores and weird aftertastes everything had, I managed to polish off a plate full of lobster drenched in butter, clams, and potatoes. And afterwards, I felt better.

I wished I felt good enough for a whole night out on the town. It was fun being in Boston in the midst of the NBA finals, the night after the Celtics had won Game 2 of the

series against the Lakers. I wasn't the only one walking the streets in a Celtics cap and jersey, and you could feel the excitement in the air. It was electric. But I definitely wasn't up for a night of clubbing, so eventually, Cary and I headed back to the hotel.

On the way up to our floor, her cell phone rang. She pulled it out of her purse and frowned at it for a moment before answering. "Hello? Sorry, who did you say this was? You're cutting out... sorry... I'm in an elevator, hang on..." The elevator doors opened, and we stepped out. "Sorry, hello?" Cary asked again. "Oh, hi, Dr. Subramanien!"

She shot me a meaningful look, and I made a face back, wondering why Dr. Submarine was calling. It was probably about my blood sample, which might have made it out to her by now. I hoped it wasn't bad news.

"Oh good, you did?" Cary was saying into the phone, as we walked slowly down the hall. "Have you gotten the results back yet? Okay... uh-huh... No, he's been pretty run down, and his tonsils are swollen. He's been running a low-grade temp the last couple of days, but it hasn't gone above 100.4. He's developed mucositis, too, so that could be the source of the infection."

I was glad when we made it to my room. I had my key out and ready; I swiped it, opened the door, and practically shoved her in, just to get her out of the hall, where anyone could hear her talking about me on the phone like that.

"He won't want to hear that, but yeah, you're right," Cary said, now pacing around the room. She was frowning, one hand tugging at her hair while the other clutched the phone to her ear. "We're in Boston till tomorrow night. Oh, really? Okay... okay, yeah, just let us know. I'll get him there, one way or another." She laughed. "Alright. Thanks. Goodbye."

She lowered her phone and gave me a look. "You," she said, pointing at me, "had no business performing last night." She shook her finger, like a mom scolding her kid. "Your ANC is 750. Or was, when that sample was sent out, anyway. It's probably lower now."

I shrugged. "It was even lower last time," I offered.

Cary ignored me. "Your doctor suggested G-CSF injections to boost your body's production of white blood cells. But she wants you looked at by a doctor. She said she knows an oncologist in Boston she's going to try to get you an appointment with tomorrow morning, and you *will* go." Her tone of voice and the look on her face were so fierce, I fought the urge to laugh. I held it back, though, because I knew she was dead serious.

"Fine, I'll go if it's in the morning," I grudgingly agreed, "but I'm not letting anyone put me in the hospital again. I have to be back here for soundcheck."

"We'll see what the doctor has to say."

“But I get the final say. No one can make me stay against my will.”

She sighed. “No, you’re right. No one can make you stay. But I hope you’ll listen to whatever advice this doctor has to give you, even if you won’t listen to me.”

I flashed her my most irresistible smile. “I respect you, Cary. Tell me where and when the appointment is, and I’ll go, and I’ll listen. I promise to do that much.”

She returned the smile reluctantly – see, it really was irresistible – and replied, “Thank you. I guess that’s good enough... for tonight, anyway.”

The next morning, we got up early and ate breakfast in the hotel. Well, Cary ate. I just sort of picked at mine. While Brian and Howie were making plans to spend the morning sightseeing with their families, I had an appointment at Massachusetts General with a Dr. Woo. Cary was going to go with me, of course; I knew she wanted to hear what the doctor had to say, and secretly, I was glad, even if it meant she might side with him.

“Where are you two off to so early?” asked AJ, coming into the dining room for breakfast, just as we were leaving it.

Cary and I looked at each other. “Shopping,” she blurted.

She may not have realized her mistake, but I did – AJ loved shopping. Before he could invite himself along, I quickly added, “For underwear.” AJ raised his eyebrows, and I went on, “Let’s just say it was a... rough night last night – if you know what I mean. Lots of torn bras and panties that need replacing. Sorry, babe.” I looked at Cary. She was staring back at me in horror, her face bright red.

Yeah, okay, it was a douchey lie to make up, but come on, I was under pressure. What else was I going to say to get him off our tails? Even this wasn’t guaranteed to do it; I mean, just because I’d know better than to ask if I could go lingerie shopping with him and Rochelle didn’t mean AJ had the same level of judgment. He actually looked like he was considering it for a minute, the way he was eyeing Cary, but finally, he grinned and said, “Well... you kids have fun with that. Get something kinky.” He winked at Cary and then headed on into the dining room, probably to latch himself onto the Dorough family for the day instead.

“Are you kidding me?!” Cary hissed as we walked out of the hotel, smacking my arm hard.

“C’mon, I had to make it something he wouldn’t want to shop for; the guy loves to shop!” I tried to defend myself. “I guess I could have said you were shopping for tampons or something, but I didn’t think that would be as believable.”

“Ugh!!!”

I tried my irresistible smile again. It didn’t seem to have quite the same effect as the night before.

Cary flagged down a taxi outside the hotel and got in. I climbed in after her. “Massachusetts General,” she told the driver stiffly. It was the last thing she said until we pulled up in front of the hospital’s main entrance. I paid the cabby, and we got out. I felt pretty intimidated as I looked up at the building; this was one huge-ass hospital.

We walked into the lobby. Cary went right up to the front desk and came back a few seconds later, pointing at the door we’d just come in. “We need to go across the street to the Yawkey building. That’s where the Cancer Center is,” she said. So we walked back out and followed a sidewalk to another, smaller building, cattycorner from the main one. *Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care*, it said on the side of the building in blue letters. Well, that was good, seeing as how I was so dead set against becoming an inpatient.

We went in, and this time, we were directed upstairs to the seventh floor. This time, I knew we were in the right place because the lobby was filled with mostly old people and a few younger people who were wearing scarves to cover up their bald heads. I got a sick feeling of *déjà vu*, remembering my first appointment at the Hematology and Oncology clinic in Santa Monica, when I’d looked around a waiting room very similar to this one and thought, *I don’t belong here*.

But I did. I just hadn’t known it yet.

I swallowed hard as I looked around this room. As crappy as I felt, I could see that I was still better off than some of these people. And at least I still had my hair, hidden underneath the Celtics cap that I hoped would hide my face, too. I didn’t want to be recognized. Not here.

Again, Cary went up to the receptionist’s desk and did the talking. We were escorted back right away, without having to wait. Dr. Submarine must have arranged for me to get the VIP treatment. Even though I felt sort of guilty for jumping the line in front of all the other, worse-off people in the waiting room, I appreciated that. I was anxious to get this over with and go on to the venue.

A nurse led us into an exam room and took my vitals, and then we were introduced to the doctor. He was a surprisingly tall Asian-American man, probably in his late thirties or early forties. *Reid Woo, M.D.*, the gold-plated nametag on his white coat said. “I’m Dr. Woo,” he introduced himself, shaking my hand and then Cary’s. He sat down on a stool in front a laptop, where the nurse had typed in all my information. “I spoke with Dr. Subramanien earlier,” he said, scanning the screen. “She faxed over your medical history and latest set of labs. Your bloodwork doesn’t look great; you’re neutropenic, which means your white cell count is low. She said you reported a low-grade fever and sore throat?”

I nodded. "Yeah, my tonsils are huge. But my whole mouth is jacked up..."

"Mucositis," Cary put in. "It just started on Saturday, a few days after he finished up chemo for this cycle. I've had him gargling salt water and baking soda and sucking ice chips, but maybe you could prescribe him something topical for the pain."

I looked at her gratefully. She knew how to talk to doctors in a way I didn't.

Dr. Woo nodded, snapping on a pair of gloves, and motioned for me to open my mouth. He stuck a tongue depressor in and shined his light around. "Definitely mucositis," he agreed. "It looks painful. I'll write you a scrip for MuGard – it's a special rinse that coats your mouth. I do want to swab the back of your throat, to check for further infection." I tried not to gag as he stuck what looked like a giant Q-Tip into my mouth and swiped it around my tonsils. It hurt like hell.

"I'll send this to the lab for a throat culture and a rapid strep test," he said. "We won't have the results of the throat culture back for a couple of days, but the rapid strep test only takes about fifteen minutes. Either way, I'll start you on antibiotics, just to be on the safe side. It may be viral, but with your immune system compromised, I don't want to take any chances by delaying treatment. Dr. Subramanien also recommended granulocyte colony-stimulating factor injections, to speed up the growth of neutrophils – white blood cells." He looked at Cary. "Have you given G-CSF injections before?"

"We usually gave it through an IV when I worked in oncology," she said, though by that time, I'd checked out mentally – too many big medical words being thrown around. It made my head hurt. "Can I inject it into his port?"

"No, you'd have to infuse it. Outside a hospital setting, it's much easier to give as a subcutaneous injection."

With a glance in my direction, Cary nodded. "I can do that."

"Okay. I'll get this to the lab and come back with your prescriptions when we know the results of the strep test."

When he left the room, I looked at Cary and raised my eyebrows. "Injections? As in, shots?"

She gave me a sympathetic smile. "It'll help your body get rid of the infection and prevent another one. I promise to be gentle."

I heaved a huge sigh. "This sucks."

I was surprised when all she said was, "I know." Nothing else about it being for the best, nothing about keeping a positive attitude, nothing about giving it all up and going home. Just "I know." In a way, it was the most helpful thing she could say.

When the doctor came back about fifteen minutes later, he said, "Well, the good news is, you don't have strep. The bad news is, since the strep test was negative, we don't know what kind of infection you do have. It could be bacterial, or it could be viral. I'm going to go ahead and give you a prescription for antibiotics. Even if it turns out not to be bacterial, the antibiotics might help prevent a second infection."

I had just finished my last prescription of antibiotics the other day. But I accepted the slip of paper, along with two others for the shots and the mouth rinse he'd mentioned, and decided I was getting off pretty easy. At least he hadn't threatened to hospitalize me.

Dr. Woo shook both our hands again, then gave us directions to the hospital pharmacy, where we could pick up the prescriptions. When we finally walked out of the hospital, I dug my phone out of my pants pocket and checked the time. It was not even noon; we had hours before we had to be at soundcheck. As we waited for a cab, I looked over at Cary and said, "I guess that wasn't *that* bad."

She beamed. "Are you saying I was *right*, Nick Carter?"

"Shh!" I hissed when she said my name, glancing around to see if anyone was looking in our direction. I guess the good thing about standing outside a hospital is that everyone who's coming or going is preoccupied; they all had bigger things on their minds than whether or not that guy in the green hoodie was a Backstreet Boy. "Yeah, you were right," I admitted in a low voice.

The ride back to the hotel was a lot more talkative.

Cary went right back into nurse mode the minute we got back to my hotel room.

She spread the contents of the paper bag we'd picked up at the pharmacy out on my bed and said, "You aren't supposed to eat or drink anything for an hour after using the mouth rinse, so we should probably get you some lunch first, then do the first dose this afternoon, before we head to the venue. You can take your antibiotic now and then again after the show." She tossed me a bottle of pills; I caught it, turning it over in my hand to read the label. Cary was still talking. "The injections are only once a day, so do you want to try one now or wait until tonight?"

Realizing she had asked me a question, I looked up. "Huh? Oh... uh... let's just get it over with now, I guess," I muttered, figuring I might as well see how bad it was now, rather than spend the rest of the day dreading it. I'm not usually a baby about needles – if I was, I wouldn't have so many tattoos – but I felt like a little kid, afraid of getting a shot at the doctor's office.

I sat nervously on the edge of the bed, while Cary moved around the room, washing her hands, setting up the supplies she needed on the table. Finally, she said, “Where do you want the injection? Arm or thigh?”

Well, at least it didn’t have to go in my ass. “Arm, I guess.”

“Okay. Take off your sweatshirt and come over here.”

Leaving my Celtics hoodie on the bed, I sat down at the table and looked at the syringe she had set out. It wasn’t too big. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt much.

Cary rolled up the sleeve of my t-shirt and rubbed the back of my upper arm with an alcohol wipe. “Little pinch,” she said as she squeezed my arm fat between her fingers and picked up the syringe. “Now a bee sting.” I sucked in a sharp breath through my gritted teeth as I felt the needle slide under my skin. I couldn’t see what she was doing, but a few seconds later, the pain disappeared, and she said, “All done.”

I let out my breath, feeling relieved. “That wasn’t that bad.”

She smiled, looking relieved herself. “Told you I’d be gentle.” She checked the back of my arm again. “Not a mark on you – you’re not even bleeding.”

“Good.” The last thing I needed was the guys noticing track marks on my arms.
“Thanks.”

She cleaned up, dropping the used syringe into the sharps container we had to carry around with the chemo supplies, and then said, “Let’s get lunch. What do you feel like? I saw some takeout places around here if you want me to go get something and bring it back.”

Nothing sounded good, but I said, “Yeah, alright... I don’t really care; get whatever you want.”

She thought for a minute. “I know it’s June, but what about some soup?” she suggested. “That might feel good on your throat.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

She nodded. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

After she left, I stretched out on the bed and closed my eyes, feeling sorry for myself. The other guys were all out on the town, enjoying the nice weather and the rare bit of free time before our show, and I was cooped up in my hotel room, too sick and tired to go out again until I absolutely had to. Cary was running all over to get me food and anything else I needed, and although I appreciated it, I couldn’t even enjoy it.

It sucked feeling so crappy. I just hoped that, as the antibiotics did their thing and my blood counts came up again, I would start to feel better. Otherwise, I didn't know how I was going to make it through the rest of the tour.

Chapter 35

Cary

“Cary! Holy hell, is that really you?”

I laughed at the tone of my best friend Jessica’s voice. “Yeah, it’s really me,” I replied, pressing the phone closer to my ear. “Sorry, I’ve been meaning to call you, but it’s just been crazy here, and our schedules are totally opposite...”

“Oh, do *not* even go there. You lucky bitch, sleeping all day and partying all night, while I reenact *Office Space* in my cubicle from nine to five every day. *So not fair,*” Jessica sniffed, but I knew she was only kidding. She had the perfect yuppie life: six-figure income, handsome hubby, beautiful daughter, and a brand new McMansion in the suburbs. She had no reason to be jealous of me.

“Trust me, it’s not quite as glamorous as it sounds,” I said, and wasn’t that the truth? If she even had half a clue as to what I’d really been doing when I wasn’t onstage... “It’s not like I’m touring with The Rolling Stones or something.”

“I dunno; I think there’s plenty of girlies out there who would much rather tour with the Backstreet Boys than the Stones. Have you gotten in Nick Carter’s pants yet?”

Funny she should ask that, I thought with a wry smile, glancing toward the back of the bus, where Nick was in his bunk, playing one of his video games. “It’s not like that,” I told Jess. “We’re... friends.”

“Friends with benefits?” she sing-songed knowingly. I guess my hesitation was enough to reveal that there was more going on between us than friendship. She just didn’t know what it was. It was the same conclusion all the guys had jumped to, and Nick and I had just been playing along. I wished I could tell her the truth, but Nick had sworn me to secrecy. I wouldn’t break his trust.

“So, how’s everything been with you? How’s the family?” I asked, ignoring her last question.

“Oh, you can try to change the subject, Cary, but just you wait till I see you in person next week. I’ll get you to spill,” she said, snickering. “Things are fine here – same old, same old. You haven’t been missing out on much.”

“I can’t wait to get home,” I replied eagerly. “It’s been awesome seeing the country, but I’ve been living out of a suitcase for a solid month. It’ll be nice to sleep in my own bed for a night – and see you, of course!”

I was counting down the days till we made it to Illinois. Three more days, two more shows, and we’d be there. We had a day off before the show in Highland Park on Thursday, and I was going to use it to drive down to Decatur, where I’d grown up, and surprise my dad. He and Jess would be coming back with me the next day to see the show. I couldn’t wait. I missed my dad, and I missed my friends. I missed Hambelina. I missed my apartment and my bed and my closet, where I could actually hang up my clothes and spread out my shoes.

“Aww, I can’t wait to see you, either!” said Jess. “I got Thursday off to go to the show, and Dan’s on babysitting duty, so I’m home free. Just let me know what your schedule looks like so we can make some plans.”

We talked awhile longer and figured out our game plan for Thursday. By the time I got off the phone, I’d killed off half an hour, and it was almost time to get ready for soundcheck. We were in West Long Branch, New Jersey that night, to perform at the concert venue at Monmouth University. From what I’d seen, walking around campus a little that morning, it reminded me of my alma mater, Millikin. That made me even more homesick. *Three days*, I reminded myself. After tonight’s show, we were driving up to Connecticut, and then, finally, we’d leave the east coast and head to the Midwest.

We had an easy week ahead, as far as our tour schedule went – no more than two shows in a row, with days off in between to travel. As nice as that was, I gladly would have swapped it with the following week, when we six shows with only one day off in the middle. If his blood counts stayed up, Nick was supposed to be starting his next cycle of chemo next weekend – right when the schedule got crazy again. I felt bad because he was finally starting to feel good again.

“Hey, Nick!” I called back to the bunks. “It’s almost time to go. You wanna do your shot first?”

He didn’t answer, but I heard movement in the back of the bus, and within a few seconds, he’d made his way up to the front. I gave him a quick once-over; even in a plain white t-shirt and gray sweats, he looked a lot better than he had the week before. There was more color in his cheeks and less shadow under his eyes. His tonsils had gone back to their usual size, and the mucositis had cleared up, too. We wouldn’t hear the results of his latest bloodwork until at least tomorrow, but I had no doubt that the numbers would be better. I could tell just in how he was feeling – less tired, more like his fun-loving old self. It was just too bad it wouldn’t last. Next week, he’d be suffering the effects of the chemo again.

“Aight, let’s do this,” said Nick. He dropped his sweatpants and plopped down onto the couch next to me. I snuck a peek at his boxer briefs and smirked to myself, remembering Jess asking me, “*Have you gotten in Nick Carter’s pants yet?*”

Well, technically, yes. I'd alternated arms for the first few days of the G-CSF injections, but both his arms were starting to get sore from the repeated needle sticks, so we'd switched to legs. "Just a sec," I said, going over to the kitchen area to wash my hands and get one of the pre-filled syringes out of the fridge.

I had the syringe in my hand when I heard a familiar, raspy voice yell, "Hey, Carter, you 'bout ready?" It startled me so much, I dropped the syringe, which clattered to the floor and rolled, right up to a pair of brown, cow print sneakers. I stared up in horror at AJ, who stooped down to pick up the syringe. He gave me a searching look, frowning as he rolled it carefully between his fingers.

Before he could get a close look at the label, I snatched it out of his hand. "Thanks!" I said brightly, my voice unusually high-pitched. Being a nurse has its advantages; I know how to stay reasonably calm under pressure, and I'm used to thinking on my feet. The lie came to me quickly. "Insulin injection," I added, waving the syringe as casually as I could, though I could feel myself shaking on the inside. "I have to give them to myself twice a day; I'm a diabetic."

"Oh!" He was still frowning, but I could see the suspicious look lift from his face. "I didn't know that. Sorry."

I shrugged. "It's no big deal. I've been doing this since I was a kid, so I'm used to it. You just startled me; I didn't hear you come on the bus."

"Oh – sorry," he said again. "I was just checking to see if Nick was ready to head in for soundcheck."

I glanced over my shoulder at Nick, hoping he'd managed to pull his pants back up while AJ was distracted. He had, thank goodness. "Yeah, I'll be there in a few," he told AJ. "Just gonna brush my teeth first." He retreated to the bathroom at the back of the bus.

I flashed AJ my sweetest smile and said, "How 'bout I finish this real quick, and Nick and I will meet you outside in five?"

"Oh yeah, sure," AJ agreed, turning to leave. "Sorry again for barging in on you like that," he called over his shoulder.

"No problem!" I waited until I saw him get off the bus, then hurried to the back. "All clear," I whispered.

Nick poked his head out of the bathroom door. "Shit, that was way too fuckin' close."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"No, it's not your fault. AJ needs to learn how to fucking knock. You were awesome! Thanks for covering for me like that."

I met his gaze, satisfied with the sheepish look on his face. “I don’t like lying, not even for you, but... you’re welcome.”

He gave a guilty nod and said, “I know. Sorry for putting you in that situation. I’m gonna tell them eventually, you know... That’s just not the way I would’ve wanted them to find out.”

“I know. That’s why I lied.”

“Thanks,” he said again. His eyes dropped to the syringe I still had in my hand. “Can we just get this over with in here, in case he comes back?”

“Yeah, good plan,” I agreed.

He lowered his pants again, closed the toilet seat, and sat down. I knelt on the floor next to him and opened a fresh alcohol wipe. He flinched when I used it to disinfect the injection site.

“Shit, those are cold.”

“Sorry.” I smiled; his leg hair was standing straight up from goosebumps.

I uncapped the syringe and pinched a hunk of flesh from his thigh. It was times like this when I was glad I usually worked with the elderly – I never had to feel embarrassed about touching a hot guy in a place that was verging on private. Then again, Nick made for a much more pleasant sight than my usual clientele. I just had to avoid looking up at his face and focus on the patch of bare skin in front of me, as I tipped the syringe to a forty-five degree angle and carefully slid it in. I felt him tense up with the pain, but he held still while I injected him with the clear fluid from the syringe. “There,” I said, sliding the needle back out. A drop of blood squeezed out of the pinprick hole in his leg; I handed him a cotton ball to hold over it.

“Thanks,” he sighed. He pressed the cotton ball to his thigh for a few minutes, while I cleaned up, then tossed it into the trash and stood, pulling his pants back up. He followed me back to the front of the bus, where he helped himself to some chocolate that was sitting out on the kitchen counter. “This stuff is finally tasting right again,” he said, with his mouth full.

“Glad to hear it.” I smiled. It was just nice to see him with an appetite again. Between dancing almost every night and not eating much, he looked like he had lost even more weight, without even trying. I, on the other hand, had probably gained it from sitting around on this damned tour bus, eating chocolate all day. “Get rid of that stuff for me, would you?” I added, pointing at the leftover candy bars. “I can’t have any now that I’m diabetic.” I winked.

He grinned, his teeth all chocolaty, and took another piece. When he was done, he licked his lips, wiped his fingers on his pants, and said, “We better go. You ready?”

“Yep.” I put on a pair of sandals, and he put on the white Celtics cap he’d been wearing for days. Then we got off the tour bus. AJ was waiting for us outside, along with two of the bodyguards, Michael and Q. They escorted us into the venue through the backstage entrance.

The Boys’ stage was set up, but crew members were still walking around, getting the sound equipment ready. We each did a quick soundcheck to make sure everything worked, before Justin, from the fan club, let the fans in for the soundcheck party. I loved watching the soundchecks; they were like mini-concerts, only way more laidback, and it was fun to see the guys goof off with each other. Howie was usually serious, but Brian was such a ham, and AJ and Nick – when he was feeling okay – could get pretty silly, too.

I could tell Nick was in a good mood by the obnoxious falsetto voice he used to sing “Masquerade.” He got all up in Howie’s face, until Howie retaliated by licking his cheek. Brian wasn’t feeling it. He texted on his phone when it wasn’t his turn to sing and rolled his eyes as he jumped in with his harmonies on the chorus. I don’t know why he seemed to hate “Masquerade” so much; I thought it was a pretty good song.

When the fans requested “Shattered” – one of my favorites from *This Is Us* – AJ started singing it normally. *“So empty, can’t feel no more, as I’m left with my tears on the floor...”*

Then Nick looked over and said, “AJ, give it McDonald. Michael McDonald.”

All of a sudden, AJ’s voice dropped an octave in an impression of Michael McDonald that made me choke on the water I was drinking. *“Wait for my heart to mend, but you keep tearing a hole...”*

Then Brian came in with his solo. *“Inside I’m so lost...”* he warbled in a deep, old man’s vibrato.

“So lost,” Nick whispered into his mic.

“... in the middle of my heart...” I giggled helplessly; Brian was practically eating his microphone, his mouth contorting hilariously to get the sound he wanted. *“It’s a battlefield of love, I’ve been fighting for too long...”*

“And now I’m shattered...” they sang together.

“From you chipping my heart,” belted Nick, his voice deeper and more soulful than I’d ever known it could be, *“kept taking it till it broke...”*

“Oh, how it hurts...”

“Felt it slip from your hands, hit the ground and now it’s shattered...” As Brian started laughing, my mouth dropped open, and I stared at Nick in astonishment, unable to believe that kind of voice was coming out of his mouth. I knew they were just messing around, but he actually sounded *good!*

“*I’m so shatter-er-er-er-ered...*” wheezed Brian.

Nick was cracking himself up. “*Can’t believe, it was me, I’m so shattered...*”

“*So shatter-er-er-er-ered...*”

“*Can’t believe, you and me, ahh...*”

“*So shatter-er-er-er-er-ered...*”

“*Can’t believe, you left me, I’m so shattered...*”

“*Shattered, cut from with inside...*”

“*Ohhh... what am I still here for?*” warbled Nick, lisping his “s,” and as Brian lost it onstage, so did I. “*Could it be that I’m just waiting?*” Tears stung my eyes as I burst out laughing at his hilarious, dead-on impression. “*Hoping you’d rescue me, and put the pieces to-*” As the fans shrieked with laughter, Nick started cracking up again in the middle and struggled to finish his verse. “*-geth... a-*” He completely lost it on “*again*” and almost fell off his stool.

The best was when even Howie started doing it. “*Inside I’m so lost,*” he sang in the Michael McDonald voice, and Brian threw his arms up in victory. “*In the middle of my heart...*” It was so weird hearing him sing that low; he sounded like a completely different person. “*It’s a battlefield of love, I’ve been fighting for so long...*”

“*And now I’m shattered...*” they sang.

Nick still did it the best, though. “*From you chipping my heart, kept taking it till it broke...*”

As they went on singing that way, I just watched him, completely enthralled. He amazed me, the way he could be so funny and still sound so good, despite the deadly secret he was hiding. He was a true entertainer. It wasn’t just me; he had everyone in the room under his spell. This was what he was meant to do.

“Felt it slip from your hands, hit the ground and now it’s shattered...” He had the cutest smile on his face, clearly amused with himself, and in that moment, he looked genuinely happy.

And despite the worry and grief he put me through, the secrets he made me keep and the lies he made me tell, in that moment, I realized how happy he made me, too.

Chapter 36

Cary

The little crush I had on Nick carried me through the next few days, as crushes tend to do.

I felt like I was in junior high again, when my sole purpose for going to school was to see whichever boy I thought I was in love with that week. I remembered sitting behind Ben Polwarth in science class, just staring at the back of his head instead of my textbook, daydreaming about kissing him instead of listening to the lecture. I was too shy to talk to him outside of class, but in science, he was my lab partner; we dissected a frog together. I wasn't afraid to touch the frog, like most of the girls in my class were, but I let him do most of the dissecting, to make him feel macho. It was no wonder I got a B in science that year, instead of my usual A. Even so, it was my favorite class.

Being around Nick was a lot like that.

I had grown out of my shy phase, so I had no trouble talking to him. I felt like we were friends, even if our friendship had sort of been forced, and I loved hanging out with him. But his mere presence distracted me, and the growing feelings I had for him made it difficult to keep playing my part as his own personal nurse. Whether he was aware of my feelings or not, I knew that I was crossing a line. I'd always had my toes on that line, just being a fan, but now I felt like I had one foot over.

I had always liked him, and he knew it; he used it to his benefit whenever he could. But something had changed. Our relationship was more than that of celebrity and fan, and it was more than patient and nurse. I felt more than friendship for him, but if I let it become more than just friends, it had the potential to get awkward – more awkward than it already was. I cared about him, but I couldn't let my feelings get in the way of caring *for* him.

So I tried to keep my distance. Even though we were still sharing a bus, it wasn't as hard as you'd think. He spent most of our day off in Connecticut playing *World of Warcraft*, which was apparently a very involved game – it kept him occupied for hours, while I read in my bunk.

The next day, we had a show, followed by an after party. I didn't go this time. I'd found the one in Miami too crowded and chaotic, girls swarming around the VIP booth with cameras and phones in the guys' faces constantly. But Nick had bailed on the one in Virginia, the day after his doctor's appointment in Boston, so he felt obligated to go to

this one. He got back on the bus in the early morning hours, exhausted and buzzed, and promptly crashed in his bunk. I kept my comments about his drinking to myself and let him sleep.

When he woke up in the morning, we were parked somewhere in Ohio, while our driver took a nap, after driving through the night. It turned out to be about a fifteen hour drive from Uncasville, Connecticut to Highland Park, Illinois, and it was early evening before we crossed the state line from Indiana. I looked out my window in time to see the sign that said *Welcome to Illinois, The Land of Lincoln* and caught a glimpse of Lake Michigan, which was so wide, it could almost pass for the ocean we'd left back on the east coast. Then I-90 veered north, and I could see the Chicago skyline out my window. Chicago had always seemed like someplace new and big and exciting on the rare occasions I'd driven there with my dad or grandparents as a kid, but now, it felt almost like home. I looked out at the Sears Tower and John Hancock building and the Smurfit-Stone building, with its shiny, diamond-shaped roof, and felt like I was back in familiar territory.

"Glad to be home?" Nick asked, flopping down next to me on the couch. He was hungover and disheveled, but he still managed to look hot with his clothes all rumpled and his hair sticking out.

"I'm not home yet," I replied, looking out the window, "but yeah, it feels good to be back in Illinois."

"Are you still planning to drive back to your hometown tonight? It's gonna be pretty late, ain't it?"

"Yeah," I said, "but it'll be worth it. I really wanna see Hambelina. And my dad, of course."

He snorted. "I gotta meet this pet pig of yours. You gonna invite me home with you, or what?"

I looked over at him, caught by surprise. I hadn't invited him to come with me, mostly because I'd figured he wouldn't care to. I'd given him his last G-CSF injection the day before, and he didn't start chemo again until Saturday, so it wasn't like he needed me around; he would be fine on his own for a night. But now I raised my eyebrows and asked, "Do you want to? You're more than welcome to come."

He stretched his arms above his head and scrunched up his face. "It'd be nice to get off this bus," he said. "Sleep in a real bed... enjoy some home-cookin'." He shot me a grin.

I laughed. "Well, I'll warn you now, my dad's not much of a cook, unless it's something he can put on the grill. But he's got an extra bed, and it's yours if you want it. We'd love to have you stay."

"I'll take you up on that offer, then," replied Nick, and a little thrill ran through me. What would Jess say in the morning when she saw I'd brought Nick Carter home with me? And introduced him to my dad? After all her talk about getting in his pants, I was never going to live it down. But even though I'd been trying to keep my distance, there was a part of me that was secretly glad he had invited himself along.

We each packed an overnight bag, and our driver was nice enough to drop us off at an Enterprise before continuing on to park the bus. We rented a car and jumped right back on the highway, heading south this time. It typically would have been at least a three-and-a-half hour drive down to Decatur, but I made it in under three.

It felt weird to be driving familiar roads with Nick Carter in the passenger seat. Even when I'd flown out to Los Angeles to meet him, I'd never guessed I'd be bringing him back to my place. As we got closer to home, I started feeling nervous. I pictured his beautiful, high-rise condo and wondered what would he think of my dad's little old split-level house. I thought of my dad, probably asleep in his recliner in front of the TV by now, and wondered if I should have called ahead to let him know I was coming – and bringing a guest. He was always up for visitors, and I knew he'd be thrilled to see me, but what if the house was a mess? Or what if he'd locked up for the night and gone to bed already?

As we turned onto his street, the street I'd grown up on, I was relieved to see a lamp on in the front window. That meant he was still up. The curtains moved in the window as our headlights cut across the front of the house, and I knew he was peeking out, trying to figure out who would be in his driveway at nine o'clock on a Wednesday night.

I cut the engine, and Nick and I got out. "Is this the house you grew up in?" he asked, looking up at it, as I led him up the concrete steps to the front porch.

"Yep. My dad's lived here for thirty years. I don't think he'll move until he can't climb the stairs anymore."

The porch light went on, and the front door opened before I could even knock. There stood my dad behind the clear, glass storm door, squinting out at us in astonishment.

I grinned and held out my arms. "Surprise!"

He threw the storm door open and cried, "Cary! Why didn't you tell me you were coming down, sweetheart?" He pulled me into his arms, squeezing me tightly, and I closed my eyes, inhaling his familiar scent. He wore the same brand of aftershave he'd used since I was a little girl.

"I didn't know for sure when we'd get in," I said apologetically. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, you certainly did. That's the best surprise you could give an old man." He ushered me in, then looked up at Nick, as if noticing him for the first time. "And you

brought company. I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. Frank," he said, holding out his hand.

Nick shook it. "Nick. Nice to meet you, sir."

I snorted at Nick calling my dad "sir." The over-the-top politeness sounded so stiff coming from him. "You don't have to be formal around here, trust me," I said, shooting him a grin.

"That's right," said my dad. "Well, come on up, kids. Can I get you two anything to drink?" He had probably been conked out in his chair five minutes ago, but now he was up and animated, in full host mode. "I've got root beer, milk, Kool-Aid..."

Oh god, did he really just offer Nick Carter Kool-Aid? I laughed to myself, shaking my head, as we followed him up the stairs to the main level of the house. "Root beer sounds good, Dad, thanks."

"Same here," added Nick.

At the top of the stairs, I stopped and looked around for my pig. She always followed me into the kitchen at my apartment, but apparently, she hadn't picked up the same habit with my dad. Or maybe she was just hiding because she knew there was a stranger in the house. "Hambe-li-na!" I sang, my voice ringing down the hall. "Where are you, baby? Hammy girl?"

I didn't even care that I sounded ridiculous, or that Nick was probably laughing at me behind my back. When I heard that familiar squeal and saw my little, pink teacup pig trotting up the hall toward me, I threw my arms open and cried, "Hammy!" Hambelina gave an oink of excitement as I scooped her up into my arms, planting a kiss on her snout. "Oh, my baby, Mama missed you!"

I stood up, cradling her in my arms, and finally turned back to Nick. He was smirking at me, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "This is Hambelina," I said in a dignified way, holding her out for him to see.

"Aww... she's a cute little pork chop," he teased, grinning. "She's like a bacon bit."

"Ah, I see you found your little oinker," said my dad, reappearing with two glasses of root beer in his hands. "Come on in and sit down."

We went into the living room. The TV was on, and so was the lamp next to my dad's recliner. The remote was resting on the arm of the chair. I wasn't surprised to see that the White Sox game was on. Nick noticed, too, and stopped in front of the TV to check the score.

"Are you a baseball fan, Nick?" my dad asked, settling back in his chair.

“Eh, from time to time. I’m more of a basketball and football fanatic, though, to be honest.”

“Been watching the NBA finals?”

Nick’s whole face lit up with enthusiasm. “Heck yeah! I’m hoping my Celtics will come out on top tomorrow night.”

“Celtics? I figured you’d be more of a Lakers guy.”

Nick shook his head. “Oh, no. I live in L.A. I *breathe* Boston.”

I was surprised he wasn’t wearing that damn cap of his again, but, apparently, he saved it for game days. He’d been hurrying back to the bus after his shows about every other night for the last week to catch the end of the Celtics/Lakers games. I knew nothing about sports, but even I had to admit, it had been a pretty good series, with the two teams going back and forth, dragging the whole thing out to the seventh and final game.

I sat on the couch with Nick, holding Hambelina in my lap, and listened in amusement as the two of them talked basketball for a few minutes. My dad was a huge sports fan, and so was Nick; it was probably the only thing they had in common, but at least it was something. Finally, they remembered my existence, and my dad asked about the tour. I’d been catching up with him on the phone every few days, but it was good to finally talk face to face. Nick and I shared stories from the road, carefully leaving out all the parts he didn’t want anyone else to know.

Away from the tour bus, away from the pills and syringes and pouches of chemotherapy drugs in Nick’s suitcase, it was almost possible to forget, or at least pretend that he wasn’t sick, that we’d just been having the time of our lives over the last few weeks. Nick was in good spirits and as charismatic as ever; he talked and joked around like nothing was wrong. I had to hand it to him: when he was feeling up to it, he had that act perfected.

It made me sad, though, to wonder what was really going through his head sometimes. Even around me, he never really talked much about his feelings. He always seemed to be in a certain state of denial, where he acted like everything was okay – or would be, eventually. Like if he kept taking his pills and shots and doing his chemo, he’d be cured, just like that. Did he really believe that, I wondered, or was he just trying to convince himself as much as me? Did he ever get scared that it wouldn’t work?

I knew that fear. I knew that feeling of lying awake long past my bedtime, in my old bedroom in this house, praying with all my might for God to make my mommy better, and worrying about what it would be like if He didn’t. I prayed right up until the night my mother died, and for days, weeks, years afterward, I lay in that same bed and cried myself to sleep.

Sometimes, lying in my bunk on the tour bus late at night, listening to Nick's faint snores across the aisle from me, it felt like *déjà vu*. I'd think, *Why am I putting myself through this again?* But, looking over at him now, watching the way he talked to my dad like they were old friends, I knew the answer. When you care about someone, you do everything you can for them. You're there through the good times and the bad, and sometimes, you let yourself get hurt just to take away their pain.

I could keep my distance, but I would never abandon Nick just to protect my own heart, when I was the one person he had trusted to help him. Some things in life are worth the risk. Wasn't that the whole reason Nick was doing this?

We ordered pizza for a late dinner, and after sitting around for a couple more hours, just talking and catching up, it was time for bed. We had an early start in the morning; I wanted to pay a quick visit to the nursing home and say hi to the people I worked with, and then it would be time to pick up Jess and head back to Chicago in time for the soundcheck and show.

My dad locked up and told me to wake him if I needed anything. With a smile, I reminded him that I had lived in this house for twenty-two years before moving out on my own; I knew where everything was. Other than keeping up with the usual repairs, he had hardly changed a thing in two decades, since my mom died. The carpet was the same basic beige she had picked out to replace the original avocado green shag that had covered the floors when they'd moved in as newlyweds. The kitchen had the same wooden cupboards, country blue laminate countertops, and off-white linoleum floor tiles. I couldn't remember the last time the walls had been repainted or repapered. Only the pictures that hung on them showed the passing of time.

When I took Nick down the hallway that led to the three bedrooms, he stopped and looked at the framed photos that lined it. They were sort of like a storyboard, sequenced to tell the story of our family. Nick leaned in closer to get a good look at my parents' wedding photo from 1980 – my dad a good thirty pounds lighter, with a full head of hair and something resembling a pornstache, and my mom in her poofy white wedding gown with long lace sleeves, her hair feathered out beneath her veil. "She looked just like you," he said quietly, brushing his fingertip across her face.

I had heard that all my life, and it was true. She'd had the same thick, dark hair, before the chemo had taken it, and the same green eyes. I smiled. "I know."

I was in the next picture, a newborn in my mother's arms. From there, I dominated the wall; my face was in every frame. A toddler in a red velvet dress, standing in front of the Christmas tree. A kindergartener sporting a brand new bookbag and two missing teeth, waiting for the school bus on the first day of school. An eight-year-old with a long ponytail and a shy smile, posing by the piano before my first recital.

After that, there was a gap in the photos; I went from eight to thirteen in the next one, taken at my eighth grade graduation, when I had a big, fluffy perm and a mouth full of metal. Nick snickered at it. “Yeah, yeah,” I said, “Go on, laugh it up. I’ve seen pictures of you at that age – *and* videos.”

He groaned. “Let’s not go there.”

“Exactly. Keep walking.”

At the end of the hall, there were two empty frames. “What are these, the year you went as the Invisible Woman for Halloween?” he asked, smiling at his own joke.

I indulged him with a smile back and said, “No. Before she died, my mom put all these up, with instructions for my dad about what to put in them. Eighth grade graduation... first car... senior prom... high school graduation... college...” I pointed out all the frames he had successfully filled. “She must have known he’d never get around to it otherwise.”

“Oh. That’s kinda neat...” he said, but I could tell he just thought it was sad. “So what are these last two for?”

I lifted the first frame off its hook on the wall and turned it over to show him the little piece of masking tape on the back, neatly labeled in my mother’s small, round handwriting. It said, *Cary’s wedding day*. On the other frame was a label that said, *First grandchild*. I didn’t mention that there was another frame I’d found once in the attic, one that my dad had either taken down or never hung up. Its label was *Second wife*.

Nick chuckled. “You better get a move on, girl,” he said, elbowing me playfully.

I knew he was just kidding, but that stung a little. It had been just over a year since I’d ended my last serious relationship, with the guy I’d thought might be “the one.” I had been ready to settle down with him, get married and start a family, but he hadn’t been up for the same commitment. After hemming and hawing over buying me a ring, when I’d been dropping hints for months, he’d finally confessed that he just wasn’t sure about getting engaged. We’d been together two years – which, when you hit your late twenties and feel your biological clock start ticking, seemed like an appropriate length of time to get to know each other. But, apparently, I hadn’t known him as well as I’d thought.

In a way, splitting up with him was what had prompted me to audition for *American Idol*. Dating after the break-up had just made me depressed, so I’d decided to swear off men for awhile and do something crazy while I was still single and free to do it. I guess I had him to thank for the fact that I was now touring the country with the Backstreet Boys and had Nick Carter standing next to me in my dad’s house.

Something must have shown on my face, as all that went through my head, because Nick said, “Sorry, is that like a sore spot or something?”

I shrugged and shook my head. “No, it’s fine.”

His gaze lingered on me for a few seconds. Then he shrugged, too, and said, “I don’t believe in marriage anyway. Half of marriages end in divorce, so what’s the fucking point?”

I thought of my father, who had never really even dated, let alone thought of marrying another woman after my mother, and of my grandparents, who had been married for sixty years before death parted them. I didn’t agree with Nick, though I could understand his cynicism.

“If you love someone, you should just be together; you don’t need a title or a ring or a fucking certificate to prove it,” he ranted on, and that I could agree with. “Marriage just gets messy. Love, real love, should be simple.”

“You done?” I asked, smiling up at him to show I was just teasing.

He grinned back, blushing a little. “Yeah, I’m good. Let’s go to bed.”

I showed him to the guest room, which was fixed up with a queen-size four-poster and matching bedroom set that used to belong to my grandparents. Once he was settled, I went on into my old bedroom, which looked almost the same as it had when I was in high school. A little emptier, of course, but my old twin bed was still there, along with the dolls and stuffed animals I’d loved as a little girl. The closest held boxes of my old toys and clothes that still had sentimental value, and on the walls – oh God, I’d forgotten about the walls – were posters I’d put up in the late nineties. Along with images of Audrey Hepburn from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Marilyn Monroe, and Betty Boop, the faded faces of various hot male celebrities I’d lusted over back then smoldered down at me from all sides – Brad Pitt... Leonardo DiCaprio... Devon Sawa... George Clooney... and, of course, The Backstreet Boys.

I started giggling when I stopped and looked at the Backstreet Boys poster. It was the epitome of a cheesy boyband shot, with the five of them striking a different sexy pose in front of a bright blue backdrop. Brian and AJ were dressed in matching shiny, silver track pants, the kind that snap up the sides; AJ was wearing the fugliest shirt I’d ever seen, some weird checkered thing, and Brian had on a blue, cable-knit sweater with his sporty pants. Kevin was in the middle and looked pretty normal, but in front of him, Howie had a black and red beret-type hat perched jauntily on his head, and behind him, floppy-haired Nick was wearing a short-sleeved, black turtleneck and looked like he was doing jazz hands on either side of his face. I wasn’t sure if I should avoid letting Nick see this poster or show it to him just to witness his reaction.

I thought Nick was a lot more attractive now; like a fine wine, he’d only gotten better with age. Still, it made me sad to see him so young, knowing what he was going through now. It was a lot like looking at the pictures in the hall, the pictures of me as a little girl and mother when she was alive.

Stop it, I thought. Don't go there. I was acting like Nick was dying or already dead. He wasn't. He was just in the next room, I reminded myself. He was fine.

But then I thought of Nick, how he was always saying, "*I'm fine,*" when he wasn't. If he was in denial, then maybe I was in just the opposite state: acceptance.

I knew he was sick. I knew it was serious. And I knew that, in some cases, all the treatments and prayers in the world aren't enough to save a person's life.

Chapter 37

Cary

Hambelina was draped across the foot of my bed when I woke up the next morning; I accidentally kicked her trying to untangle myself from the covers. It was early, and I hadn't slept nearly long enough, but I was anxious to get up and start the day. I threw my legs over the side of my bed and sat on the edge of the sagging mattress, its springs broken from too much jumping on the bed, to pull on the pajama bottoms I'd kicked off the night before.

I tiptoed out of my room, pausing in the hall to listen. My dad's door was open; he'd always been an early bird, up at the crack of dawn even on weekends. Nick's door was closed, and when I pressed my ear up to it, I heard nothing; he was still asleep. I padded up the hall, the floor creaking in all the usual places beneath my bare feet.

My dad was in his recliner again, his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, engrossed in the morning paper. "Morning, Dad," I announced my presence, and he looked up in surprise, fumbling with his paper.

"Morning, sweetheart! I didn't hear you get up."

I smiled. "I was quiet. I didn't wanna wake Nick. I was gonna make us all some breakfast – have you eaten yet?"

"Oh, I had a Pop-Tart earlier, but you know me; I could always go for seconds." He grinned back, looking so pleased to have me home.

I went into the kitchen and rummaged around, taking inventory of the ingredients he had in the house. Belgian waffles sounded good, but of course, he had no berries or whipped cream, and who knew where the waffle iron was buried. Collecting dust in the far reaches of some bottom cupboard, probably, but I wasn't brave enough to go digging for it. He did have butter and syrup, and even a bunch of ripe bananas, so I settled for banana pancakes instead.

I turned on the little transistor radio that sat in the windowsill and sang along to the oldies station while I mixed up the batter and dropped it in spoonfuls onto a hot griddle. I've always loved cooking. I learned from the best – my mom's mother, who was the perfect fifties housewife well into the nineties. She always had a hot, homemade meal on the table for her husband and their four children, and she passed her traditional values, as well as her recipes, onto me. I could appreciate the sense of satisfaction it must have given her to take care of her family. Like her, I was a nurturer at heart, and I think being the “woman of the house” from the age of nine up had just ingrained it in me even more.

I was flipping pancakes, singing along to “Jailhouse Rock,” when Nick wandered into the kitchen. I didn’t even notice him at first; I had my back turned and was dancing around in front of the stove, using my spatula like a microphone, while I waited for my pancakes to brown. When I did a little twirl and found him standing there behind me, my heart almost stopped. It skipped a beat, anyway. I stopped dead, too, feeling my face heat up, but Nick didn’t miss a beat. Where I’d stopped singing, he started.

“Number forty-seven said to number three... You’re the cutest jailbird I ever did see,” he sang, his eyes sparkling dangerously at me. *“I sure would be delighted with your company...”* He wiggled his eyebrows and beckoned me forward with one finger, a smirky “come hither” look on his face. *“Come on and do the jailhouse rock with me, let’s rock...”*

He held out his hand, and when I took it, he pulled me out into the middle of the kitchen floor and started doing his best Elvis impression – hips gyrating, leg shaking, lip curling, singing along the whole time. *“...Everybody, let’s rock... everybody in the whole cell block was dancin’ to the jailhouse rock...”*

I couldn’t understand how he could look so silly and yet so sexy at the same time. But he was in such a playful mood, I also couldn’t help but play along. I did my best twist, twisting all the way down to the linoleum and back up again.

By the time the song was over, we were both out of breath, and the pancakes were burning. “You must be feeling good this morning,” I said, flipping the pancakes onto a plate, dark brown side down. “I didn’t know you were an Elvis fan.”

“Oh, come on, baby... everybody loves the King,” he said, in a pretty terrible attempt at an Elvis voice. “My mom used to make me perform that song when I was a kid.”

I giggled. “Did she make you a little Elvis suit? With a white cape?”

He grimaced. “No... thank god. I wore some pretty cheesy-ass stuff, though.”

“I know... I’ve seen footage on YouTube,” I laughed.

“Ugh,” he groaned, rolling his eyes. “I told you, don’t go there. Don’t even wanna hear about it.”

"How 'bout some breakfast, then?" I shut off the burner on the stove and carried the plate of pancakes to the kitchen table. "Dad!" I called into the living room. "Pancakes are ready!"

It was weird sitting down to breakfast with my dad and Nick Carter. Because I still thought of him that way sometimes... Nick Carter, the Backstreet Boy, instead of just Nick. Most days, when it was just him and me on the tour bus, I could pretend he was just a regular guy. But at night, when I saw him perform, it was impossible to forget that he was a superstar, and I was, at most, a former reality TV contestant, enjoying a small extension to my fifteen minutes of fame. Even out of his stage clothes, in pajama pants and a baggy t-shirt, he looked out of place in my dad's kitchen.

But if he felt that way, he didn't show it. He made conversation and complimented my cooking and thanked my dad profusely for letting him stay, acting as if he'd spent the night in a real bed and breakfast. He may well have really been acting; I'd seen firsthand how he could charm anyone and lie his way out of anything. But he seemed genuine enough.

After breakfast, we got dressed and packed up our stuff again, setting our bags by the front door. Then the two of us piled back into the rental car, and I drove us to the nursing home where I had worked before leaving for California. Idyllwood Manor was not as stately or idyllic as its name suggested, but I had enjoyed it there. It was a big brick building, situated around an inner courtyard with a patio and gardens. There were three wings, designated by the level and kind of care the residents who lived there needed. "We've undergone a huge renovation the last five years," I told Nick, as I led him through the main entrance, "trying to follow more of the 'greenhouse' model to make the facility feel more like a home and less like a hospital."

"It's nice," he said, looking around the lobby.

I showed him through the dining room, which was being cleaned up in between the breakfast and lunch hours, and the lounge, which was full of comfortable couches and armchairs and had a huge tropical fish tank built into one wall and a floor-to-ceiling bird cage in the corner. Our residents and their visiting families loved to sit and watch the animals. Even Nick stopped to look at the fish tank. I wandered over to the birds, who were all named for famous singers from the golden age – there was Ella, Etta, Billie, Louis, Sinatra, Dizzy, and Duke. I was admiring them, when I heard someone say, "Cary?"

I recognized that voice and turned around, grinning at Nancy, the nursing director. I had known her since I was a teenager, in the days when my grandparents lived at Idyllwood, and I came to visit and sing for the residents. She had always had a motherly presence – nurturing and organized – and I'm sure she had put in a good word for me when I applied for my position there. "Hi, Nancy!" I said, scurrying over for a hug.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?” she fussed over me. “I thought you’d be in Chicago! Some of the girls traded shifts so they could drive up to your show tonight.”

“I just came home for the night. We’re heading back up there in a couple of hours,” I replied. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nick turn around when I said “we’re,” so I beckoned him over. “I brought a guest along. Nancy, meet Nick Carter. Nick, this is Nancy Tomlin, our nursing director.”

Nancy’s eyes lit up in recognition, and she eagerly pumped Nick’s hand. “Welcome, Nick. We’re so pleased to have you drop by for a visit.” Then she looked from him to me. “Since we have two touring musicians in the house... would you be up for singing for the residents this morning?”

I looked at Nick, and he looked back at me. *Your call*, I thought, giving him a pointed look.

He got the message. Smiling at Nancy, he replied, “Sure, we’d love to.”

She beamed. “Wonderful! Cary will show you to the activity room, and I’ll have the staff round up some of our residents.” She bustled off, and I turned to Nick.

“You’re sweet to do this,” I said.

He shrugged off the compliment. “Eh, it’s good practice for tonight.”

“Like you need it.” I laughed. “Come on, this way.” I took him into the activity room, which was a big space set up with card tables and chessboard tables, crafting stations, and shuffleboard courts built into the floor. There was also a piano in the corner, which I’d played many times before. I pulled out the bench and sat down, tinkering a bit on the keys to warm up my fingers. “What are you gonna sing?” I asked Nick.

He looked back at me. “What can you play?”

I thought over the Backstreet Boys songs I knew on piano. Most of the ones that were actually meant for the piano were pretty depressing: “Incomplete,” “Shattered,” “Lose It All,” “Do I Have to Cry for You?”... “What about ‘Weird World’?” I suggested. Well, maybe it wasn’t the most uplifting song, either, but at least it sounded happy.

“‘Weird World’?” He seemed to consider it for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, alright.”

We waited while the residents started trickling in, many of them pushed in wheelchairs by nursing assistants. I said hello to the ones I knew, residents and staff alike, and introduced Nick. I could tell most of the old people had no clue who he was – granted, some of them didn’t remember me either, even though it had only been a couple of months since I’d last worked there – but the younger nurses did, and some of them were giggly and starstruck around him.

Once everyone was seated, Nancy got up in front of the little audience and said, “Folks, we have a real treat for you this morning. One of our own, Cary Hilst, is back for a quick visit before she goes back on tour with the music group The Backstreet Boys.”

“Oh, my granddaughter likes them...” murmured an elderly woman in the second row to the woman sitting next to her.

“She’s brought a special guest with her – Nick Carter, from The Backstreet Boys!”

There was scattered applause, mostly from the staff. “Who?” one of the old men blurted out loudly, his bushy eyebrows furrowing as he squinted up at Nick. I glanced over at Nick; he was grinning.

“They have a concert tonight in Chicago, but they’ve graciously agreed to put on an impromptu performance for us this morning.”

The staff started another round of applause, which most of the residents politely joined in. I looked at Nick and mouthed “You first,” then went to sit at the piano.

Nick actually looked sort of unsure of himself, standing there in the middle of the room without a microphone. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, grinning nervously at the little crowd in front of him, while I flexed my fingers and hoped I wouldn’t screw up the accompaniment of “Weird World” too badly.

I kept my fingers light on the keys, plunking out the bouncy chord progression, and as soon as Nick started singing, he was back in his element. He bounced along with me as he sang, *“The sun is over the city, but it’s an orange day. There is reason for lookin’ up, but I’m feelin’ down. You see, I’ve got to catch a plane, but won’t buy a ticket, ‘cause it’s hard to just stop when you’re spinnin’ around...”* He paced back and forth as he sang, making eye contact with each member of his audience. *“It’s a weird world, don’t you know it? It’s a weird world, and it won’t slow down. It’s a weird world, no matter how you roll it. Hey, hey, hey... sweet baby, there’s a way to stand up and fight it. Hey, hey, hey... never give up, and don’t let it wear out... your love...”*

His falsetto gave me chills, just like it did when he sang “This Is Us” every night on stage. My fingers stumbled, and I hit a clunker on the keyboard, but quickly found the right chords again. I don’t know if it was my screw-up that threw Nick off, or if he simply blanked on the lyrics, but he didn’t come in on the second verse. I looked up from the piano, still playing, and he was staring back at me with a sheepish grin. I giggled to myself and repeated the last few measures of accompaniment before I started singing, *“Sent a message to a G.I. in the desert. Said ‘thank you man for bringin’ another dawn...”*

I saw Nick’s face light up and smooth out, and his voice joined mine with the harmony traditionally sung by Kevin. *“...Back here it’s her and me, and we’re havin’ our first baby... and he’s out there, takin’ ‘em on.”* That was my favorite line of the song; it reminded me of my grandparents, who had met during the war and started their family

not long afterwards – first my Uncle Jim, then Uncle Mike, then Uncle Dave, and, finally, my mother.

"I'm closin' my eyes, but I'm startin' to see, while he's lookin' at you, she's lookin at me. The only thing he does is just keep me away from you..." sang Nick on the bridge, gesturing with his hands to make up for the lack of a microphone to hold onto. *"Sure, part of this place would cheer if I die, but don't let him take away your beautiful smile... Take away your beautiful smile..."* My chills came back as he went high again. *"Take away your... beautiful smile... Hey, hey, hey..."*

When he was finished, our little audience clapped again, louder this time. There was smiles on most of the residents' faces. Nick came over to me and muttered, "Thanks for the save."

I grinned. "You can count on your fans to know the lyrics to your songs better than you do."

He laughed. "Hey, that wasn't too bad, considering I haven't sung that song in, like, four years..."

"And no rehearsal either," I pointed out. "I thought it was pretty dang good."

He smiled. "Yeah, well, you sing something next."

I ran through a list of my original songs in my head, but in the end, I chose something I thought most of the old folks would know, a song that was not mine, but was just as special to me. I had performed it in the Top 16 on *American Idol*, and I wanted to perform it again now. My fingers moved down the keyboard, striking chords and arpeggios I had memorized off a yellowed piece of sheet music a long time ago. I knew most people would recognize the song from the piano arrangement, and sure enough, when I looked up, I saw smiles on some of the faces in the audience.

My fingers moving gently over the keys, I opened my mouth and softly sang, *"When you're weary... feeling small... when tears are in your eyes, I will dry them off... I'm on your side... Oh, when times get rough... and friends just can't be found, like a bridge over troubled water... I will lay me down, like a bridge over troubled water... I will lay me down..."*

"Bridge Over Troubled Water" was one of my mother's favorite songs. As I played the accompaniment, I could still hear her playing the same arrangement on our old, out-of-tune piano at home. She had been musical, too, a lovely pianist, and had pushed me to take lessons. After her death, I'd inherited her collection of sheet music and taken it upon myself to learn all of her favorites, the pieces I remembered her playing the most. I knew them all by heart now, and even though it was silly, I liked to think that she could look down on me and smile when she heard me play them.

“When you’re down and out... when you’re on the street... when evening falls so hard, I will comfort you... I’ll take your part... Oh, when darkness comes... and pain is all around...” I glanced from the piano and caught Nick’s gaze. He gave me a crooked, tight-lipped smile. My throat swelled, but I forced myself to keep on singing, *“Like a bridge over troubled water... I will lay me down, like a bridge over troubled water... I will lay me down...”*

In my mind’s eye, I could see my mom, her curtain of dark hair falling in her face as she leaned over the piano, her hands flying up and down the keyboard, fingers stretching to hit the right chords. That was how I liked to remember her – not bald, like she’d been before she had died, too frail to sit up at the piano, her fingers too stiff and swollen from her medications to play.

“Sail on, silver girl... sail on by,” I sang, and the familiar lyrics felt almost like reassurance, words of encouragement from my mother’s spirit. *“Your time has come to shine... all your dreams are on their way... see how they shine...”* Letting my voice grow louder and stronger as the accompaniment crescendoed, I closed my eyes, and my thoughts turned back to Nick. *“Oh, if you need a friend... I’m sailing right behind... like a bridge over troubled water... I will ease your mind... like a bridge over troubled water... I will ease your mind...”*

Our tiny audience broke out in applause as my hands came off the piano. I smiled, stood, gave a little bow. For a moment, it felt like old times, like I was the same high-school girl I’d been when I used to come for them – not the same exact people, but the residents who had been there when my grandparents were still alive. It was weird to realize I’d be performing on the big stage, in front of a crowd of four thousand in Highland Park that night.

When it was time to go, I said goodbye to those I knew, and they wished me good luck for the show that night and the rest of the tour. On our way out, Nick and I passed a frail figure, hunched over in a wheelchair that was parked in front of the fish tank in the lounge. At first, it was almost impossible to tell whether the person was a man or a woman; their back was to us, their face turned toward the fish tank. The bald, skeletal head suggested an old man, but when I noticed the flowered nightgown falling off the bony, stooped shoulders, I realized it was a woman. Her posture made her look ninety years old, but then she turned and looked over her shoulder at us, and I saw that her face did not have the wrinkles of age, but the smoothness of youth. She couldn’t be older than forty. But I felt like I was looking into the face of death – pale white, almost translucent skin stretched thin over her gaunt skull, and big, black hollows where her eyes were sunken into their sockets. It was like seeing a ghost – not because she looked like death, but because she looked like my mother. Or, at least, the way my mother had looked at the end of her life.

I forced myself to smile what I hoped was a pleasant smile and say, “Good morning.” But my voice sounded shriller than usual, and when the breath rushed out of me, I felt deflated. For a moment, it seemed like all the air had been sucked out of the room around me; I couldn’t breathe. It was an old, familiar feeling, the feeling I’d gotten

when I'd been around terminally ill children and their families in the hospital. It was the reason I had been so eager to quit working there.

Because almost all of the residents in the nursing home were elderly, I sometimes forgot that Idyllwood Manor accepted other patients, too – younger adults with mental or physical handicaps and illnesses so severe, they could not live independently. Sometimes they had no families to care for them, or sometimes their families just couldn't do it. Whichever was the case with this woman, two things were clear: one, she had advanced cancer, and two, she was far too young to be dying in a nursing home. I swallowed hard as I continued past her, thinking of my mother, who had died at the age of thirty. I was barely a year shy of thirty, myself. Nick was thirty.

I snuck a glance at him. The look on his face matched the feeling inside me. The sight of the emaciated woman had shaken him as much as it had me. But when he looked at her, I knew he hadn't been picturing my mother. He had probably been picturing himself that way.

Without a word, I reached over and grabbed his hand. It was clammy. I gave it a squeeze, trying to reassure him. After a second, I felt his fingers curl around my thumb, squeezing back. Neither of us spoke, but we held hands the whole way out to the car.

Chapter 38

Cary

After we left Idyllwood, I drove Nick back to my dad's house with just enough time for me to say goodbye to Hambelina and load our stuff into the car. I was glad we had to rush; it didn't give either of us much time to dwell on what we had seen at the nursing home.

I called Jessica to let her know I was in town – I didn't mention who I'd brought with me – and would be driving back to Highland Park with my dad and her. She suggested dropping off the rental car now and riding up in her SUV, so half an hour later, my dad and I stood in the Enterprise parking lot, waiting. Nick was still inside, finishing the paperwork for the rental, and I hoped Jess would pull in before he came out so I could get the full effect of her surprise when she recognized him.

I was in luck. She must have been excited because, for once, Jess was on time. She swung into the parking lot in a big, silver SUV and waved frantically over the steering wheel as she slowed to a stop in front of us. I could hear her music pulsing through the closed windows. She turned it down before I opened the front door, probably for the benefit of my dad. She knew I loved it; we always sang at the top of our lungs when we were together in a car.

“Hey!” I said, sliding into the passenger seat, as my dad threw Nick’s and my bags into the hatchback and climbed into the seat behind me.

“Cary!” She let out a girlish squeal and leaned over to hug me, as best the front seat would allow. “I’m so glad you made it down! It’ll be a million times more fun driving up there with you in the car.”

“What, Jessica? You mean you weren’t looking forward to a road trip with just Cary’s dear old dad?” joked my father, grinning from the back seat.

“Nooo!” Jess laughed. “That’s not what I meant! I always have fun with you around, Frank. You’ve always been the cool dad.”

He seemed pleased to hear that. Jessica Matthews – now Jessica Powell - was my best and oldest friend; we’d been two peas in a pod since first grade. While we weren’t alike in personality – she was a lot more outgoing and funny than I was – we had a lot of the same interests. Even when we weren’t in the same class at school, we’d taken dance classes and ice skating lessons together. We both sang in the school choir and auditioned for the musicals and did duets for solo and ensemble contest. After high school, we both went to Millikin, which was a small, private, liberal arts college right in town. It was known for its music program, but we went the practical route and chose majors we would actually use – nursing for me, marketing for Jess. Even after college, when I had moved to Springfield and her to Champaign, we’d kept in touch. Now we were both back home in Decatur. She was settled, with a house and family of her own, while I was flitting around the country, chasing a dream. In a way, I was as jealous of her as she was of me, but we were equally happy for each other, too.

“Well,” said Jess, looking over at me, “are we ready?”

My door was still open. “Not yet. We’re waiting on one more. He’ll be out in a second.”

“*He’ll?*” Jessica’s eyebrows shot way up, disappearing under her swooping bangs. “Who did you... oh my God!” Her blue eyes got as round as saucers, as she stared past me, and I knew Nick had walked out. I turned to look and saw him striding across the parking lot, looking around.

“Nick!” I called and waved through the open door. He spotted me, smiled, and quickened his pace toward us.

“Oh my God, Cary, you brought one of them *home* with you?” Jess asked in an incredulous whisper. “It *is* just one, right?” She suddenly craned her neck, looking all around and checking her mirrors, as if the other Backstreet Boys might suddenly jump out from behind the other cars.

I laughed. “Just Nick.”

“You *are* sleeping with him, aren’t you?” she hissed, her eyes flashing accusingly at me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my dad lean forward in the backseat, apparently as curious to hear my answer as Jess was. “No,” I said, loud enough for both of them to hear. “I’m not. We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, right. Jeez, Cary, I can’t believe you’d bang a Backstreet Boy and not – hi!” she squeaked suddenly, as Nick opened the back door and got in behind her. She beamed at him in the rearview mirror, then twisted around in her seat to peer into the back. “I’m Jessica.”

“Nick. Nice to meet you,” Nick said, smiling that smirky, crooked grin that could make any girl weak in the knees.

Jess turned back around, her cheeks pink. I watched with amusement as she fumbled with the keys in the ignition, before realizing the SUV was still running. She jammed the gearshift into drive, and the SUV lurched forward as she hit the gas pedal too hard. She was totally flustered, I realized with amusement, marveling at the effect Nick had on women. That was some talent he had, turning typically cool and competent women like Jessica into total ditzes.

Jess wasn’t even a fan anymore, though she had been once, and maybe that was what had rattled her. She had always loved pop music and pretty boys, whereas I listened to oldies and preferred traditional tall, dark, and handsome gentlemen. When the Backstreet Boys had emerged on the scene with “Quit Playing Games,” Jess had jumped right on the bandwagon and eventually dragged me onboard with her. That was the fall of 1997, when we were starting our senior year of high school. We used to carpool to school together, and she had dubbed their CD onto a cassette for me and would blast it in the car, until I had the thing memorized and couldn’t help but love it.

We’d gone to our first concert together the following summer, in St. Louis. But Jess was fickle; after that, she moved on to *NSYNC, then gave up boybands altogether, as we graduated college and they faded from popularity. I’d dragged her to one of their Up Close and Personal shows five years ago, when they were promoting their not-yet-released comeback album, *Never Gone*. But I could tell then that it was just a nostalgia trip for Jess; she had no real interest in following their career anymore. She was going to the concert tonight more for me than for them.

Yet I watched the way her eyes kept flicking up to the rearview mirror as she drove and knew it had nothing to do with checking traffic. She was checking out Nick. I couldn’t blame her; he was looking fine that day, in a white t-shirt that showed off his tan and his tattoos, and a pair of dark wash jeans. Between how good he was looking and how chipper he’d been acting all day, it was almost possible to forget the real reason I was with him. This trip really had been a much-needed break for me, not only from the tour, but from the treatment. I wondered if he felt the same way; maybe that was why he had come home with me.

The three-hour drive back to Highland Park was long and unusually quiet. We made small talk, but I got the sense that the other three were all a little uncomfortable in each other's presence. Jess and I did most of the talking, to each other. Eventually, she turned up her music again, but she didn't sing. She must have been self-conscious in front of Nick.

When we finally got to the venue, Nick called Howie to find out where the guys were and managed to direct us to a back entrance, where Jess stopped to let the two of us out, then went to find parking. "Call me when you get parked," I said, slinging my bag over my shoulder. "I'll come find you and sneak you into soundcheck."

Nick and I found where the tour buses were parked and dropped off our stuff. We had time to kill before soundcheck, but I didn't want to spend it on the bus like the other guys. It was a gorgeous day; the sun was out, and the temperature was in the low eighties, but there was so much shade, it felt even cooler. The Ravinia Festival, as the venue was called, was not a festival at all, but a big park with a large concert pavilion, where we'd be performing, and two smaller theaters on the campus. It was surrounded by trees and had a wide, open grassy area for picnics. It looked beautiful, and I was eager to explore.

"I'll let you do your thing," said Nick, when I asked if he wanted to walk around before they let all the fans in for the show. "You should catch up with your dad and your friend without me around."

Maybe he knew Jessica was just dying to hear me dish out all the details of our summer romance on the road – which was what she, like everyone else on the tour, seemed to think it was. I grinned. "You're not afraid of me spilling secrets?"

He gave me a look. "As long as you're not letting *the secret* slip, I don't care what you say. Go have fun. I'm gonna chill on the bus for awhile."

Even when he was feeling good, he seemed to tire easily. I left him to lie down in the air-conditioned bus and went out to meet my dad and Jessica. As we strolled around the park together, my dad lagged a few steps behind, letting Jess and I get a little girl talk in.

"So tell me," she said, hooking her arm through mine and reeling me in close. "What's the deal with Nick?"

My stomach bottomed out, and my first panicked thought was, *She knows*. How could she tell something was off, when no one else seemed to suspect too much? Was it that Nick had lost so much weight? Did he look sicker than I realized? I saw him every day; maybe I just hadn't noticed the subtle changes in his appearance that probably looked severe to an outsider. Or maybe it was me... Jess knew me better than almost anyone; maybe I'd given something away with my body language, without even realizing it.

I glanced guiltily over at her and tried to play dumb. "What do you mean?"

“What do you mean?” Jess mimicked me, rolling her eyes. “Don’t you dare try and act innocent, missy. You know what I mean. You and Nick Carter... are you, or aren’t you?”

I felt an enormous sense of relief, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. She didn’t suspect anything, except the same thing everyone else did: sex. She still thought we were just sleeping together. “My dad is right behind us!” I hissed, but I couldn’t keep from grinning.

Of course, Jess mistook my smile for an admission of guilt and gloated, “Ha! I knew it! You lucky bitch! God, I *knew* he just wanted in your pants! I told you, didn’t I? Jeez, Cary, it’s like you’re living one of those damn fan fiction stories I used to read... ‘Mary Sue was a down-on-her-luck aspiring singer, about to give up on her dream, until she landed an audition for the Backstreet Boys’ opening act. One look was all it took for Nick to fall head over heels in love with her. But will their love survive the tour?’”

I groaned. “Oh my god, are you *kidding* me? Where do you come up with this stuff?”

She laughed. “Are *you* kidding? There used to be stuff just like that all over the internet, delusional teenyboppers writing out their fantasies of becoming a famous singer and falling in love with their favorite Backstreet Boy. You’re the real deal! You’re Cary Sue!” That cracked her up even more; she threw back her head and cackled loudly enough that some nearby picnickers turned their heads to look at us.

“What’s so funny?” My dad’s voice carried from behind. “I feel like I’m missing out back here.”

I glanced back over my shoulder and shook my head, rolling my eyes. “You don’t wanna know, Dad, trust me.”

“No, seriously,” giggled Jessica; she was on a roll now. “You’ve got the sex, the romance... all you need is the drama! You know, something to shake things up, put the relationship in jeopardy. A love triangle... the reappearance of the jilted ex-lover... an unplanned pregnancy. Or maybe something tragic, like a bus crash or a terminal illness. I mean, herpes is incurable, right? It’s the gift that keeps on giving...”

She babbled on, and I’m sure Paris Hilton’s name was mentioned at some point, but I blocked it out. The words “terminal illness” had sent me into a mental tailspin, and all of a sudden, I was about to lose it. I looked away, knowing I couldn’t hide the emotion, that if she saw the look on my face, she would know.

Thankfully, right there in my line of sight was a ladies restroom. It was my saving grace, my sanctuary. “Hang on – I gotta pee,” I blurted. “I’ve had to go since we were in the car. Be right back!” Somehow, I managed to choke all that out, and I made a beeline for the bathroom, hoping she wouldn’t follow me.

To my relief, the bathroom was large, and there wasn't a line yet. I darted into the very last stall, slammed it shut and locked it, and rested my forehead against the back of the door. I took a huge, shuddering breath and released it shakily. My heart was pounding, and my face suddenly felt like it was on fire. Was this what Nick went through, I wondered, every time someone mentioned something that reminded him of the horrible secret he was keeping? Or was I just the neurotic one?

Tears pushed at the back of my eyes, but I fought them, knowing if I broke down in this bathroom and let myself cry, I'd never stop. And when I cry, it's obvious. My face gets all red and blotchy. My eyes get bloodshot and puffy. There'd be no hiding it. So I managed to hold back the tears, but when I finally came out of the stall, flushing the toilet for effect, I had a pounding headache.

The bathroom was empty, so I took my time at the row of sinks, staring at my reflection in the mirror. In the unflattering fluorescent light, my face looked flushed and shiny. I pulled my compact out of my handbag and powdered my cheeks and nose. It helped a little. But I could still see the secret in my eyes; they stared back at me, accusingly.

How can Nick do this? I asked myself. *How can he be around his friends, every day, and lie to them like this, every day, and pretend nothing's wrong, every day??* Some days were easier than others; today, by all accounts, should have been incredibly easy. Nick was off chemo, well-rested, and feeling good, but still, I was struggling with it. How did he do it on the other days, the chemo days, the days when he felt like shit and could barely drag himself out of his bunk, let alone perform? How had he pulled it off for three months? I had barely survived three hours!

I finally washed my hands and forced myself to leave the bathroom, knowing the longer I stayed, the more suspicious Jess and my dad would get. They were probably already wondering what was taking me so long. "Sorry," I said, when I met up with them outside. "I really had to go."

Jessica gave me a wry smile. "Isn't frequent urination a symptom of certain STDs...?"

"Hey, look, ice cream! Do you guys feel like ice cream? I want ice cream before soundcheck," I babbled, pointing. When in doubt, changing the subject works. I knew my dad could always go for ice cream. I practically dragged him towards the ice cream place, a big, round, wooden pavilion called Carousel. By the time we got our cones, Jess seemed to have dropped the subject, and before we finished, I heard the distant drumbeats and amplified music that meant the guys' soundcheck was about to start.

I led the way back to the concert pavilion, eager for the distraction. I supposed that was how Nick did it, too: he just used the soundchecks, the concerts, the after parties, the whole tour, to distract himself from the illness he was hiding and everything that went with it.

It was a good show that night, not just for Nick and the guys, but for me, too. For the first time all tour, I knew there were people in the audience who were there to see *me* – not the Backstreet Boys, not the other Idols, but me, just *me*. It was an amazing feeling. The crowd had never cheered louder when my set was over, and for once, I didn't think it was just because that meant the Boys would take the stage soon.

After I changed, I went and found my dad and Jess in the audience. “You were wonderful, sweetheart,” my dad told me, squeezing me tightly.

“Freaking amazing,” Jess added, smothering me with a hug of her own.

For me, just having them there was the wonderful part, even if it did make it that much harder to keep Nick's secret. I was glad when the Boys' part of the show started and sorry when it ended. I fought back tears again as I hugged my dad goodbye. He and Jess had a three-hour drive home that night, and we had a six-hour drive to Clarkston, Michigan. It was back home for them and back on the road for us. Back to the tour bus. Back to the cancer treatments.

Back to reality.

Chapter 39

Cary

Back to reality...

It was weird how, in the course of three months, the reality of my life had totally changed. When I got kicked off *American Idol*, “back to reality” meant back to being a single girl living alone with her pet pig in a small city in Illinois and working in an old folks’ home. Then, out of the blue, Nick Carter called, and “back to reality” became “back on the tour bus for back-to-back shows.”

After our show in Michigan on Friday, we had a weekend off. The whole weekend. It was the first and only free weekend of the tour, and it couldn't have come at a better time. Because that was when reality really sank in.

I looked around at my current “reality” – a lavish hotel room, with floor to ceiling windows, a private balcony, a marble bathroom, and sleek furniture made of dark-stained wood. I felt like the coffee table in front of me should have been covered with a spread of fancy hors d’oeuvres brought up by room service, to complete the picture. Instead, it held supplies more suited to my other life – a box of latex gloves, a bottle of antiseptic, bags of pre-measured and mixed medications, a sharps container, and various syringes and needles. Nick lay on the colossal king-size bed, waiting for me to torture him with them.

In a way, it was lucky that our rare two days off in a row happened to coincide with the start of his fifth cycle of chemo. It also sucked, because it meant that instead of getting out and enjoying our weekend in Kansas City like the rest of the guys, Nick was going to spend it cooped up in this hotel room, feeling miserable. And I was going to spend it warding off the guys and making excuses for him. No matter what I said, they were only going to believe one of two things: one, that Nick was actually sick... again... or two, that he and I were in the middle of some wild, two-day sex marathon.

It was bad enough they had stopped booking me my own room at the hotels we stayed in. Since everyone assumed Nick and I were a package deal now, we got to share. Sometimes there were two beds, so it wasn't a big deal, no different than sharing his tour bus. But in other rooms, like this one, there was only one big bed. I resigned myself to spending another night curled up on the loveseat.

"Man, there's nothin' on TV," Nick griped, flipping channels from the bed. He stopped on an episode of *Cops*, which, around my house, was a sure sign there really was nothing else on.

"Maybe we could watch a movie or something later," I suggested, as I double-checked the labels on everything and cross-referenced the doctor's orders, making sure I had the right drugs and dosages for that night's chemo infusion. It was identical to the one I'd given him on the bus that morning, which had been enough to sap him of all the strength and energy he'd built back up over the past week. His chemo regimen was cruel that way; it gave him just enough time off between courses to start feeling almost normal before it sucked the life out of him again.

"Yeah, sounds good," he replied listlessly, like nothing about lying in this hotel room watching TV all night sounded good. I couldn't blame him. He had lain around on the bus all day, as we finished the long drive into Missouri, and tomorrow would be even worse. It was hard to see him so down and depressed, especially after how lively he'd been the last few days.

"How about a comedy?" I added. "We could both use a laugh. Something to distract us."

He managed a crooked smile that didn't make it to his eyes. "Yeah... for sure."

But instead, an unwanted distraction came knocking at the door.

When we heard the knock, we both stiffened and looked at each other in panic. My eyes darted from Nick – shirtless, the portacath visible beneath his collarbone – down to the coffee table in front of me, set up like a surgical tray.

"Pretend we're not here," muttered Nick, just loud enough for me to hear.

But the knocking continued, and after a few seconds, we heard AJ's gruff voice saying, "It's me, dude, open up. C'mon, Carter, I know you're in there..."

"You can't just ignore him," I whispered. "Put your shirt on, and let's drag this into the bathroom."

Nick nodded, and together, we lifted the coffee table full of medical equipment and carried it into the bathroom. "He better not ask to take a shit while he's here," Nick grumbled.

I laughed. "Why would he do that?"

"Cause he's a douche."

"Well, then I'll do this." I walked over to the shower and turned it on. "Tell him I'm in the shower. I'll lock the door."

"You're amazing," Nick told me, then hurried to put on his shirt before he answered the door.

I thought AJ would have given up in the time it had taken us to hide everything, but no, he was still pounding away, persistent as ever. I guess he really did know we were in there. I wondered what excuse Nick would give for taking so long to let him in, so after I'd shut and locked the bathroom door, I stood just inside it, trying to listen over the sound of the shower.

"Sorry, dude, I was naked," I heard Nick apologize as he opened the door. It was a good thing I wasn't eating anything; as it was, I nearly choked on my own spit.

"Naked time... me likey," replied AJ with a cackle, his voice growing louder as he came into the room. "So where's Cary?"

Perv, I thought, smirking behind the bathroom door.

"In the shower," said Nick.

"And you didn't join her? What happened to naked time?"

"Well, I was gonna, but you wouldn't quit knocking, dumbass."

"Oh – heh, sorry, man. I was just hoping you'd come out with me tonight. I'm goin' crazy here without Rochelle."

You couldn't help but feel a little sorry for AJ. Brian and Howie had both had their families with them the entire tour, and Nick at least had me for company – not that I was the sort of company everyone else seemed to think I was. AJ had no one. Rochelle

was still stuck in California, working and taking classes, and wouldn't be able to join the tour until the last few shows on the west coast, so he was the odd man out.

"Sorry, dude... not tonight," Nick replied.

"Why not?" AJ demanded. I cringed at the way his voice rose sharply. This wasn't going to be pretty. He must have been tired of getting blown off by Nick, and he wanted answers.

All Nick had to offer were excuses. "I just don't feel like it tonight. Maybe another time."

"*Maybe?*" AJ repeated. "Why just 'maybe'? What is with you, dude? You've been acting lame this whole tour. I mean, we hung out all the time overseas, even when Lauren was with you... I don't see what's so different now. Cary's welcome to come out with us, if that's what this is about."

I felt my stomach clench when I heard my name. This wasn't heading in a direction I liked, and I thought desperately, *Please, Nick, just tell him the truth. Right here, right now. Get it over with.*

But, of course, Nick didn't. "It's not about Cary. I just haven't been feeling that great today," was all he said. He was a master of the half-truth, of lying without telling an outright lie. Most of what he said to the guys was honest; it just wasn't the whole truth.

The problem was, the guys weren't buying the half-truths anymore. "Bullshit," AJ spat. "Ya know, I can't blame you for wanting to tap that hot little piece of ass all night, but it fucking sucks that you forgot how to have fun with your old friends. I have always defended you and Cary when Rok starts in with the gold-digger crap, 'cause hell, you're a grown-ass man, and she seems like a good girl. But now I'm starting to think he's right."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nick challenged, as I was still reeling from what AJ had said about Brian.

"He think she's just another fame whore. I dunno about that, but I do know you've gotten progressively lamer ever since you met her. It's like she's turned you into a completely different person, like she's trying to mold you into the man she wants you to be and keep you all to herself."

"*That's bullshit.*"

"It's not, though," AJ insisted. "You just can't see it right now cause you're right in the middle of it; you've got blinders up. I hate to bring this up, man, but it's like when you were dating Paris. Remember how she used to just show up at all our stuff without being invited, like you two were attached at the hip or something? Like on your

birthday, when she came to the studio with the whole camera crew and the cake with her own fuckin' face on it?"

"Fuck you, AJ; don't even go there."

"No, I'm goin' there. My point is this: she had you fucking whipped, dude. She changed you; you were different with her. You dressed different, acted different, did shit you never would have done before, all that red carpet PDA kind of shit. We could all see it happening, and we knew she was bad for you, but you couldn't see it until it got really bad."

"Are you seriously comparing Cary to Paris Hilton? Like, *seriously*?" Nick's voice rose angrily, and even though I was on the verge of tears, hearing AJ say those things about me, I felt a surge of gratitude towards him.

"I know it's not the same situation, though I will point out that Paris seemed sweet at first too, before she showed her true colors. All I'm saying is—"

"Fuck you," Nick interrupted him. "Don't say one more fucking word. Just stop talking and get the hell out of my room."

Hidden in the bathroom, I couldn't tell if AJ left willingly, or if Nick forced him out, but I didn't hear another word after that, just the sound of the door slamming shut. Then came Nick's footsteps, stomping heavily across the carpeted floor. I turned off the shower, just as he knocked on the bathroom door.

"You okay in there? You can come out now; he's gone." His voice was light and hesitant; I could tell he wasn't sure how much of his conversation I had been able to hear. I unlocked the door and opened it without a word. As I stared at him, the look on my face must have been enough to tell him I'd heard it all. His features sagged. "You overheard, huh?"

I just nodded. My throat felt swollen shut, like I could barely breathe, let alone speak. I didn't want to cry in front of him, but I could feel the tears pressing in at the corners of my eyes again. I fought them, staring down at the floor, focusing on breathing slowly, in and out, as I tried to get my emotions in check.

"I'm sorry. You probably hate me now for putting you in the middle of this mess."

That was an interesting thing to hear him say, because up until that point, it hadn't even occurred to me to be mad at him. It was true, though; I had him to blame for the guys jumping to all the wrong conclusions about me, about us. If he had just told them the truth about what I was really doing there, they wouldn't think I was just another gold-digging whore, out to use him for my own benefit. He'd had another opportunity right there and then with AJ, and he still hadn't come clean. I should have been angry, but I wasn't. I was just hurt.

“He had no business saying all of that,” Nick went on quickly, to make up for my silence. “He was just talking out of his ass. You’re about the furthest thing from Paris, and if he can’t see that...”

“But it’s not just him,” I finally said, quietly. “Brian apparently thinks so, too. Does Howie? Does everyone?”

His face reddened, and I realized this wasn’t the first time one of them had warned him about me. I didn’t even want to know what kinds of things they were saying behind his back. How could they read so much into our relationship, and yet, read it completely wrong? Maybe they were the ones with blinders on. Maybe they didn’t see what I saw when I looked at Nick, really looked at him closely: that he was thin to the point of looking gaunt, without the muscle tone he’d had in that lovely *People* photo shoot a year ago; instead of a six-pack, his belly was slightly bloated, this time from the steroids he took with his chemo, rather than too much booze. His ankles would swell from fluid retention, sometimes his fingers, too, and that night, even his face seemed puffy. His summer tan kept his complexion from looking too sickly, but there were bags under his eyes and lines around them that showed the stress his body was under. To the untrained eye, the signs were far less obvious than a bald head... but they were there. The cancer treatments were taking their toll, yet no one else seemed to notice. If they did, they were just as much in denial as Nick was.

That bothered me. Nick had done a good job keeping this a secret, but the guys were practically his family. They knew him better than anyone. Shouldn’t they have started to get suspicious by now? Shouldn’t they have noticed something wasn’t right? That he was acting different? Having mood swings? Seeming tired? Keeping to himself a lot?

Oh, that was right – they had noticed, but they blamed it all on me. I was the one keeping him away from them, changing him to suit my needs. It ticked me off, and I was half-tempted to go hunt AJ down and tell him the truth, so he could set the others straight. But I had made a promise to Nick, and Nick had defended me to AJ (not that it had made much difference), so I knew I wouldn’t. It wasn’t my secret to tell.

“I’m sorry, Cary,” Nick mumbled again. “This is a mess.”

I wanted to say, “*I told you so,*” but I didn’t. Instead, I just said, “All you have to do to get us out of it is tell them the truth.”

He gave me a look and shook his head. “No. That’ll make an even bigger mess. Do you know how pissed they’re gonna be at me when they find out? I’d rather wait till after the tour, when we can take some time apart.”

“You could stop the tour now,” I pointed out. “You don’t have to keep putting yourself through this.” I looked down at the coffee table we’d hidden in the bathroom, heaped with equipment that belonged in a hospital, not a hotel room.

"I don't wanna stop the tour. We're almost done. This is the last cycle I have to do on the road. I've made it this far; I just wanna finish this thing out. This leg, at least. After that, we'll see."

I'd almost forgotten there was supposed to be a second North American leg of the tour in August. I was just counting down to the Vegas show, the last one on this leg. Thirteen more days, ten shows to go. It still seemed a long way off, especially with five more chemo days to get through as well, not counting this one.

I sighed, knowing by now that it was pointless to keep arguing with him, and said, "Well... I guess we should get this over with, then."

He helped me drag the coffee table out of the bathroom and over to the bed, which he climbed back on, taking off his shirt again, while I set up the supplies the way I wanted them again and re-washed my hands. I pulled on a pair of medical gloves and prepared his port, swabbing the skin with antiseptic and applying the anesthetic spray to numb it.

"And to think, I coulda been performing at a New Kids on the Block Show tonight," mused Nick, not even flinching as I inserted the Huber needle.

I almost did flinch, though. "What???"

"We've been shopping around for a new record company, right? So we considered signing with Interscope, which is also the New Kids' label. They had the idea to have us do a joint tour next summer, two boybands for the price of one. They wanted us to appear onstage at their show in Boston tonight as a publicity stunt, to sorta test the waters."

I stared at him, holding a syringe in midair. He had told me none of this before. "Are you gonna do it? The tour?"

He shook his head. "Howie and AJ wanted to, and I think Brian would have gone along with it if the rest of us were on board, but I said no. I said joint tours are only for groups who can't sell solo tours anymore, and we're not that washed-up and ancient yet."

But I could tell by the way he said it that that wasn't the only reason. "Would you have done it if you weren't sick?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. If the rest of the guys wanted to, I wouldn't have been the one to stop them. But I don't think it's smart to plan that far ahead right now. Who knows where I'll be next summer?"

That was smart of him to say, but it made me sad. It was true... the future was not certain for any of us, but especially not for him. For once, though, I decided to be the stubbornly optimistic one. "You'll be making music," I said, with a confidence I didn't feel. "It'll just be new BSB music, instead of, like, 'Havin' Tough.'" I giggled, and he snickered.

“Yeah,” he said, with a crooked grin, “either that, or I’ll be hangin’ tough on some cloud, playing ‘Hangin’ Tough’ on a harp...”

Even though I knew he was joking, the smile fell off my face. I feigned a look of deep concentration as I bent over him to inject the Zofran into his port. Then I thought of a reply, and as I pulled the syringe carefully back out, I said, “Or maybe a little Bryan Adams. You know... ‘Heaven.’”

He laughed out loud. “Good one.”

“Thanks.” I managed a quick smile before I went back to hooking up his chemo. “There,” I said, once the IV drip was running from the pump into his port. “You’re all set.”

“Awesome,” he replied, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Three hours to lie here, and nothin’ on TV to watch.”

“How about that movie?”

“Yeah, okay. What do you wanna watch?”

We browsed Netflix on his laptop and decided on *Zombieland*. “I’ve been wanting to watch that again ever since we went to that theme park,” Nick said, “and you really do need to see it.”

I don’t really like zombie movies, but Nick promised this one was more funny than scary. I sat on the bed next to him to watch it on his laptop, the chemo pump set between us as a grim reminder that even though we were lying on a bed together in a hotel room, this was not a date, and I was not to wait or even hope for him to make a move.

When the movie was over, I got up from the bed. “You were right; that was pretty epic,” I said, dragging a couple of pillows over to the loveseat. “Bill Murray’s awesome.”

“Wasn’t that the best?” he laughed. “Hey, you’re not getting ready for bed, are you?”

“As soon as your drip’s done, I am.” It was almost midnight, and I was tired.

“Well, you’re not gonna sleep on that little sofa. You can sleep up here with me,” he said, patting the spot I had just occupied on the bed.

I raised my eyebrows. “Are you sure?” In any other situation, I would have expected a guy to be chivalrous, to offer me the bed and take the couch or a cot or the floor for himself. But there was no way I was taking Nick’s bed when he was sick and needed the sleep. Besides, I could fit on the loveseat a lot easier than he could. I hadn’t really even considered sharing the bed.

“Why not? There’s plenty of room. I’ll try not to kick you or steal your covers.” He grinned in a way that made me envy the lucky girls who had shared his bed for real. “And I promise, I don’t wet the bed.”

I giggled and thought, *No, but you’re Nick Carter.* I didn’t know how I was going to get any sleep lying so close to him, but in the end, I agreed. It made a lot more sense for both of us to be comfortable on the huge bed than for me to scrunch myself up on the tiny loveseat.

Once his chemo infusion had finished, and I’d disconnected the IV, I turned down the covers on “my” side of the bed and climbed in. Nick was already curled up on his side, still shirtless beneath the covers. “Night,” he muttered, when I turned off the light on my side of the bed.

“Night,” I said back, rolling onto my side so that I was turned away from him. There was no way I could sleep facing him; I’d be staring at his bare back all night. It was hard enough just knowing he was lying right behind me, listening to the sound of his breathing and feeling the mattress sag and the covers shift every time he moved. I lay perfectly still, trying not to toss and turn or let my pajama bottoms twist. I wished they were long pants instead of just capris; I hadn’t shaved my legs since we were at my dad’s house, and I shuddered to think of him accidentally brushing my bare calf in the night and feeling the stubble.

Those were the neurotic sort of thoughts that kept me awake for hours, long after Nick’s breathing had gotten steady and deep. Needless to say, I didn’t get much sleep that night or the next.

Chapter 40

Nick

I woke up on Sunday feeling like shit, and the only good thought I could come up with was, *At least I don’t have a show tonight.* No show... just two more rounds of IV chemo and one dose injected into my spine, which meant I could look forward to a day of lying flat on my back and feeling crappier than I already did.

It almost wasn’t worth it. For a few seconds, as I lay there in bed, just staring up at the wall, I thought, *Maybe I’ll just screw it all and go play basketball with Brian today.* It was tempting, except that I felt too tired to get out of bed, let alone run all up and down a basketball court, so I figured I might as well just get the chemo over with, since I’d probably be spending the day in bed either way.

I rolled over, and Cary was still sound asleep next to me. She was on her side, facing away from me, and so close to the edge of the bed that if I poked her in the back, she'd probably roll right off. I smirked, considering the idea. If it had been any of the guys – Howie, especially – I totally would have done it, but not to Cary. I'm not that much of an asshole. Besides, I'd put her through enough shit already.

I decided I should do something nice for her, so I got up and ordered breakfast from room service while she was still asleep. While I waited for it to be delivered, I put on a shirt and brushed my teeth and tried to fix my hair, which was sticking up all over the place, but finally gave up on that. If I was going to spend the day lying in bed, I might as well have bed head.

The knock on the door woke up Cary, which was perfect, since it was the room service guy. He brought in a small platter of fresh fruit, muffins, and bagels, along with two plates of scrambled eggs and bacon. "I didn't know what you wanted," I told Cary, "so I just got some of everything."

"It looks great," she said sleepily. "Just give me a few minutes."

She disappeared into the bathroom, while I looked over the breakfast options. There weren't many for me. I wasn't supposed to eat anything raw while I was on chemo because of the risk of germs, which eliminated the fruit. The bagels and muffins were also out because they weren't pre-packaged or homemade. That left the eggs and bacon. Technically, I wasn't supposed to eat them either, since I hadn't cooked them myself, but I would have starved way back at the beginning of the tour if I'd had to make all my own food on the road. I decided to take my chances.

When Cary came back out, looking fresh-faced and more awake with her hair pulled up in a messy bun, I was digging into my mound of scrambled eggs. "Sleep well?" I asked her, between bites.

"Um. Better than I would have on the loveseat," she offered, with a shrug.

"I slept like a rock. Hope I didn't kick you or nothin'."

She smiled, her cheeks turning pink. I got a kick out of making her blush without even trying. "You didn't."

She was pretty quiet while we ate our breakfast, but then, so was I. I was still thinking about how crappy the rest of the day was going to be, with the chemo and all. I wondered if she was still thinking about what she'd heard AJ say the night before. I sort of hated him for saying all those things, especially the stuff about Paris, but then, I hadn't said much to set him straight, either. She was probably pissed at me for that, even though she said she wasn't.

After breakfast, I took a long, hot shower, delaying the inevitable. The only thing I had to look forward to when I got out was starting chemo, so I stayed in as long as I could,

until the water started getting cold. I was just about to turn it off when I heard a tapping sound. I stuck my head out of the shower and realized it was Cary knocking. "Nick? Are you okay in there?" her voice called.

"Yeah!" I shouted back, quickly turning off the faucet. "I'm fine. Getting out now." She was probably worried I'd passed out or something.

I grabbed a clean towel and dried myself off, wrapping it around my waist. I hadn't brought any clothes into the bathroom with me, so I just walked out in the towel, making sure I caught the look on Cary's face as I crossed the room to my suitcase. I dug out a clean pair of underwear and some comfortable shorts and took those back to the bathroom to put on.

When I came out again, I saw that she was getting the chemo stuff set up on the coffee table. "You ready to get this over with?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at me. She looked relieved to see that I was at least half-dressed this time.

I guess I had stalled long enough. "No, but go ahead." I lay down on the bed and turned on the TV, trying to distract myself while she hooked up the chemo pump. That part wasn't bad. It didn't hurt because of the port; I just had to make sure I didn't get myself tangled up in the IV line. She taped a gauze bandage over the port when she was done, to keep the needle from being pulled out if it got bumped. I set the chemo pump down on the bed next to me, in the little Nintendo pouch she'd made me.

Then it was time for the spinal injection. "Be gentle," I begged, as I rolled over. She always was, but that didn't make it any easier. It was the needle that hurt so bad, and she couldn't change that. The numbing stuff she put on my back really only worked on the surface; once the needle went through my skin, I could still feel it.

I curled up into a ball on the edge of the bed, wrapping my arms around my knees and pulling them up to my chest, and tried to hold still as her fingers poked up and down my backbone to find the right spot. That part actually felt good, like a massage. If only I were getting a massage, instead of chemo... I closed my eyes and tried to imagine myself in a spa, lying on a massage table while a hot little masseuse in a white uniform worked my back. The daydream was destroyed as soon as I felt the pressure of the needle sliding into the small of my back. I cringed and sucked in a sharp breath through my teeth, grabbing a fistful of the covers to clench. "Hang on," Cary murmured, her voice soft and soothing. "Almost done..."

Finally, I felt the pain and pressure let up, as the needle came out. I let out the breath I'd been holding in a sigh of relief and took a few more deep breaths. As long as I didn't get a headache, the worst part was over. Cary wiped off my back, and I stretched out flat on the bed again. Except for trips to the bathroom, it was where I'd be stuck the rest of the day.

I wondered if AJ had told everyone about how I'd cussed him out the day before, because they pretty well left me alone. It was a Sunday, so I figured Brian and Howie

had found somewhere to take their families to church. AJ actually texted me in the afternoon. *Sry bout last nite*, the text said. *U guys up for seein The A-Team with me and Justin and a few peeps?*

We had talked about seeing the new remake of *The A-Team* together, and if it wasn't for the spinal tap, I probably would have gone. It would have been easy enough to hide the chemo pump in a dark movie theater. But I knew if I went out, the headache would be horrible, so I texted back another lie: *Sorry dude, I have a migraine. Another time?* At least the lie was convincing; if anyone came by the room and found me lying in bed, a migraine was a good excuse – and not so far from the truth, either.

AJ never texted back, and of course, he went anyway. "You didn't wanna go see *The A-Team* with AJ today, did you?" I asked Cary, as we sat around, watching World Cup soccer matches on ESPN. (Well, I was watching, anyway; she looked up from her book every once in awhile, when the cheering on TV got loud.)

She just gave me a look that said, *Are you kidding? After he compared me to Paris Hilton?* All she actually said was, "No." It was enough.

I flashed her a sheepish smile. "I figured. Just checking."

All in all, the day was long and boring. I felt bad for Cary, who spent it cooped up in the hotel room with me, even though she felt fine herself. She could have gone out and enjoyed her free day, but she spent it taking care of me instead. I don't think she was happy, and neither was I. The weekend had sucked, and the next day was going to suck even more. We had a show, the first of three in a row, and I still had more chemo to take.

For the first time, I really started to worry that I was in over my head, that it was all too much, and that sooner, rather than later, it was going to catch up to me.

Turns out, I was right.

Chapter 41

Nick

Going through chemo is kind of like working out. It sucks right from the start, but once you get going, you think, *This isn't that bad. I can do this.* It isn't fun, and sometimes it's downright painful, but you do it because you know it'll make your body stronger in the long run. You push yourself to your limit, sometimes past it, and when it's all over, you're exhausted, but you feel good. You know you made a healthy choice, even if it was the harder choice, and you feel relieved that it's over... for now.

But you feel it later, in your muscles and joints, sometimes all the way down to your bones. Even when you take all the right precautions, you still get sore. Sometimes it's just too much for your body to handle. You feel the effects for days after, and at first, it seems like each day it hurts worse than it did the day before. It has to get worse before it gets better, before your body heals itself and adjusts to you pushing it so hard. But you don't quit, because you know it's a necessary evil.

I always hated working out, but chemo was worse. What I wouldn't give to be in the gym, lifting weights or running on the treadmill, instead of lying around, hooked up to an IV and feeling like shit. On chemo, I was too tired to work out. Luckily, I didn't need to; with all the dancing, each of our shows was a workout in itself.

We had three of them in a row after our free weekend, and each of them was harder than the one before it.

On Monday, we played Kansas City. I did another round of chemo in the morning, then took a nap to sleep it off, and was late getting into the venue for soundcheck. Everyone was pissed at me – especially AJ, who was still being a little bitch about me blowing him off twice that weekend. Even the fans were pissed because the soundcheck party started late and was really rushed, though they didn't know it was my fault. Some of them probably blamed me anyway – I get blamed for everything. After the soundcheck, it was my turn to lead the backstage tour for the platinum VIPs, which meant I had even less time to rest before the show. I'm sure it wasn't my best tour; those fans got gypped. The show itself wasn't much better. I did my best, but on top of my fatigue, the venue was fucking hot as hell, so I felt literally like death warmed over. By the end, I was about ready to collapse. I skipped the showers, even though I was sweating buckets, and went straight back to my bunk on the bus to crash – and finish the rest of my chemo.

On Tuesday, we were in Broomfield, Colorado. I only had one round of chemo to get through that day, so we decided to save it for that night, so I could sleep through it. I spent the day trying to get geared up for the show... which pretty much amounted to drinking mass quantities of caffeine. I had coffee with my breakfast, guzzled Mountain Dew at lunch, and chugged a Red Bull before I took the stage. It helped. I got through the show. I even put in an appearance at the after party, mostly to keep Howie happy. AJ was still acting pissy, and Brian had been pretty distant lately; I didn't need Howie hating me, too. I had a couple drinks with him at the club, which earned me a lecture from Cary when I got back to the bus, about mixing alcohol and chemo. She said it would make the effects of the chemo worse, and as usual, she was right.

On Wednesday, I woke up in Salt Lake City with the worst hangover of my life. That was what it felt like, anyway. My head was pounding. My eyes were burning. My stomach was queasy. My throat was dry, and my tongue felt like sandpaper. My whole body ached. I didn't know how I was going to get through the show that night. But it was our last one before a break; we had the next day off to travel to California. If I could just get through this one show, I could sleep it off the whole next day if I had to, and then we'd be on the final stretch. One more week. Two more states. Seven more shows.

I could make it.

Before we took the stage that night, I sat around in my dressing room, finishing off a pack of Red Bull shots and listening to Queen's "The Show Must Go On" on my iPod. It was a far cry from "Eye of the Tiger;" this song was dark, inspiring in a different way. It fit my mood that night... depressed, but determined. I wasn't excited about the show, but I was going to go out on that stage and give it my all. The fans deserved that much from me, and I wasn't sure how many more chances I'd have to give them what they wanted. With the tour winding down, every concert counted. I tried to perform each one like it was my last.

"Whatever happens... I'll leave it all to chance," sang Freddie Mercury in my ears.
"Another heartache... another failed romance. On and on... does anybody know what we are living for? I guess I'm learning... I must be warmer now; I'll soon be turning... 'round the corner now..."

It was like I knew something was going to happen. It was a gut feeling... a sick sense of dread...

I pushed it from my mind when I heard the knock on my dressing room door. Pausing my iPod, I downed the last shot of Red Bull and dropped the bottle into the trash, along with the rest of the package. "It's open!" I called to whoever was outside my door. I figured it was Cary. The guys never waited that long after knocking; they just barged right in.

Sure enough, the door opened, and there she stood, looking like a perfect Bettie Page pinup in a little polka dot dress and heels, her cheeks all flushed from being onstage. As she walked in, her skirt swishing around her bare legs, it occurred to me again how hot she was all dolled up like that, with her hair curled and her cherry red lipstick. She was a pretty girl without all the makeup too, but she sure cleaned up nice. In any other circumstances, I probably *would* have "tapped that hot little piece of ass," as AJ so tactfully put it.

"I just wanted to come see how you're doing before I go change," she said, dropping onto the couch beside me and reminding me why there would be no ass-tapping tonight or any other night on this tour.

"I'm alright," I replied. It wasn't a total lie, just a half-truth, as usual. I was far from a hundred percent, but with the energy shots kicking in, I was starting to feel better – less tired, anyway. I still had a nervous feeling, but I blamed that on the caffeine making me jittery. It would pass once I got onstage. "How was your set?"

She grinned. "It was good!"

"Yeah? Good crowd tonight?"

“Seemed like it.” Her smile faded to a look of concern. “Are you sure you’re gonna be okay to perform?”

I rolled my eyes. Despite my attempts to distract her, she had been in nurse mode since she’d walked through the door. “Yes, Nurse Cary, I’ll be fine. It’s a little late to decide I’m not okay, at this point.”

She gave me a look. She opened her mouth, like she was going to say something, then apparently changed her mind and closed it again. I knew there was a lot she wanted to say to me, but I guess she felt like it wasn’t the time to bring it up again. I was grateful. The last thing I wanted to do before I took the stage was argue with her about the same old crap. I had enough on my mind already.

“Seriously, I’m good to go,” I added, to reassure her. “I’ve been rockin’ out, gettin’ myself pumped. I’m ready.”

Her eyes fell on my iPod. “What are you listening to?”

“Queen. ‘The Show Must Go On.’” I flashed her a crooked grin. “It was one of the last songs Freddie Mercury recorded before he died. The rest of the band didn’t think he’d be able to do the vocals, but he went for it and fuckin’ killed it.”

Cary didn’t look too impressed by my music trivia. She just looked sad. “And then he died,” she said flatly. “A day after finally admitting he had AIDS. Is that what you’re going to do? Hide this right up till the day it kills you?”

I felt my face heat up, and my stomach clenched. “No. I just think he had some balls, to keep making music as long as he could. He knew it was gonna kill him eventually, but he didn’t let it kill his career, too.”

She shook her head. “This doesn’t have to kill you, Nick.”

“If I thought this was gonna kill me, I wouldn’t even bother with the fucking chemo,” I replied. “I’m not planning on dying anytime soon. I’m gonna go out there and perform, and after the tour, when I’m done with chemo, then I’ll tell everyone. They’ll take it better then.”

“You’re crazy,” she sighed, as she stood up. “I’m done trying to change your mind. Go kill it onstage. Just don’t kill yourself.”

I couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic or not. She just sounded sort of defeated. She’d been like that for a few days, ever since Kansas City. I think both of us were glad the tour was almost over. “Don’t plan to!” I called, as she walked out, closing the door behind her.

I pushed play on my iPod again. *“The show must go on... The show must go on...”* the chorus chanted again, and my ears rang with the legendary voice of Freddie Mercury.

"I'll face it with a grin! I'm never giving in! On with the show..." The electric guitar squealed, and my heart raced. *"Ooh, I'll top the bill! I'll overkill! I have to find the will to carry on with the show..."* I stood up, as the song echoed to a finish. *"The show must go on..."*

I let it fade out before I turned off my iPod and put it back in my bag. I took a quick look at myself in the mirror – I didn't look nearly as vibrant and polished as Cary had, but I could still make the ladies scream. I gave my reflection the smoldering smirk I had perfected, which could make up for any missed note or messed-up dance step. Once again, I would need that smirk to pull this off.

Looking more confident than I felt, I left my dressing room and went to find the other guys. It was almost time to take the stage.

The best thing I can say about the show is that once it started, it went by quickly. One song led into another, and it was only during our quick changes, while they showed our movie spoofs on the big screen, that I even had time to think things like, *One more half to go... One set left... One last song...*

For me, it was a countdown to that moment when we took our final bows and left the stage, when I could go back to my bus and lie down. I just wanted to sleep, all night and all the next day, if it would make me feel better. As I stood backstage before the encore, my head was pounding from the loud music. I felt jittery from the bright, flashing stage lights, dizzy and nauseous from all the dancing.

The show had passed by in a blur, and I wasn't even sure how it had gone. I'd performed on autopilot, going through the motions and singing my parts without any real conscious thought. A smirk here, a raised eyebrow there, a pelvic thrust now and then... I threw those things in naturally; they were part of my stage persona, the act I'd perfected over the years. The screaming from the crowd told me I hadn't let them down.

Police sirens wailed, as blue and red lights flashed on one side of the stage, and I heard the collective shriek rise from the audience again as our voices echoed, *"Straight through my heart... Straight through my heart..."*

Last song, I thought again, steeling myself. *I can do this*. But my heart was pounding, and sweat was pouring down my face, and I had a sick, nervous feeling in my stomach. I just wanted it to be over.

As the backing track began, Brian walked out onto the platform to sing his part, and the fresh wave of screams told me he had leaped onto the stage below. *"In the heart of the night, when it's dark in the lights, I heard the loudest noise... a gunshot on the floor, o-ohh, o-ohh..."*

“I looked down,” I sang as I joined him onstage, “and my shirt’s turning red, spinning ‘round... felt her lips on my neck and her voice in my ear... like, ‘I missed you, want you tonight’...”

“Straight through my heart,” we all sang, as AJ and Howie took the stage, too, “a single bullet got me; I can’t stop the bleeding... o-ohh... Straight through my heart; she aimed and she shot me; I just can’t believe it... o-ohh...”

I tried to stay in step with them as we did the choreography, but even though my heart was racing, my body struggled to keep up. I was so exhausted. My limbs felt heavy, and the rest of me felt weak; it took every last ounce of effort I had in me to jump and spin and kick and make my arms do what they were supposed to.

“No, I can’t resist, and I can’t be hit; I just can’t escape this love...Straight through my heart...”

“Soldier down...”

“My heart...”

“Soldier down...”

“My heart...”

I was so out of breath by the bridge, I could barely sing. *“In the heart... of the night...”* I wavered, my voice going flat, *“when it’s dark... in the lights, I heard the loudest-”* I gasped for air. *“-noise... gunshot on the floor... oh-ohh, oh-ohh...”*

The guys could hear me struggling; they came in beneath me, helping finish my solo. I envied Brian, who held his notes over the last chorus like he had all the air in the world, belting, *“Soldier down... soldier down...”* like he could go on all night. There had been a time, not so long ago, when I’d been like that, too. Now, I couldn’t wait to introduce the dancers and the DJ, thank the crowd, and get the hell off the stage.

“You okay, Nick?” Brian was the first to ask, once we were backstage again. He was eyeing me with concern. I must have looked and sounded terrible, but we were all sweaty and out of breath; that was nothing new.

“Yeah,” I panted, “sorry, I just... ran out of air. Thanks for coming in there...”

“Sure.” He was still frowning at me.

I tried to make a joke. “Man... I gotta get back in the gym...”

“I thought you were getting in nightly workouts with Cary,” AJ put in. He didn’t smile at his little joke.

God, get over it, I thought, rolling my eyes at him. He had been way flakier than me when he was drunk or high all the time, so he had no right to bitch. Besides, he didn't know half the shit I was going through. None of them did.

So tell them, I could hear Cary saying. She'd become like the little voice in my head. I ignored her.

"I'm gonna go change," I said and made my escape. In my dressing room, I peeled off my sweat-soaked stage clothes and put on the gray shorts and white t-shirt I'd worn to the venue. I skipped the shower; I could do that back at the hotel. I felt nauseous and light-headed, and all I wanted to do was lie down on my bus.

Cary was already on the bus, waiting for me. "Are you okay?" was the first thing she asked when I came onboard.

"Jeez, was I *that* bad tonight?" I muttered.

"You were fine. You just look really pale," she said, looking up at me in concern. "Come here..." She reached for me, but I shrugged her off, not in the mood for being poked and prodded.

"Nah, I'll be alright. I'm just gonna lie down till we get back to the hotel." I went straight back to my bunk, dropped my bag next to it, and flopped down on my stomach. It was a relief to finally lay my pounding head down on my pillow. The pillowcase felt cool against my clammy face. I closed my eyes, but I still felt sort of dizzy, like the bus was rocking, even though it hadn't started moving yet. I could hear my own heartbeat, hammering in my ears. It was going really fast.

Relax, I told myself, or maybe I was just talking to my heart. You can chill out now. Show's over. Day off tomorrow. Everything's fine.

My heart wasn't buying it. It was still pounding when the bus pulled up behind the hotel, like I'd just gotten off the stage. I could feel it even when I sat up, like a weird fluttering in my chest. It made me woozy, and for a few seconds, the bus seemed to spin again. I wasn't sure I could get up from my bunk. I did anyway, though, swaying a little. I put my hand on the top bunk and held on until I got my balance.

"Hey, you are up." Cary appeared, her bag slung over her shoulder. "I was just coming to get you; I thought you might've fallen asleep."

"I wish," I said. "I'm so fucking tired..." I leaned down carefully to get my own bag, warding off another wave of dizziness. The backpack felt a lot heavier than it had before. I put it on over both shoulders, but its weight seemed to drag me down. I felt like I was fighting gravity, and gravity was winning. I was tempted to give in and lie down in my bunk again, but I forced myself to follow Cary up the aisle to the front of the bus. All I had to do was make it upstairs to my hotel room, and then I could rest again. That was all I needed... a little rest.

Cary kept her mouth shut the whole way up to the room, while our bodyguards and the other guys were around, but as soon as we made it inside and shut the door, she rounded on me and said, “I wanna draw your blood tonight and send it off first thing in the morning. I’ll bet anything your counts are low again.”

I groaned. “Can we just do it tomorrow? I’m too tired to mess with that shit tonight. I just wanna shower and go to bed.”

She pressed her lips together, but finally nodded. “Alright. First thing in the morning, though. Are you feeling okay otherwise? You don’t have a fever, do you?” Before I could answer, she swooped in and put her hand on my forehead. “You don’t feel warm,” she said, satisfied. “You’re probably anemic, though...”

“And sweaty and smelly, too, I bet,” I said, managing a grin. “I’m gonna jump in the shower.”

But I didn’t feel up to “jumping” anywhere. I dropped my backpack and staggered into the bathroom. It had a nice, big, marble tub, so I decided on a bath instead of a shower. I could lie down that way, relax a little before I went to bed. I stripped out of my clothes, put on one of the hotel’s big, white, cushy bathrobes, and turned on the water. I made it nice and hot, so that by the time the tub was full, I could see steam rising off the surface of the water.

I let the robe fall and slid into the bath, groaning with pleasure as the hot water washed over my tired body. I lay my head back against the edge of the tub and closed my eyes. When the water had cooled off a little, I stretched out and lowered myself further into the water, until my head went under. Lying like that across the bottom of the tub, I could hear my heartbeat again, thumping erratically against my eardrums. I sat up quickly, splashing water everywhere, and let out my breath in a gasp. My heart was galloping in my chest, going way too fast. The sensation was familiar, and it made me feel sick to my stomach. It scared me. It was the same symptom that had sent me to the cardiologist over two years ago, leading to my diagnosis of cardiomyopathy. Just as I had then, I thought, *Something’s not right. Something’s wrong with me.*

Okay, so there was a lot wrong with me, and I didn’t know if it was related to the cancer or the chemo or my heart condition. All I knew was that I didn’t feel right, and I couldn’t deny it any longer. I needed to get help.

I pulled myself up out of the tub, reaching for a towel. My heart reacted and started racing even faster, and all of a sudden, I got really dizzy again. I felt hot all over, then freezing cold. As I fumbled with the towel, trying to wrap it around myself and stay on my feet at the same time, my vision started going. It was like a black tunnel around the edges of my eyes, closing in until the room started to gray out. In the darkness, I was even more aware of my heartbeat, thudding against my ribs. Then the bathroom floor seemed to tilt, right out from under me. My knees buckled, and I felt myself falling...

I came to on the cold, tile floor, still dripping wet and wearing nothing but a towel, with Cary leaning over me, saying my name. I blinked a few times until my vision cleared, bringing her face into focus.

“You need to take me to the hospital,” I whispered. “Something’s wrong.”

Chapter 42

Cary

Subconsciously, I had known since Nick stepped onto the bus that night that something wasn’t right.

Maybe it was that his coloring seemed off. His face was always really red by the end of a concert, but this time, only his cheeks were flushed. The rest of his face, especially around his lips and eyes, was white. He was out of breath and looked exhausted, and I knew he had pushed himself too hard.

Looking back, I should have just taken his vitals right then and there on the tour bus. I would have realized that he was in trouble and saved him the embarrassment of blacking out in the bathroom, naked. I could have spared myself the awkwardness of finding him that way, too.

But instead, I let his stubbornness win, yet again, and figured I’d let him relax and get some rest before I bothered him about blood samples and all of that again. It could wait until morning, I thought, as I watched him walk off to the bathroom. I waited until I heard the tub filling to change out of my clothes and put on my pajamas. There was a double sink outside the bathroom door, so I washed my face while he was in the bath. As I stood there at the sink, I could hear him sloshing around in the tub. It was hard not to think dirty thoughts, as much as I tried to keep myself from picturing him naked.

Stop it, I scolded myself, as I patted my face dry. When I lowered the towel, my reflection in the mirror was smirking back at me. I looked away, turning to hang my towel back on the bar.

That was when I heard the thud.

As my heart leapt into my throat, my head whipped towards the closed bathroom door. “Nick?” I called, and when there was no answer, I immediately grabbed the door handle. I was filled with dread, expecting the door to be locked, so you can imagine my relief when the knob turned easily in my hand.

I peeked my head around the door, really not wanting to walk in on him naked, but when I saw his bare feet just lying there, I knew I had no choice. I threw the door open

wide and rushed in. He was slumped on the floor, just in front of the tub, a towel draped loosely across his waist. He must have been getting out when he'd fallen – or passed out, more likely.

"Nick?" I said again, dropping down onto my knees next to him. I was relieved to see that he was already starting to come to. As I hovered over him, his eyelids fluttered and then opened. His blue eyes looked dazed and disoriented. "Nick," I repeated, trying to get him to focus on me.

He blinked rapidly a few times, and finally, the confusion in his eyes cleared. He looked right at me and muttered, "You need to take me to the hospital. Something's wrong."

It made my blood run cold to hear him to say that. It was like he was finally admitting defeat, accepting that his condition was outside of his control, and even though that was a good thing, it scared me. Whatever he was feeling, it had to be bad for him to want to go to the hospital. I could see it in his eyes. He was scared, too.

"Okay... okay, hang on..." I looked around and spotted his robe, draped over the closed toilet seat. I grabbed it, bunched it up, and wedged it under his legs, to elevate them a bit. I found a clean, folded towel and slid that under his head, to give him some cushion. I didn't think I should try to help him up from the floor just yet; if he passed out cold again, I wouldn't be able to move him on my own. "Lie right there... don't move... I'll be right back."

As I started to get up, his hand shot out and caught my arm. "Don't call an ambulance," he begged. His voice was weak, but firm.

I let out my breath and looked at him in disbelief. "You just said to take you to the hospital. How else do you think you're gonna get there?"

"We can take a taxi..."

"You are unbelievable," I said, exasperated, as I pulled myself out of his grip and stalked out of the bathroom.

"Please," his voice drifted after me. "It'll draw too much attention..."

He was right, of course. Loyalty to him outweighed my better judgment, and when I picked up the phone, I dialed the front desk instead of 911. "I need you to call us a cab, please, immediately," I told the clerk who answered. When I hung up the phone, I got my medical bag and hurried back to Nick. I had more training than any EMT and enough basic equipment to monitor him until I could get him to the hospital.

"How do you feel?" I asked, as I sank down next to him again. "What's wrong?"

"My heart's racing," he murmured, putting his hand on the left side of his chest. "It has been ever since the show."

I took out my stethoscope and slipped it into my ears. Pushing his hand out of the way, I pressed the diaphragm to his chest and moved it around until I could hear heart sounds. They were strong, but fast and irregular. Frowning, I reached into my bag and pulled out the watch I always wore when I was on duty at the nursing home to check pulses. I watched the second hand, counting beats as I listened. In fifteen seconds, I counted fifty-some beats. Even when I rounded down to do the math in my head, the number was alarmingly high.

“You’re having an arrhythmia... an irregular heart rhythm,” I explained to Nick, trying to keep my voice calm so he wouldn’t panic any more than he already was. “It’s a form of tachycardia... rapid heartbeat. Your heart rate’s over two hundred right now.”

“How bad is that?”

I swallowed. “Well... normal’s anywhere between sixty and a hundred beats per minute. Your heart’s going double that.”

“Holy shit,” he breathed, his eyes going wide. “Is that... is it gonna kill me?”

For the first time, I saw it in his face: not just a flicker, but a full-on expression of fear that he was going to die. It made my own heart skip a beat, as if an invisible hand had reached up and squeezed it still for a second. “No,” I said firmly, taking the stethoscope out of my ears. “But you do need treatment... medications, to slow your heart down. The cab should be here soon. Do you think you can stand up?”

“Yeah...” he said uncertainly, lifting his head. I helped him sit up and put his robe on, and after he’d been upright for a few seconds without blacking out, I ducked under his arm to support part of his weight as he tried to stand. He swayed unsteadily for a moment, holding onto me, and I kept my arm around him until he’d gotten his balance.

“Nice and slow,” I said, as we walked out of the bathroom. “Tell me if you feel like you’re going to pass out again.”

“I’m alright,” he replied, though he sounded uneasy. “My heart’s just pounding...”

“I know. Sit here for a minute,” I said, guiding him to the edge of the bed. I left him there and went over to his suitcase, digging through it to find him some clothes. “Try something for me,” I said, as I held up a pair of shorts. “Hold your breath for a few seconds. Then cough, really hard.” I waited until I heard him cough. “Did that help?”

I glanced over at him; he was looking back at me like I was insane. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay...” I rummaged around deeper in the suitcase and pulled out a plaid, button-down shirt. “Then try this: clench your stomach muscles and bear down, like you’re about to have a BM.”

“Have a BM?” he repeated flatly. “Is that nurse code for ‘take a huge shit’?”

I smiled. “Uh-huh. Just do it.” I snuck another peek over my shoulder at him, in time to see his face scrunch up. It was eerily reminiscent of his facial expressions in the “Quit Playing Games” video, all those years ago. The thought made me want to laugh and cry at the same time. “Any change?” I asked hopefully, as I brought his clothes over to the bed.

“I don’t feel any different...”

I picked up his wrist to check his pulse again. It felt just as fast as before. Oh well, it had been worth a shot; sometimes vagal maneuvers helped. “Then we really do have to get you to the hospital. Here, put these on,” I said, dropping the clothes on his lap. “I’ll turn around if you promise not to pass out again.”

Finally, some color came back into his cheeks. “Yeah, alright...” he muttered, standing up slowly. I made myself turn around while he got dressed, praying I wouldn’t hear another thud from him collapsing again. I was relieved when he finally said, “Alright... I’m decent.”

He sounded somewhat calmer, which made me feel calmer, too. “Okay... I’m gonna grab my bag, and we’ll head downstairs.” I got my medical bag from the bathroom and slung it over one shoulder, remembering to slip my wallet and room key into one of the outside pockets. It wasn’t until I saw myself in the mirrored wall of the elevator that I realized I had forgotten to change my own clothes. I was wearing a black tank top, no bra, and red pajama pants with Betty Boop all over them. *Really classy, Cary*, I thought, rolling my eyes at my reflection.

If Nick had even noticed, he didn’t make fun of me for it. In fact, he didn’t say anything the whole elevator ride. In the silence, I could hear his breathing – it was fast and shallow, like he was on the verge of hyperventilating. I reached out and took his hand, squeezed it hard. “Hang in there,” I said, hoping to reassure him. “You’re gonna be alright.”

Then the elevator doors slid open, and my sense of calm evaporated. Staring out in dismay, I thought, *Oh no...*

The lobby was full of people... most of them girls. I recognized BSB t-shirts on a few and realized they were fans, either just getting back from the concert or waiting to see if the Boys would come down. If they saw Nick, they were going to swarm us. Why hadn’t I thought to jam that damn Celtics cap on his head before we came down? It probably wouldn’t have helped much, but it might have delayed the moment of recognition and given us a head start.

“Shit,” I heard Nick swear under his breath beside me. I looked over at him; his face was pale and streaked with cold sweat. I wasn’t sure how much longer he could stay on his feet.

"Come on," I murmured, pulling him out of the elevator. "Don't talk, and don't stop. Just walk."

I was still holding onto his hand, and that gave me an idea. Dropping his hand, I cozied right up to him and wrapped my arm around his waist, possessively, jamming my hand into his back pocket. He naturally slung his arm over my shoulders again, and I steered him towards the front doors. I tried to ignore the fans who cried, "Nick! Hi, Nick!" but I didn't miss the dirty looks they gave me as I hurried him right past them, to the taxi that was waiting outside.

To the casual observer on the street, we must have seemed inseparable, walking with our arms around each other like that. They couldn't see how heavily Nick was leaning on me or feel the dead weight of his arm on my shoulders.

To the cab driver who eyed us in the rearview mirror of his taxi, we certainly looked like a couple, holding hands in the backseat. He didn't know that my fingers were pressed against the radial artery in Nick's wrist, feeling every pulse of his racing heart.

"We need you to take us to the closest emergency room," I told the cabbie.

He gave a quick nod. "That'd be Salt Lake Regional," he said, already pulling away from the curb.

"Thanks." I looked over at Nick. He stared back at me, but neither of us spoke. I didn't let go of his hand, and his pulse fluttered beneath my fingertips the whole way to the hospital. It was a silent, but short ride.

I was relieved to see the words *Salt Lake Regional Medical Center* lit up on the side of a large, light-colored building up ahead, and when the taxi pulled to a stop underneath the overhang that said *EMERGENCY* in red letters, I thanked the driver again for getting us there so quickly and shoved a ten dollar bill into his hand. "Don't worry about change," I said, already opening the door. I scrambled out and then reached back in to help Nick. Arm in arm, we walked into the hospital.

It didn't take long to get medical attention. As I was hurriedly explaining the situation to the triage nurse, she took one look at Nick and recognized him, and the next thing I knew, he was being whisked away in a wheelchair. I followed the nurse who brought him to a small, private room and helped him out of the wheelchair and into the bed. "He's got a port, for IV access," I told her, before she had even unbuttoned Nick's shirt. "He's being treated with chemo for Stage IV lymphoblastic lymphoma."

Even though it made my stomach drop to hear the words out loud, it felt good to say them, to finally be able to tell someone the secret I'd been carrying around for Nick for the past six weeks.

The nurse looked at me in surprise. “Are you his caretaker?” I didn’t miss the way her eyes panned down to my pajama bottoms, as she gave me the onceover.

Feeling myself blush, I nodded. “I’m a CNP. I’ve been administering his outpatient chemo.”

“Stick around,” said the nurse. “The doctor will want to talk to you when he’s taking a history.”

I stood back and watched as she fit an oxygen canula into Nick’s nose and hooked him up to the standard cardiac monitoring equipment – heart monitor and twelve-lead ECG, blood pressure cuff, and pulse oximeter. It was almost a relief to see him connected to so many wires, to know that he was being closely watched and properly taken care of, and that the responsibility was off my shoulders.

While she was charting his initial vitals, a big, blonde man in a white lab coat breezed in and introduced himself as Dr. Harrison. “What do we have here?” he asked.

The nurse barely looked up from her chart. “Mr. Carter, age thirty, complains of rapid heartbeat with palpitations, shortness of breath, fatigue, and syncope...” She repeated all the information Nick and I had given her, including his cancer diagnosis. Then she glanced up at me and said, “This is his caretaker, Ms...”

“Hilst,” I supplied. “Cary.”

The doctor asked me a few quick questions, which I answered, and then focused his attention on Nick. He listened to his heart and lungs, palpated his chest and neck, studied his vital signs and the rhythm on the ECG strip, and asked him all kinds of questions. “You’re having what’s called supraventricular tachycardia,” he told Nick, “an abnormally fast heart rhythm. Have you ever experienced anything like this before?”

“I’ve had the palpitations before,” Nick admitted, “but not like this.” He filled Dr. Harrison in on his cardiomyopathy diagnosis, which gave me another sinking feeling in my stomach. I had assumed this episode was related to his cancer treatment, just another side effect of the chemo, a complication caused by him pushing his body past its limits. It hadn’t even occurred to me that it could be his heart condition flaring up, though all of a sudden it seemed like the obvious conclusion. Nick had never really talked about his cardiomyopathy, at least not to me, so I hadn’t thought much of it. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. It scared me. I knew certain chemotherapy drugs could cause damage to the heart muscle – or, in Nick’s case, worsen the damage that had already been done. Had the drugs I’d been giving him messed with his heart?

“What were you doing when the symptoms started?”

“I’d just gotten off stage. I’m a singer,” Nick added, looking unsure as to whether this middle-aged man would have a clue who he was or not. “I did a bunch of dancing, too, though...”

"Any drugs or alcohol before the show?" asked the doctor.

Nick shook his head. "I had a few Red Bull shots, but that's it."

The doctor and nurse looked at each other. "Draw a blood sample through his port and order a CBC, lytes, tox screen, and caffeine level," the doctor told the nurse."

I stared at Nick. "When were you drinking Red Bull?"

He shrugged, his face reddening. "In the dressing room, before the show."

I wondered how long he'd been hiding that little habit from me. He must have known I wouldn't approve. Energy drinks like Red Bull are loaded with caffeine and sugar – good for a rush of adrenaline, bad for a heart condition. "Caffeine speeds up your heart," I told Nick, trying not to sound too exasperated with him, even though I was feeling that way. "That might be what caused this."

I looked at Dr. Harrison, and he nodded in agreement. "There are a lot of things that can trigger SVT – caffeine and other stimulants, certain medications, alcohol, stress, overexertion, dehydration, changes in blood pressure, heart disease... Given your medical history, it could be a combination of any of those factors. Hopefully your labwork will give us some answers; if not, we'll run some more tests. In the meantime, we're going to give you some fluids and medicine that will hopefully slow your heart." When he was done explaining this to Nick, he turned to the nurse and said, "Run in a liter of saline and six milligrams of adenosine, IV push."

As the nurse moved around to his left side to hook up the IV to his port, Nick looked up at me. "Are you mad at me?" he asked.

For a second, I was confused. "Mad at you?"

"For the Red Bull?" He looked more sheepish than scared now.

"Oh." I thought about it for a moment, then finally shook my head. "No. I think you're kind of a moron, to load yourself up on that much caffeine before a show, but I'm not *mad* at you."

He actually grinned. "Good."

There was so much more I wanted to say to him, about what he was doing to himself, but this wasn't the time or place. "We'll talk," I added, smiling sweetly back. "Later."

The nurse hung a bag of saline solution on the IV stand; it ran into an infusion pump, which pushed it steadily through a thin tube that connected to Nick's port. The fluids would help, I figured; he was probably dehydrated, from chugging Red Bull instead of water before the show. That did annoy me; I was constantly urging him to stay hydrated

while on chemo, and he was more concerned about getting himself all caffeinated so he'd have energy on stage. As usual, his priorities were way out of whack. It was no wonder his body had started going that way, too.

I looked at the heart monitor; the waves were still double-timing it across the screen, showing his heart beating at a rate of two hundred beats per minute. "I'm going to inject the medicine now. You may feel a little funny for a few minutes after," the nurse warned Nick. She injected a syringe full of adenosine into his port, followed by a second syringe of saline. I watched on the monitor as his heart reacted to the drug; the EKG wave bottomed out and flattened for a few seconds, then shot up and down in rapid peaks and valleys again. Nick groaned in obvious discomfort, his hand going to his chest, which was covered in electrodes. Whatever he felt, as his heart skipped a few beats and then started racing again, it couldn't have been pleasant.

"No change," said the doctor. "Let's try twelve milligrams."

The nurse shot him up with a double dose of the adenosine, and this time, while there was still no change on the heart monitor, Nick reacted poorly. "Oh god... I feel really bad," he whimpered, clutching his chest. His skin was flushed and sweaty. An alarm started going off on the monitor, as his blood pressure dipped.

"He's dropped his pressure," the nurse told the doctor.

"He's not stable," was the doctor's reply. "We're going to need to cardiovert him. Get the defibrillator ready."

My stomach dropped again. "What? What's going on?" I heard Nick's voice rise anxiously. I came up alongside his bed and took his hand.

"They're going to give you a shock across your heart to get it beating normally again," I explained, squeezing his hand. I knew how scary that had to sound, even though it was standard treatment for an unstable patient with an arrhythmia like this. It scared me, too.

"Fuck..." Nick moaned, looking like he was on the verge of tears.

Another nurse came in, and the two of them worked in perfect sync with Dr. Harrison. One of the nurses squirted a conductive gel onto Nick's chest, while the other injected a sedative into his IV line. If it did its job, he wouldn't remember the shock. I felt his hand go limp in mine as the sedative kicked in, and the nurse who had given it placed an oxygen mask over his face.

"Charge to fifty joules," said Dr. Harrison, as the first nurse set up the defibrillator to synchronize the shock to the right moment in the cardiac cycle. If the timing was off, it could cause a cardiac arrest by sending Nick's heart into a more dangerous arrhythmia, ventricular fibrillation. Just thinking about it caused my own heart to race from anxiety.

The nurse handed the doctor the defibrillator paddles. "Charged to fifty."

"Clear of the patient, please."

I let go of Nick's hand and stepped back out of the way, as the doctor placed the paddles to his chest. While Nick's heart took the jolt of electricity, mine skipped a beat as I saw his body twitch, and even though he was sedated, he let out another loud moan. Our eyes turned to the heart monitor, which flatlined briefly as it registered the shock, then went back to its irregular rhythm.

"Still in SVT," said Dr. Harrison. "Let's try again. Charge to a hundred."

The nurse adjusted the knob on the defibrillator. "Charged."

"Clear."

I turned away as the second shock was given, but I still heard Nick's cry of pain. When I looked back at the heart monitor, I was relieved to see the waves normalizing, spacing themselves out evenly across the screen.

"Sinus rhythm," said the doctor triumphantly. "Keep him on the monitor until we get his labs back, and we'll go from there."

While the nurses cleaned up, I went back to Nick's bedside. The sedative was already wearing off. "Did you feel that?" I asked, putting my hand over his again.

"What? No..." he mumbled, sounding a little out of it still. I was glad to know the shock looked worse than it felt. And if he had felt it, he didn't remember.

"How do you feel now?"

"Tired... chest hurts..."

I figured that was from the shock and not from his heart. The heart rhythm on the monitor was perfectly normal again. The danger had passed, and now all we had to do was wait for his bloodwork to come back. It would show if anything was off, but I suspected it was a combination of dehydration and caffeine overdose that had done this.

"Just take it easy," I told Nick softly, deciding the lecture I had in store for him could wait until later. After all the stress his body had been put under, he was completely worn out. "You'll feel better after you've gotten some rest."

He nodded, letting his eyes close again. I held his hand until he had drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 43

Cary

It was getting light out when we finally took a cab back to the hotel. Nick had dozed in the emergency room, while we waited for his lab results, but I had been awake for twenty straight hours and could barely keep my eyes open for the short taxi ride. When we pulled up in front of the hotel, I remembered how we'd walked out of it, his arm over my shoulders, mine wrapped around his waist, practically holding him up. I half wished he'd do the same for me; as I climbed out of the cab, I felt dead on my feet.

But Nick looked just as exhausted. Together, we trudged into the lobby. Thankfully, it was deserted this time of night – morning, rather. If any of the fans who'd crowded it before had stuck around, waiting for us to return, they'd given up by now. Aside from the front desk clerk, we didn't run into anyone on our way upstairs to the room.

Once we were inside, I made a beeline for the bathroom. There were towels strewn across the floor. I shuddered, remembering the image of Nick lying there. The tub was still full of water, cold now. I pulled the lever that opened the drain, and the water gurgled as it went down. The noise reminded me of why I had come into the bathroom in the first place, and I sat down on the toilet to relieve myself.

When I was done, I went out to the sink to wash my hands. I grimaced at my reflection in the mirror. My face, without makeup, looked pale and haggard. My hair hung limply around my shoulders. I was embarrassed to think I had been out in public looking like that, in my pajamas no doubt, but an emergency's an emergency. The hospital had surely seen worse. The nice part was, I was already ready for bed, so once I'd dried my hands, I headed straight for it.

Nick was already there, sitting up on his side of the big bed we were sharing again. The blackout shades were drawn over the windows, but he had the TV on and was flipping channels. “Aren’t you sleepy?” I asked, surprised that he would feel like watching TV.

He shrugged. “I’m too wired to sleep right now.”

“I thought that was the problem earlier,” I replied automatically, before I could hold myself back. “All that caffeine should be out of your system by now.”

His face reddened, and he shot me a sheepish grin. “Sorry... about all this...”

I wanted to tell him that he should be sorry, for putting both me and himself through all that panic. I wanted to tell him he was an idiot, and that if he didn’t start taking better care of himself, I wasn’t going to be able to take care of him, either. But I was too tired to speak my mind, so all I said as I climbed into bed next to him was, “It’s done. We’ll talk in the morning.”

He looked relieved. “Thanks. For everything.”

I looked over at him. Idiot or not, it was hard not to feel sorry for him. He had taken off his shirt to go to bed, and his bare chest showed the evidence of all that he'd gone through that night. His port was covered with a fresh bandage from where they'd stuck him to draw his blood and give him the fluids and medications his body needed. Under the port, in the place where you could still see the remnants of one of his feet tattoos, was a large, rectangular, red outline, branded into his skin. There was a matching one on the other side of his chest, underneath his left nipple. They were defibrillator burns, the exact shape of the paddles that had sent a shockwave across his heart to stop it in its tracks and make it slow down. They looked raw and painful, and I hoped they'd serve as a reminder to Nick not to let this happen again.

The results of his labwork had been pretty predictable: there was enough caffeine in his system to cause even the healthiest of hearts to race. It probably wasn't just caffeine alone, but the fact that he was also dehydrated, that had triggered the arrhythmia in his weakened heart. Between the alcohol at the after-party the night before and the Red Bull before the show, he hadn't been drinking enough water, and his electrolytes were all out of whack. I felt partly responsible for that; if only I'd kept a closer eye on what he was putting into his body.

I wasn't sure how much good I could have done, though. Nick did what he wanted, regardless of what I said. His blood counts were low again, too, and the doctor had wanted to admit him to the hospital for further monitoring and a blood transfusion. Nick had refused. "I'm tired," he'd told the doctor irritably, after we'd been in the ER for several hours. "I just wanna go back to my hotel and sleep it off. We're driving to California tomorrow, anyway."

In the end, there hadn't been a thing Dr. Harrison or I could say to change his mind; he had signed himself out against medical advice, promising to follow up with his cardiologist after the tour. I had the feeling it was an empty promise, made just to get the ER doctor off his back. He didn't seem to listen much to his oncologist, so why would he care about what any other doctor said – or me, for that matter? The sheepish "thanks" was probably all the acknowledgment I'd get.

"You're welcome," I told him shortly, before I slid beneath the covers and rolled onto my side, away from him. I closed my eyes to block out the flickering light of the TV. The sound was on low; it wouldn't bother me. I was so tired, I was sure I'd be asleep in a matter of minutes. But sleep didn't come right away. I was overtired, and my head hurt so bad it was pounding, but inside it, my thoughts were still racing. I kept hearing the thud of Nick collapsing... feeling his erratic pulse beneath my fingertips... seeing his body jerk with the shock of electricity. I couldn't relax enough to fall asleep, and after I'd lain there awhile, I realized it might not only be because I kept reliving the last few hours, but because I hadn't felt Nick relax yet, either.

When I rolled over to check on him, he was still sitting up, his back straight against the headboard, his eyes glued to the TV, his hand resting on his chest. "You okay?" I whispered.

He looked over at me. His eyes were glazed with fatigue, and it seemed to take him a few seconds to focus on me and process what I'd said. Finally, he answered, "Yeah..." He sounded uncertain, though, and the way he left the word hanging in the air, I sensed there was more he wanted to say. A few more seconds passed before the "but" came. "But... what if it happens again?"

I understood then. He was afraid. I saw the fear in his eyes. He liked to play tough guy, with his whole "too cool for cancer" act, but this close call had not just shaken his confidence; it had rocked him to the core. He was scared to sleep, scared his heart might start going haywire again. My exasperation with him melted into sympathy.

"I don't think it will," I said honestly, pulling myself up to sit beside him. "Some people do have episodes of SVT that come and go, but usually they have something wrong with the electrical conduction system in their heart. You don't have that. Yours was triggered by overexerting yourself with too much caffeine and not enough fluids in your system. Your heart was trying to tell your body to slow down and take care of itself."

He smiled sheepishly again at the warning look I gave him. "I know... I was stupid."

I nodded. "Thank you for admitting that."

He chuckled, then shook his head, his expression sobering. "Seriously... I thought I was having a heart attack or something. When I saw those paddles coming for me, I thought that was it... that I was gonna die." He shuddered, rubbing the spot on the left side of his chest where the defibrillator paddle had burned him. Maybe he didn't remember the shock itself, but he hadn't forgotten the fear that came before it.

I felt sorry for him, but I hoped this would be the wake-up call he needed. "It was scary for me, too," I said. "You're lucky it wasn't life-threatening, but it just goes to show what happens when you push yourself too far. Your whole body's weakened from the chemo, Nick... it can't handle all the stress you're putting it under, trying to finish this tour." I took a deep breath, knowing he was going to hate what I was about to say, yet again, but I said it anyway: "You need to talk to the guys. You need to tell them what's going on."

He shook his head, but slowly, not as automatically as he usually did. It seemed like he was at least considering what I had said. But when he answered, he sounded just as stubborn as ever. "I can't. I don't want to. Not yet. This leg of the tour's almost over," he added, as if that would justify his bad decisions. "I don't want us to cancel it with only a few shows left... and that's what would happen if I told them now. They'd freak out, and we'd have to cancel the rest of the shows, and all this would've been for nothing. I started this tour, and I wanna finish it."

I sighed. It was hard being his nurse and his fellow singer, his friend and his fan all at the same time. As a medical professional, I knew he was being irrational, jeopardizing his health for the sake of a few more shows, but as a musician, I understood how much those last few shows meant to him. As a friend, I felt for him, caught in the middle of a

tug-of-war between his common sense (or lack thereof) on one side and his passion for entertaining on the other. And as a fan, though I wished he would tell the guys, his brothers, I could see why he was delaying that moment as long as possible.

It would kill the other guys to know what he was going through. They'd probably be angry at him, at first, for hiding it from them so long, but then they would rally around him. Of course they would; they were his family, and he was their little brother. That was exactly why it would be so hard for them to watch him go through cancer treatment. In a way, Nick had been protecting them from that burden the whole time. This tour wasn't just for him or for the fans; it was for Brian, AJ, and Howie, too.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and said, "Okay... let's make a deal, then."

He eyed me skeptically. "What kind of deal?"

I took a deep breath, trying to get my tired brain to focus enough to choose my words carefully. "I will do my very best to get you through the last few shows. But you have to take care of yourself. That means getting as much rest as you can and drinking enough water. No more alcohol, and no more caffeine. Alcohol's just going to make you feel worse, and caffeine doesn't give you any actual energy; all it does is cause an adrenaline rush, which activates your body's 'fight or flight' response – the feeling you get when you're in a high-stress situation. By chugging caffeine all day, you kept your body in a constant state of emergency... no wonder your heart was racing. You can't do that anymore. Got it?"

I felt like I was lecturing a child, and with his wide-eyed expression, Nick looked almost little boyish. I was glad to see him nod, like he was taking me seriously.

"If you drink one more drop of booze or Red Bull on this tour," I went on, looking him right in the eye, "then our deal is off, and I *will* tell the guys. *Everything.*"

I wasn't above threatening him anymore. Tough love... he needed it. If I couldn't convince him to give up this whole charade, the least I could do was put the fear of God into him so that he could fulfill it without killing himself.

Nick looked sufficiently rattled, as he nodded to accept my terms. "Deal," he mumbled, his cheeks flushing.

I offered him my sweetest smile. "Good."

Nick smiled back, then tipped his head to the side. "Rockstar Energy Drink's okay, though, right?"

My mouth dropped open, and I was halfway through saying, "Are you *kidding* me?" before I realized his smile had turned into a wicked little smirk. He was messing with me.

With a quick wink, he replied, "Yes, I'm kidding."

"Ugh," I groaned, flopping my head back onto my pillow. "I'm gonna go to sleep now. We can talk more in the morning, okay?" *It already is morning*, my tired brain thought.

"Yeah, okay," Nick agreed. He turned off the TV and scooted down under the covers so that he was lying on his back, his arms folded over his chest in that odd sleeping position of his.

Almost like a mummy in a coffin, I thought, then immediately wished I hadn't. I lay back down and rolled over again, closing my eyes and trying to fall asleep.

I was almost out when I heard Nick's voice drift out of the darkness. "I can still feel my heart beating..."

Forced out of my sleepy, semi-conscious state, I muttered, "That's nice... glad to know it hasn't stopped."

"It's freaking me out..."

"Is it going really fast again?"

"No... not like before. I just... don't like feeling it."

I sighed and rolled over to face him. "It's just because you're concentrating on it. After what happened tonight, you're more aware of it than usual. Try to think about something else."

"I can't. I keep thinking about everything that happened. Like, what if you hadn't been here?"

A shiver ran through me that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. *What if I hadn't?* I wondered. Hopefully, he would have woken up alone on the bathroom floor and been scared enough to get himself some help. Even if he hadn't, his heart probably would have reverted to a normal rhythm on its own after awhile, once the caffeine wore off. Probably. But sometimes the type of tachycardia he'd had turned into a more dangerous arrhythmia, a lethal one. He could, potentially, have died. It was unlikely, but just thinking about it made me feel sick.

I knew Nick had to be feeling the same way. I remembered how anxious he'd sounded when he asked earlier, "*But... what if it happens again?*"

I sat up and turned on the light on my side of the bed. "Do you know how to take your pulse?" I asked.

"No... not really," said Nick, sitting up, too.

“Your phone has a stopwatch, right?”

“Yeah...” He reached over and grabbed it off the bedside table.

“Set it for fifteen seconds,” I said, and he did. “Now give me your wrist.” He gave me his free hand, and I turned it palm up in mine. “You put your index and middle finger over the radial artery in your wrist, right... here,” I said, putting my fingers over the right place on his wrist to show him. “It’s usually pretty easy to see in guys, especially ones with veiny arms like you, but you’ll know you’re in the right spot when you can feel the pulse under your fingers. Never use your thumb; it has its own pulse, so it’ll throw you off. Then you just count the beats for fifteen seconds and multiply that number by four. Here, you try, and I’ll time it.”

He handed me his phone, and I helped him guide his fingers to the right spot on his wrist. “Can you feel it?” I asked.

His brow was furrowed in deep concentration. “Yeah,” he said, “I feel it.”

“Okay, now start counting when I say when. Ready? Go.” I started the stopwatch on his phone and stayed quiet while he counted, his head bowed in concentration. His phone beeped at the end of the fifteen-second countdown, and I said, “Stop. How many beats?”

“I think twenty?”

“Oh, easy. Multiply that by four, and you’ll get the beats per minute.”

He looked up at the ceiling as he did the mental math. “So... eighty?”

I nodded. “Like I said, normal is anywhere from sixty to a hundred, so eighty’s right smack dab in the middle. See? You’re perfect.”

“Good,” he sighed, letting out a breath of relief.

I smiled. “Now if you’re worried, or you wake up and something doesn’t feel right, you can check your pulse. If it’s over a hundred when you’re just lying around like this, or if it doesn’t feel steady, wake me up or come get me.”

He nodded, looking more at ease. “Thanks. Again.”

“Sure,” I said, sliding down under the covers again. “Now stop worrying and try to get some sleep. You’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” he sighed, lying back down beside me. I felt the mattress move and the covers pull as he flopped around a few times, trying to get comfortable, but finally, he relaxed and got quiet and still. If he was still lying there awake, obsessing over his heartbeat, he didn’t bother me about it again.

I normally wouldn't mind, but my head felt like it was pounding as hard as his heart had been earlier, and I was desperate for sleep. I closed my eyes and let my body relax again. While Nick may have fallen asleep counting beats, I drifted off to the steady sound of his breathing.

Chapter 44

Nick

I woke up to pounding. Not my heart against my ribs this time, but a fist on the door. "Open up, Carter!" bellowed a voice that I quickly recognized as AJ's.

Shit, I thought, scrambling out of bed.

"Crap, we overslept, didn't we?" I heard Cary say. I looked back, and she was sitting up on her side of the bed, squinting at the clock. Checkout time was eleven, and it was five minutes past. "We should have set an alarm..."

"Yeah, it's not like we had anything else to think about last night," I replied sarcastically, grabbing a t-shirt from the heap of clothes overflowing out of my open suitcase. I pulled it on over my head and looked down to make sure my port was hidden.

AJ was still banging on the door. "Yo, Nick!" he shouted again. I bet half the hotel could hear him. If he wasn't careful, there'd be a horde of fans knocking on my door, too.

"Coming!" I called on my way to get the door. I undid the lock and opened it to find not only AJ, but Brian and Howie standing there, too. *Uh oh*. Somehow, I already knew this wasn't just about missing checkout time. "Morning... sorry... overslept," I apologized quickly, before they could say anything.

AJ shoved his palm into my chest and pushed me backward as he barreled into the room. He didn't push me hard, but I winced; my chest was still sore from getting zapped.

"What the fuck, dude?" I complained, glaring at him. I was hurt and confused. In the old days, when Kevin was in the group, I might have gotten crap for being five minutes late, but not now. And definitely not from AJ. Things were a lot more chill without Kevin around, which was how I knew there was something else going on. *What'd I do now?* I wondered. There was no way they could know about what had happened last night... could they?

"Where were you last night?" AJ demanded. He was glaring back at me. Brian and Howie stood on either side of him, not quite glaring, but still looking pretty serious.

I swallowed hard. *Well, shit*, I thought. *Maybe they do know*. But then, maybe they didn't. How could they? They probably just knew Cary and I had been out really late, and I was going to get a lecture about too much partying. Well, okay. I could take that. "Me and Cary hit a couple of clubs," I said, as casually as I could. "We were out pretty late. Why?"

AJ's eyes narrowed. Brian and Howie looked at each other, but apparently they'd elected AJ to do the talking. "Clubs?" he repeated. "Not a hospital?"

Fuck! my mind screamed. *Fuck, fuckity fuck-fuck-fuck!* How did he know?? I just stared at him, like a deer caught in headlights, without a clue as to what I was going to say.

Brian spoke up. "Some fans saw you guys leave the hotel last night. They got into a cab and followed you... to the emergency room. There are pictures online; fans have been chirping at me and Leighanne like crazy, asking what the emergency was."

"The rumor is it was an overdose," AJ added flatly. His dark eyes fixed me with a stare so hard, I finally had to look away. "Look at me, Nick," he snapped, as soon as I did. "Look me straight in the eye and tell me the truth. Are you using again?"

God, he sounded a hell of a lot like Kevin. He must have picked up some tips from when Kevin was the one accusing him of this same shit. And Kevin had been right, of course. Kevin was always right. But AJ was dead wrong about me. So I looked him right in the eye and answered, "No. I'm not."

"Then what happened last night, Nick?" Howie jumped in. "Why were you at the hospital?" Unlike the others, he actually sounded concerned about *me*, not just about what the fans were saying. I was grateful for that, but I still didn't know what to say.

"He did overdose," Cary's voice drifted over from the bed. My head whipped around to stare at her. What the fuck was she doing, throwing me under the bus? "Not on drugs, though," she added, pulling the covers up higher around herself. "Just caffeine."

My heart was thumping hard in my chest, but not like last night; it had already started to slow down again on its own, as I realized what she was doing. She was being honest... in my own half-truth kind of way... and in doing so, she was also guaranteeing I'd have to go along with her little deal. If the guys knew how bad all that caffeine had messed me up, they'd make sure I wasn't pounding down Red Bulls before the show anymore, too. She was pretty clever, that Cary.

"Caffeine?"

I turned back to the guys; they were all looking at the two of us in disbelief, their eyebrows raised. I felt my face flush. "Yeah... for real. It's stupid, but I kinda drank too much Red Bull before the show last night, to get rid of my hangover, and it fucked me

up. My heart was, like, racing and wouldn't stop, and it kinda freaked me out, so Cary took me to get checked out."

I left it off there, not wanting to get into all the gory details. It was bad enough having to go through it once; I didn't want to relive it right then, and I also didn't want to shock the guys. (Get it? Shock?) Brian was already frowning, while Howie's eyes had gotten wide. AJ was still staring at me like he couldn't decide whether to believe me or not. He said, "Jesus, how much caffeine do you need to drink to fuckin' OD on it?"

Brian asked, "Never mind that. Are you okay, Nick?"

"Yeah," I said quickly, "I'm good." I knew my cardiomyopathy diagnosis bothered Brian. It made me feel guilty because, while he'd been born with his heart condition, I had caused mine. He had lived with a defective heart for twenty-two years before getting it fixed, and in just a fraction of that time, I'd taken my perfectly healthy heart and fucked it up. Whether he knew it or not, Brian had been a big motivation for me to get myself back into shape; I didn't want to let him down again. *I wanted* everything to be "good." I just wished it actually was.

"They gave him some fluids and medication to slow his heart down," Cary explained. "He was dehydrated, too, and that made it worse. I told him he needs to start drinking more water and lay off the caffeine." She gave me a stern look.

"Jeez, Nicky," said Howie. "That's just common sense. You need to start taking better care of yourself."

Now he sounded like Kevin, too, but that was typical. They were the two fitness freaks in the group. And Howie had done his best to fill Kevin's shoes as our unspoken leader the last few years, so I wasn't surprised to be getting a lecture from him. He was still a lot more laidback about it than Kevin, so it wasn't that bad. I knew I deserved it, anyway.

"Yeah, I know," I muttered. "I'm gonna."

AJ was still eyeing me, like he didn't quite believe me. It was weird that, out of the three of them, he was the one who was onto me. Okay, so Howie can be pretty clueless, but Brian could always read me like a book. Then again, Brian was an honest guy and expected honesty in return. AJ, on the other hand, had enough experience in deception to recognize a liar when he saw one. He had been there, on the other side of it, lying his way through his addiction, trying to cover up how bad it really was. As a result, he knew when he was being lied to.

"You know what else makes your heart race?" he asked slowly.

No one said anything. He was staring at me, but his tone made it sound more like a rhetorical question. Sure enough, he answered it himself.

“Cocaine.”

Brian and Howie both looked at him, then at me. Howie’s eyes were wide again; Brian’s were narrow. Quickly, I shook my head in response to their silent questioning. “I’m not... I told you, I’m not doing drugs again.”

“No? Then why have you been acting so weird lately? Moody... secretive... never wanting to do anything with the three of us...”

“That’s not true,” I argued, but I knew it was. How many times had I blown them off, turned down a club or even a movie because I was doing chemo or feeling like shit because of it? It was a lot, maybe more than I realized. I liked it better when they thought it was Cary’s fault, for being some kind of gold-digging sex goddess.

“And have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?” AJ ranted on, ignoring me. “You look like shit, dude. You’re starting to look fuckin’ manorexic.”

“Fuck you,” I spat, really annoyed now. “I thought you guys were proud of me for losing all that weight. Now you’re gonna turn it against me?”

“If you’re doing blow again to keep the weight off, then damn straight we are,” AJ shot back. Brian and Howie kept quiet; they weren’t accusing me out loud, but they weren’t trying to stop AJ from attacking me, either.

“I’m not doing blow!” I shouted, my heart beating like a bass drum in my chest. “And you, of all people, AJ, have no right to give me shit about that. We all know you’ve been off the wagon all year, yet no one’s accusing you of doing drugs.”

I expected that one to burn, but AJ didn’t even seem fazed. He was staring at me. “If you’re not snorting coke, then why’s your nose bleeding?”

“Huh?” I reached up to my nostrils and felt moisture there. My fingertips came away bloody. I looked down just in time to see a drop of bright red splat onto the carpet at my feet. “Shit,” I said, turning away from the guys. I left them standing just inside the door and hurried into the bathroom. I turned on the lights; there were still towels and clothes all over the place from my little incident that night before. I grabbed a wad of toilet paper, then went out to the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. My nose was bleeding pretty good; in no time, the toilet paper was soaked. *Where did that come from?* I wondered. I never got nosebleeds.

“I’ll take care of him,” I heard Cary tell the guys. “We’ll be down in a few minutes. Sorry for being late.”

She said it so sweetly, not even AJ was going to keep arguing with her, and in a matter of seconds, I heard the door open and close again. I admired her for the subtle way she’d gotten rid of the guys for me. “Thanks,” I said, when she appeared behind me in the mirror.

“Let me see,” was all she said back, turning me towards her.

“I dunno what started this...” My voice was muffled by the wad of toilet paper I was holding up to my nose.

“Low platelets,” she replied, without missing a beat. “That’s the stuff that makes your blood clot. I knew you should have had that transfusion last night...”

“Oh.” *Nick fucks up again*, I thought, annoyed.

She grabbed a clean washcloth from the shelf above the sink and said, “Come here.” She led me back out into the main room and sat me down in one of the armchairs. “Lean forward,” she advised. “Don’t tip your head back, or the blood will just run down your throat.” Then she handed me the washcloth and said, “Pinch the bridge of your nose. You need to keep pressure on it for at least ten minutes. If the bleeding doesn’t stop, then we might have to go back to the hospital.”

I groaned, and more blood squirted out of my nose, into the washcloth. I sat there for over fifteen minutes, squeezing my nose and feeling like a loser, while Cary picked up the room and repacked my suitcase. “You can always blame it on dry air,” she said, folding the button-down shirt she’d dressed me in the night before, “you know, from the air conditioning. Unless you want to just tell them the truth, so they don’t think you’re snorting cocaine.” She gave me an incredulous look, like she couldn’t believe I would be okay with them thinking that.

But I wasn’t okay with it. I hated that AJ thought I was into drugs again, after I’d worked so hard to get clean. I had slipped up a few times, but not recently, and definitely not since my cancer diagnosis. It hurt that he didn’t believe me – and from the looks on their faces, neither did Brian or Howie, even though they wanted to. But what else were they supposed to think? Even if I didn’t want to admit it, I could see why they’d jumped to the conclusion of coke.

“You should have told them, Nick,” Cary went on, adding the folded shirt to the neat stack she’d made in my suitcase. “That was the perfect opportunity.”

All I could do was nod and say, “I know.”

Chapter 45

Nick

I knew I should have told the guys the truth when the door was open, when I had the chance to come clean. It wouldn’t have comforted them to find out I had Stage IV

cancer instead of a cocaine addiction, but at least they might have been sympathetic, instead of pissed off at me. I didn't want their sympathy, though, so I put up with their anger instead.

The next four days were the hardest part of the tour. We made our way up the California coastline, doing a show a night, four in a row – five, if you counted our performance at the gay pride parade in San Francisco. The good part about being so busy was that the guys and I didn't have much of a chance to keep arguing about whether or not I was doing drugs; we were forced to set aside our differences and be professional. The bad part was that I was struggling just to keep up.

For weeks, I'd been using caffeine to counteract the fatigue that the chemo caused. But now, with the guys and Cary all watching me like hawks, I couldn't rely on Red Bull anymore. I didn't want to. Blacking out like that, feeling my heart speeding out of control, and having to be shocked to slow it down again had scared the shit out of me. I never wanted to experience anything like that again. But without the boost of caffeine, I was exhausted all the time.

Our first day in California was supposed to be a chemo day – the intrathecal kind, which meant an injection into my spine and a full day of lying flat to avoid the spinal headache that would follow if I didn't. But we had a show in Temecula that night, and I begged Cary to let me skive off chemo. "Please... I won't be able to perform," I said, sounding like a little kid asking to stay home sick from school – except that I guess what I was doing was the opposite.

I expected a lecture about how the chemo schedule was more important than the concert schedule, and how my health should come first, so I was really surprised when Cary nodded and said, "I think we should wait a few days." When I raised my eyebrows, shocked at how easily she'd agreed, she added, "Your blood counts are low. Giving you more chemo now will just kill off more of the healthy cells, and you'll be more susceptible to infection. Let's just worry about getting you through the next few shows, and then you can finish off this cycle."

I could have kissed her. She even called Dr. Submarine, who actually agreed with her that delaying the treatment by a few days would probably help more than hurt. Cary was making good on her promise to get me through the rest of the tour, so I had to keep up my end of the bargain, too. But it was hard, even harder than I'd anticipated.

By Monday, the day of our second show in San Francisco, I was totally beat. While the other guys spent our free morning out and about in the city, I lay around in my hotel room, and when we got to the venue, I lay around on my tour bus. I didn't get up until I absolutely had to, until Cary was saying, "Nick, it's almost time for the soundcheck party."

"Kay... I'm coming," I mumbled, dragging myself out of my bunk. "I just wanna brush my teeth first..."

I felt like I was wading through quicksand on the short walk to the bathroom at the back of the bus. My feet felt heavy, like I was wearing shoes made of cinderblocks, and my legs seemed slow and weak. I might as well have been trying to walk in the wrong direction on one of those moving sidewalks they have at airports; I put all my energy into each step just to keep myself moving forward. How in the hell was I going to dance tonight, feeling like this?

I pulled myself into the bathroom, leaning heavily on the wall, and turned on the light. It was not very forgiving to my reflection in the mirror. My face looked pale, like something had come along and drained the life out of me. In a way, I guess it had, only that thing wasn't some kind of bloodsucking creature, like a vampire. Its name was chemo.

I reached for the toothbrush I'd left perched on the edge of the sink. It felt like a five-pound weight in my hand. The toothpaste was even worse; it took all of my strength just to squeeze a little dab of it onto the brush. It almost wasn't worth it, but whatever I've said before about the ancient Egyptians having perfect teeth without brushing, I still don't like to sing with bad breath. So I dragged the toothbrush back and forth across my teeth a few times, swished the toothpaste foam around in my mouth, and spat into the sink. My spit was the color of Christmas cookie frosting – light green from the toothpaste, with swirls of light red from the blood. My gums bled every time I brushed my teeth now, even if I tried to brush lightly. They were getting pretty sore.

I rinsed my mouth and the brush and then shut off the water. As I straightened up and turned to leave the bathroom, I got dizzy all of a sudden. I had to grab the sink with one hand and the wall with the other to keep myself upright. My heart was pounding hard, and for a scary few seconds, I was afraid I was having another arrhythmia, like I'd had from the caffeine. I stood there in the doorway for a minute and put my hand over my chest, feeling my own heart beat. It wasn't beating crazy this time, racing and skipping around like it had before, but I still didn't like the feel of it thudding against my palm.

I just need to lie down for a few more minutes, I thought, *give it a chance to calm down.* I staggered weakly back to my bunk, swaying with dizziness, and collapsed onto the thin mattress. It felt so good to lie down again; I closed my eyes, wishing I didn't have to get back up.

"Nick?" I heard a soft whisper in my ear and a light hand on my shoulder. I opened one eye, and Cary was kneeling next to my bunk, looking at me with concern. "You really don't feel good, do you?"

I couldn't remember the last time I *had* felt good. There was no use lying about it, not to her. "No," I croaked. "I feel like shit. I'm so fucking tired..."

She pressed her hand to my forehead, tracing over my eyebrows with her fingertips. It felt so nice, I closed my eyes again. "You can't do the show like this," I heard her say. "What do you want me to do?"

“I dunno...”

“Well, we have to figure out something. Someone’s gonna come looking for you if you don’t go in there for soundcheck in the next few minutes.”

I just groaned. I didn’t have the energy to think of a lie, or to even care that I couldn’t. I almost felt like throwing in the towel and telling her, *“I give up. Just go tell the guys the truth. Tell them I can’t perform tonight and why.”*

But before I could get around to forming the words, Cary said, “I think you’re just severely anemic, Nick. Your blood counts are low, and that’s why you’re feeling so bad. If you would just let me take you to the hospital, they could give you a transfusion, and I bet you’d feel a lot better.”

Something in her tone of voice made me open my eyes again and look at her. She was looking back at me hopefully. It was like she *wanted* me to be able to perform that night. She was on my side. Somehow, the realization gave me some strength. “Do you think there’s time before the show?” I asked. “Would I be able to perform tonight?”

“If I’m right, and that’s all it is, you might be able to. We’d need to leave now, though. You’d have to skip the soundcheck party. Can you do that?”

“I don’t have much of a choice,” I mumbled. “I can’t go in there like this.”

Cary sighed. “Finally, we agree.” She stood up and started pacing back and forth outside my bunk. “I know,” she said after a minute or so. “The guys think I’m diabetic, right? So, if my blood sugar suddenly skyrocketed, and I couldn’t get it under control, I’d need to go to the ER. You, as the ‘concerned boyfriend,’ would insist on going with me to make sure I’m okay. They’ll buy that, won’t they?”

I smiled. “Listen to you, you little mastermind... plotting and scheming and coming up with lies... I’m a bad influence on you.”

A guilty look came over her face, which was turning red. “You’re right... this is horrible. I hate having to lie. We should just tell them-”

“No,” I interrupted, before she could finish. “We’ll tell them exactly what you said. It’s good. They’ll buy it. And at least then hopefully I can get through tonight’s show.”

Just like that, we’d switched back to our old roles; Cary was the uncertain one, and I was determined. If I didn’t make it to the show tonight, if I had to tell the guys the truth, I might never get another chance to perform. I had to try her idea; if it worked, I’d at least buy myself more time. “C’mon,” I said, struggling into a sitting position again. “Let’s go.”

Cary looked like she wished she’d never suggested the plan, but she went along with it anyway. I had to hand it to her – not only was she clever, but she was a pretty good

actress, too. When we walked into the theater together, she was holding onto me, doubled over, like she was the one who needed support, instead of the other way around.

“Guys, Cary’s sick,” I said to Brian, Howie, and AJ, who were messing around backstage while they waited for the VIPs to be brought in.

They all looked at her in concern, and I was glad she was playing it up – it took their attention off of me and how sick *I* looked. “What’s wrong?” Howie was the first to ask.

“It’s my diabetes,” Cary answered shakily. “My blood sugar’s all out of whack; I think I might be in keto. I need to go the ER, right now.”

I could tell she was acting – her voice was just a little too weak and wavery, like someone who’s faking sick on the phone – but the guys totally bought it. If I hadn’t known better, I probably would have, too. She knew enough about what she was talking about to be convincing.

“Should we call an ambulance?” Brian asked.

Cary shook her head, maybe a little too quickly. “No, we can catch a cab outside. I’ll be alright; I just need to get my insulin level regulated.”

“I’m going with her,” I added, to explain the “we.” “I’ll be back by showtime.”

I saw the way the guys exchanged glances, but then Brian said, “Go. We’ll cover for you.”

Howie nodded in agreement. “Call us when you know something, okay?”

“Sure,” I replied.

“Hang in there, Cary,” Howie added, squeezing her arm.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

It was as simple as that. We walked out of the theater, past a few fans who were still lurking by the backstage door, and hailed a cab. Once the taxi had pulled away from the venue, I leaned my head back against the seat and let out my breath in a sigh of relief. I felt an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* as I heard Cary tell the driver, “We need to go to the nearest hospital, please.”

I turned my head towards her. “You were good back there.”

Her face got red. “Don’t say that. And don’t make me do that again. I know it was my idea, but I felt awful lying to them like that, faking an emergency. We should have just told them the truth.”

"Drop the cancer bomb on them right before a couple hundred fans came in for soundcheck? Yeah, right. That would have been a shitty thing to do – to the guys and the fans. It's better this way," I insisted.

She sighed. "You *have* to tell them the truth, Nick. You *have to*. I think you should do it tonight, after the show. We've got a day off tomorrow; it would give everyone some time to deal with this and decide what to do."

I knew she was right. But just thinking about it made my stomach hurt. "We'll see," I muttered, staring out the window.

At the hospital, they drew my blood and ordered a complete blood count. The results weren't a surprise to anyone, especially Cary, who had called it all along. My counts were low across the board – red cells, white cells, and platelets.

The doctor agreed to give me a transfusion, so while we should have been getting ready for the show, Cary and I sat around in a little room in the emergency department, while a bag of blood ran in through my port. "Sorry about all this," I apologized, when I realized it should have been about time for her to take the stage. "You're supposed to be performing right now, not stuck here with me."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't have been able to go on anyway, after almost dying of ketoacidosis." A mischievous smile came over her face, and she winked at me. I had no idea what that big word meant, but she added, "That happened to Crystal on *Idol*, you know. That's where I got the idea. The guys and the girls had to switch nights one week, in the semi-finals, 'cause she was in the hospital. She wasn't supposed to perform, but she did anyway, the next night. She's almost as stubborn as you."

"Passionate," I countered. "I like the word 'passionate' better."

"Passionately stupid," Cary giggled.

"Hey, now..." I gestured down at the IV line running into my chest. "I'm here, aren't I? I'm doing this. And you didn't even have to twist my arm this time."

"Cause you knew you would have collapsed onstage tonight if you didn't."

She was right, of course. There was no way I would have made it through the show, feeling as bad as I had been. I was starting to feel better, though, as the healthy blood circulated through my body, boosting my counts. It was better than Red Bull. "I'm like a vampire," I joked, then put on my best Transylvanian accent. "I *must* have blood for strength." Cary giggled again, and I added, "I'm a scary vampire, not one of those sparkly kind. But still sexy. Scary, yet sexy... like Dracula. Or Kiefer Sutherland."

Cary was grinning. “You’re Kiefer Sutherland, not Edward Cullen. Gotcha.”

I bared my teeth for her and gave her my most piercing, smoldering stare. Instead of being seduced, though, she just giggled again. I guess the fact that I was lying in a brightly lit hospital room with a tube of blood hanging out of my chest kind of ruined the sexiness. Oh well.

Cary’s attention returned to her phone, which she had been messing around with off and on ever since we’d gotten there. I’d figured she was just checking texts or playing Snake or something, until she announced, “Well, the news has made it online. The fans are freaking out.”

“What?”

She waved her phone. “Someone posted on a message board that you weren’t at soundcheck. There’s a whole thread of frantic speculation about what could be wrong.”

“Oh, great,” I groaned. I shouldn’t have been surprised; of course fans would be upset I was a no-show at the soundcheck party. I guess I just hadn’t expected to cause a panic or anything. “What are they saying?”

“Apparently the guys just said you had a ‘family emergency,’ so first they were worrying about which Carter was sick or hurt. Then they decided that, since none of your family’s on the road with you, and you’re too far to just run home and still make it back for the show – I guess the guys promised you’d be back – and it wouldn’t make sense for you to skip soundcheck just to deal with something on the phone, it must involve your girlfriend...” Her face got pink. “...who they think is me.”

“Heh, them too, huh?” I smirked, remembering the days when any girl I was spotted with in public – even my own sister – was instantly assumed to be my girlfriend. In some ways, not much had changed since then.

Cary nodded, her face turning pink again. “Ever since Salt Lake City.”

I remembered the emergency trip to the hospital, the fans in the hotel lobby who had watched us leave together, the pictures online the next day of Cary in her pajamas with her arm around me, and the rumors that I’d had some kind of overdose. I didn’t want to know what they were saying about that.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “They’ll chill out once I make it back for the concert.” But even then, I figured some fans would still be pissed – the fans who had bought VIP just to meet me. They were the ones I’d really let down. I felt bad about that, but I thought, *They’ll feel worse once they know why.*

It was only a matter of time before they found out the truth. I could feel my secret starting to unravel and knew I couldn’t keep it together much longer. It was only going to get harder to cover up, the more the chemo messed up my body and the worse I felt.

There would be more incidents like the one in Salt Lake City and the one today, and we couldn't use Cary's fake diabetes to excuse them all. My only saving grace was that it was the last week of the tour. Just four more shows to get through, and then I could go home and get the rest I desperately needed.

We made it back to the venue with only ten minutes to spare, just enough time for me to throw on my stage clothes and meet up with the guys backstage. "It's about time," grumbled AJ, giving me an annoyed look.

"I told you I was on my way," I replied, putting my earpiece in, while one of our sound guys hooked up my mic. I had texted Brian from the cab to let them know I was almost there.

"How's Cary?" Howie was the first to ask.

"She's okay. She's resting on the tour bus." I was eager to change the subject. "Did the crowd get restless without an opening act?" Through the curtains, I could hear them chanting, "Backstreet Boys! Backstreet Boys!"

Howie shrugged. "No more than usual. Lani DJed a set and got them fired up, so it was okay."

None of them mentioned any fans freaking out at soundcheck, and I didn't ask. But word must have spread through the theater that I hadn't been there, because when the four of us jumped through the screen during "Everybody," we got a bigger reaction than we had all tour – impressive, considering the place only held about two thousand people.

Maybe it just seemed magnified to me because, for the first time in the last six shows, I was actually happy to be onstage. The blood transfusion had worked its magic, and I felt reenergized, revitalized. I soaked up the screams and gave it my all, performing like it was my very last show. I guess, in a way, I thought it might end up being my last show, because once it was over, I knew what I had to do.

It wasn't until I got on the bus that I made up my mind to actually do it, though. Cary wasn't waiting for me up front like she usually was. I thought that was weird, especially since she hadn't watched the show; I figured she'd be dying to know how it had gone. "Missed you in the audience tonight!" I called, as I walked back to the bunks – my way of apologizing, I guess, for making her miss the show.

The curtain was drawn around her bunk, which was also weird. Had she gotten so bored, she'd gone to bed early? It couldn't be much past eleven. "Cary?" I said her name quietly, pulling the curtain aside just enough to peek in. At first, I thought she was asleep – she was lying on her side, her back to me, the covers pulled up around her. But underneath them, I saw the glow of her cell phone, which told me she'd just been using it before shoving it under the sheets. She *wanted* me to think she was asleep. That was weird, too. Usually we sat up and talked for awhile after a show, especially

when we were just riding back to a hotel. I frowned. “Cary?” I asked again. “You okay?” I waited a few seconds, and when she didn’t answer, I called her bluff. “I know you’re not asleep...”

That did it. “How was the show?” she asked, without rolling over. Her voice sounded funny.

“Fine... good, actually. You were right. The transfusion helped a ton; I feel great. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I just need some alone time.”

“You just had, like, two hours of alone time,” I pointed out. “What happened?”

With a sigh, she finally rolled over, and I could see that she’d been crying. Her eyes were puffy, and her face was all red and blotchy. “See for yourself,” she said, handing me her cell phone.

I hit a button to brighten the screen. She was on Twitter, looking at her @replies. I didn’t have to scroll long to see why she was upset. Among the messages wishing her well and hoping that she felt better soon, there were tweets saying bitter, downright hateful things like, “@CaryHilst i cant believe u made nick miss soundcheck just cuz u were ‘sick’! grow up u selfish bitch! hes to good 4 u! u dont deserve him!” and “@CaryHilst whateverz wrong with u, i hope u die from it! it better of been a life or death sitch 4 u to make nick bail on his fans that way!”

I sighed, too, and sat down on the edge of her bunk, tossing the phone down beside me. “Don’t even think twice about crap like that,” I told her. “Those so-called ‘fans’ are just unhappy with their own lives and insanely jealous of the life they think you have with me. Which, as we both know, is no fantasy.”

She let out some hybrid between a giggle and a sob. “I know,” she said. “I know it’s stupid to get upset over this; I know it’s not even close to the truth, and if they knew the real story, they’d be singing a different tune, but still... it’s not fun to be hated, whether it’s for a good reason or not. I’ve been getting tweets like this since those pictures of us going to the hospital went up last week, but I got hit with a ton tonight, and it just got to me.”

I squirmed uncomfortably. “I’m sorry you’re having to put up with that kind of shit. Welcome to life as Nick Carter’s girlfriend,” I said flatly. I love my fans, but sometimes I hate the crazy ones for pulling this kind of shit. Every serious girlfriend I’ve ever had has had to deal with it – Mandy, Paris, Julie, Lauren, and all the flings in between. None of them deserved it – well, maybe Paris – but definitely not Cary. She wasn’t even my girlfriend, and it was my fault for making people think she was.

Cary sniffed. “Yeah, well, it sucks getting that much crap without any perks.”

“Perks?” I raised my eyebrows and smirked, making her blush.

“Never mind,” she said quickly. “I’m just tired of this... this double life we’re living – having to sneak around and pretend and lie to people. That’s not me, and I think it’s just really starting to get to me.” She sat up, wiping her eyes.

I didn’t know what to say, except, “I’m sorry.” And I was. I was the one who had been selfish, getting her involved in my own “double life” and making her lie for me and take care of me and put up with the guys and my crazy fans thinking she was no good for me. In reality, it was the other way around – she was way too good for me. She was everything I had hoped she would be and more – not just a good nurse who could give me my chemo and keep my secret, but a good friend who was patient and understanding and sweet. It took someone special to put up with me and my bullshit as long as she had, without complaining. And now that she was, I knew I had taken this whole thing too far.

It was getting to me, too. I didn’t like lying to my closest friends any more than I liked them thinking I was some lame-ass druggie. Being on tour wasn’t fun anymore. Really, I wasn’t sure it had ever been fun – not this leg, at least. There had been a few good times on the road, but they were few and far between all the times I’d lain around on my bus, avoiding the guys while I got chemo, and the times I’d chugged Red Bull in my dressing room, trying to fight off fatigue and get myself energized for a show. Even performing wasn’t fun when I was too sick and tired to enjoy it. I had taken this way too far. Cary was right, just like she always was, just like she’d been all along. It was time to come clean.

I remembered what she had said earlier: *“You have to tell them the truth, Nick. You have to. I think you should do it tonight, after the show. We’ve got a day off tomorrow; it would give everyone some time to deal with this and decide what to do.”*

Before she could suggest it again, I added, “I’m gonna tell the guys. Tonight.”

She raised her eyebrows, looking at me skeptically. “For real?”

I swallowed hard. “For real.” And to prove it, I got out my own cell phone and sent a text message to Brian, AJ, and Howie. *“When we get back to the hotel, will you guys meet me in my room?”* it said. *“I got something to tell you.”*

Chapter 46

Nick

When we got back to our hotel room, Cary said, “I’m gonna check out the bar downstairs. Text me when it’s safe to come back up?”

I looked at her in surprise, feeling my stomach bottom out, like when you go down a steep hill really fast. “You’re not gonna stay?” I’d taken it for granted that she would be there for support when I told the guys – to give me the courage to actually do it, first of all, and help me answer the questions I knew they’d have once I did.

But Cary shook her head and said, “No. I think this conversation needs to be just between you guys. I’m staying out of it.”

I sighed. She had a point. I was just being a chicken, afraid of facing their reactions by myself. “Alright... I’ll text you later, assuming I’m still alive. They might kill me when they find out how long I’ve been hiding this.”

She offered me a crooked smile. “If I don’t hear from you in a few hours, I’ll call the police.”

“Good plan.”

She put her hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze of encouragement. “Good luck,” she said, on her way out the door.

“Thanks,” I replied miserably. I closed the door behind her and sat down on the edge of the bed, fidgeting while I waited for the guys to show up.

One by one, they came: first Howie, then Brian, and finally, AJ. He wasn’t bored now that Rochelle was finally on the road with us; I was surprised he’d managed to tear himself away from her. He didn’t look too happy about it. “What’s this all about, Carter?” he growled, as I motioned for him to sit down. “Lemme guess... Cary’s knocked up, isn’t she?”

That was so far from the truth and from what I’d been expecting, I just gaped at him, totally speechless, for a few seconds. In that time, I saw Brian’s and Howie’s eyes widen, their heads whipping towards AJ and then back to me, silently asking, *“Is she??”* Funny that they all assumed I’d get a girl pregnant before I’d propose to her.

“No,” I said, once I’d recovered. “She’s not knocked up, and I’m not doing drugs.” I couldn’t help but think that either of those situations would be better than what I was about to tell them. Those would have been my own fuck-ups, but fuck-ups I could fix... unlike cancer, which I couldn’t have prevented and couldn’t cure. This situation was completely out of my control, and to me, that made it much scarier.

“So what’s the deal, then?” AJ persisted, looking more curious than annoyed now, while I stalled, trying to figure out how to tell them. I’d been working on that one the whole bus ride – really, a lot longer than that – and still had no clue.

Finally, I decided to just come out and say it. Like pulling off a Band-aid – do it quick, and it hurts for a second, but then it’s over. I wanted it to be like that. “I’m sick,” I said,

my eyes dropping to the carpet. I couldn't stand to look at them while I said it. "I... I've been diagnosed with something called lymphoblastic lymphoma. It's a kind of cancer."

I heard their soft gasps as it hit them, what I'd said. Then AJ said, "Please tell me you're fucking with us."

I finally looked up. He was staring at me in disbelief, his face contorted into this weird, painful-looking expression. Next to him, Howie was wide-eyed and pale, his mouth hanging slightly open. Brian's eyes were narrowed, his lips pressed tightly together. They were both staring at me, too, waiting for me to either explain or say, "Psych! Just kidding... gotcha!" They had to know I'd never pull a prank that fucked up, but I knew they wanted to believe that's all this was. Just a practical joke... an April fool... never mind the fact that it was almost July.

Slowly, I shook my head. "Wish I was, but no... I'm serious. I have cancer."

It was one of the few times I'd said it out loud, and even though I'd been living with it for three months, it gave me a cold shiver just to hear myself admit it. I'd been hiding it and trying to deny it for so long, but now they knew the truth, and soon, everyone would know. My Wikipedia page would be updated with a section about my illness, and it would be a footnote at the end of any article written about me, no matter how unrelated. My legacy would be forever changed, forever tarnished by this.

"Oh my God, Nicky..." Howie's voice sounded shaky. "Did you just find this out today? Or was it last week, when you..." He trailed off.

I almost laughed when I realized he thought I'd just been diagnosed, on one of my recent trips to the hospital. He was going to flip when he found out I'd known since March. It was almost funny, except it wasn't. "No," I forced myself to say, before I could think of lying about that, too. "I was diagnosed in the spring." Then, feeling like I should explain, I added, "I started feeling bad at the end of the Asian tour, so when we got back to the States, I saw my cardiologist in Florida. He sent me to an oncologist in LA, and she diagnosed me."

Finally, Brian spoke. His voice was deathly calm when he said, "So... you've known about this how long? Since March? April? And you're just now telling us?"

I hung my head, avoiding the hurt look in his eyes. Out of all of them, I felt worst about lying to Brian. We'd had our differences over the years, grown apart as we'd grown up, but I still considered him my best friend, my brother from another mother. He had always been so open with us about his own health problems, I knew he'd never understand me hiding mine. Especially from him. We were Frick and Frack. We used to tell each other everything.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I didn't want you to know."

“Nice,” AJ spat. “Real fuckin’ nice, Nick, to keep a secret like that for three fucking months and then spring it on us like this. What the fuck am I supposed to say?”

I looked up again, fidgeting under his blazing stare. If looks could kill, the cancer wouldn’t get the chance to do me in; AJ’s eyes alone would have gotten the job done right there. He didn’t just look betrayed, like Brian; he was *pissed*. I guess I’d known he would be, but I still wasn’t prepared for how bad he’d make me feel. I don’t know what else I had expected. Sympathy, maybe? Understanding? “You don’t have to say anything,” I told AJ. “I just thought you should know.”

“Yeah, damn straight. We should’ve known three months ago. Fuck...” AJ swore, standing up. He paced back and forth between us a few times before he announced, “I can’t even deal with this shit right now. I’m going downstairs.”

I didn’t even try to stop him as he stalked out of the room, slamming my door shut behind him. I figured he was off for a smoke, or maybe a drink. I wouldn’t blame him for either; he clearly needed some kind of release. Again, I felt a stab of guilt for causing that kind of a reaction. I looked back at Brian and Howie, bracing myself for a lecture from them.

Howie, half out of his seat, asked uncertainly, “Should I go after him?”

“Nah,” said Brian, “Let him blow off some steam. We can check on him later... after we’re done talking to Nick.” He turned his eyes back to me, looking me up and down. “So... why didn’t you want us to know about this?”

Brian knew just how to make me feel like a piece of shit without yelling and cursing at me. His disappointment was a hundred times worse than AJ’s anger. I tried to explain myself, hoping he’d understand. “I was gonna tell you...” I started, “but the timing just never seemed right. I know I should’ve called when I first found out, but I couldn’t make myself do it. I didn’t wanna tell you over the phone; it was too hard of a call to make. So I was gonna wait and tell you guys in person, when we were all together. I tried to in Napa, but I chickened out. We were having fun, and you guys all seemed so happy, and I didn’t wanna be the one to ruin it.”

“Oh, Nick,” said Howie, shaking his head, “of course we would’ve been devastated, but we still would have wanted to know.”

“I know,” I replied quickly, “but I liked being able to have fun with you guys and forget what was going on with me. When we did that Napa fan event, I had just finished my first cycle of chemo, and all I’d been doing lately was lying around, feeling sorry for myself. You don’t understand how good it felt to get out and get back onstage. It was like nothing had changed. I could pretend like my life was back to normal, even if it wasn’t. I dunno; it’s hard to explain...” I trailed off, knowing there was nothing I could say that would justify my keeping this secret from them for so long. They wouldn’t understand. They couldn’t.

"Thanks for trying," Brian said, the hard look in his eyes softening a little. "So you did chemo?" He looked at me closely again, like he couldn't quite believe it.

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm still on it, actually. I've been pretty lucky... still got all my hair..." I ran my hand over my head. "I've had other side effects, though."

Brian and Howie looked at each other. "How have you been managing to sneak away for chemo treatments without anyone knowing?" Howie wanted to know. "Is that the real reason you were at the hospital?"

"No. I've been getting them right here, either in my hotel room or on the bus." I pulled down the neck of my t-shirt to show them my port, explaining how the little metal disc implanted under my skin made it easy to get chemo through an IV without having to be stuck every time. "It looks freaky as hell, but it doesn't hurt. I don't even feel it," I assured them.

Howie looked pale and shocked. Brian just looked perplexed. "But how...?" he began, and then I could almost see the light bulb go on above his head. "Cary," he said, like he couldn't believe he hadn't figured it out earlier. "She's a nurse. She's the one who's been helping you this whole time, hasn't she? That's why you were so insistent about her being our opening act."

I nodded, smiling at my own brilliance. "To be fair, she had no idea what she was getting into at first, so don't blame her. She got roped into it. But yeah, she's been taking care of me, giving me the chemo and stuff."

"And that's why you've been spending so much time with her." Brian paused. "Are you actually dating her, too, or was that just a cover up?"

"A cover up," I answered. "There's nothing else goin' on between us. It was just convenient that you guys assumed there was."

Brian shook his head. "You're an idiot, Nick, but now you got me feelin' like one, too, for thinking she was another gold digger. Sorry, man. You're still a prick, though."

I grinned sheepishly. "I know. I'm sorry, too."

What else was there to do but hug? That's how we Backstreet Boys roll; we're just cheesy that way. I got a hug from Brian first, then Howie. They weren't the tight bear hugs I was used to, but both of them seemed to cling to me a little longer than usual. If they'd been mad at me before, it was forgotten now; when they pulled away, they both just looked sort of sad.

"So... what kind of cancer did you say you had?" Howie asked.

"It's a kind of Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. It's called lymphoblastic lymphoma," I said, surprised I could actually remember that mouthful. I wasn't a total idiot, though; I'd read up on it.

"And what stage is it in?"

My stomach dropped, like it had earlier. "Um... stage IV." I saw Howie's face crumple when I said that. He knew what it meant; his dad had died of stage IV lung cancer that had spread to his brain. "But it's not as bad as it sounds," I added quickly. "I had a bunch of tests done in the hospital right before we went on the road, and they showed that the chemo is helping. I had a tumor in my chest, but it's shrunk. I'm gonna be okay."

Howie offered me a shaky smile. "I hope so, Nicky."

"You better be," Brian added severely. I smiled at his threatening tone – as if scrawny little Brian Littrell could scare the cancer out of me. I wished he could. Then again, he did have a pretty good relationship with God; maybe he could pray it away. "You need to take care of yourself," he lectured, sounding a lot like his cousin. My stomach bottomed out again when I thought of Kevin finding out I was sick. He was gonna be devastated – and pissed at me for not telling him sooner. "... And start being honest with us." Brian was still going on. "You shouldn't have had to go through this alone."

"I wasn't alone. I had Cary."

"You know what I mean. You should have had support from your friends, your family. Do *they* know about this?" I shook my head guiltily, and Brian sighed. "Of course not. I don't understand you, Nick."

"You know my family ain't like yours... or yours, D," I added, looking from Brian to Howie. "I'm not ready to involve them in all this shit. One step at a time, alright? It was a big enough step just to open up to you guys."

"I don't know why," said Howie, sounding hurt again. "We are your family, Nick. We're your brothers. If you can't come to us when you're going through stuff, who can you count on?"

Sometimes you can count on a total stranger. I thought of Cary, who had been everything I'd asked of her and more. Thanks to her, I hadn't been alone. I'd had the support of a friend. The guys didn't get it, but suddenly, I did understand just how much that support had meant to me on this tour. No matter how strong and stubborn I could be, it was Cary who had gotten me through it – just like she'd promised.

"Speaking of brothers," Brian spoke up, "maybe one of us should go down and check on A.J."

"I'll go," Howie volunteered. "He probably just needs some time. You know he doesn't handle bad news well."

"Tell him I'm sorry," I offered, as Howie got up to leave. "There was no easy way to tell you guys, then or now."

"Knowing AJ, he would've freaked out no matter when you told us," Brian said. I think he meant to make me feel better, but really, I just felt worse. This was partly why I'd avoided telling them for so long. I had known it would devastate them. I hoped AJ was just out smoking and not doing something totally stupid.

Howie nodded, agreeing with Brian, and gave me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. He'll come around."

I really hoped he was right.

Chapter 47

Cary

I actually felt nervous sitting down in the hotel bar, nursing a margarita and wondering what was going on upstairs. I knew I had done the right thing in leaving Nick on his own to tell the guys, but I was still dying to know how it had gone. I just hoped he had actually gone through with it.

I knew he must have when AJ came barreling in and threw himself onto a stool at the end of the bar. "Gimme a shot of Jack," he told the bartender. "Actually, make it a double."

My stomach lurched as I watch the bartender fill a whiskey glass and slide it across the bar to AJ, who downed it quickly and shoved it back for a refill. *Not good*, I thought, wondering if I should intervene. I was down at the other end of the bar; he hadn't noticed me yet, but I couldn't just sit there and watch him drown his sorrows in whiskey. Taking a deep breath, I slid off my stool, picked up my margarita glass, and walked over to him. "Hey, AJ."

AJ looked up. "Oh, hey, Cary." He sounded amazingly composed, even though it was obvious he was falling apart inside. "You feelin' better?"

"I... uh, yeah... thanks." My mind was racing. *He has to know, doesn't he? Why else would he be down here drinking? Maybe he just hasn't heard the whole story yet.* Even if that was the case, I was astonished that he hadn't pieced it together and realized that I wasn't sick, that it had been Nick all along. He wasn't thinking clearly. "Did you talk to Nick?" I asked hesitantly.

He threw down the rest of his second glass of Jack Daniels and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before answering. "Yeah." He looked at me, his eyes dark and accusing. "You already knew, didn't you?" I nodded. "How long have you known?"

So he hadn't heard the whole story. I really didn't want to be the one to have to tell him, but now that he had asked, I didn't have much of a choice. "Awhile," I admitted. "I've been taking care of him."

AJ looked at me in disgust. "So you knew about this all along, and you didn't think you should tell *us*?"

As his voice rose, I felt my face heat up. "It wasn't my place," I said in a small voice. "I tried to get Nick to tell you, but he had his reasons for wanting to keep it a secret."

"Bullshit," AJ spat. He was practically shouting now, and I looked around nervously, expecting to find fans lurking nearby, hanging on to our every word. There were a few other people in the bar, but I couldn't tell if they were fans or not. "We're like his brothers," AJ was ranting on. "We've known him over half his life. He's only known you, what, a month? Two? I can't believe he'd tell his girlfriend before he told us. That is fucked up, man..."

He really didn't get it. And his F-bomb had attracted a lot of attention. The other bar patrons – who may or may not have been fans – were starting to stare at us. I leaned down closer to him and said in a low voice, "Can we not discuss this right in front of everyone? Come here..." I dragged him off to a small table in the far, back corner, away from listening ears. I sat down across from him, set my glass down in front of me, and said, "Listen... I'm not his girlfriend. He let you guys think that because it was convenient. We haven't been sleeping together. I'm his nurse."

That stopped AJ in his tracks. "You... what?"

"He's doing chemotherapy. I've been giving him his treatments on the road, so he could keep touring with you," I explained patiently, once AJ had backed off enough to hear me out. "That's all he wanted; it's the whole reason he hid it. He thought you guys would cancel the tour if you knew he was sick."

AJ frowned, blinking, while he let everything I'd said soak in. "We probably would have postponed it, yeah..." he said slowly, "but we could have toured later, once he got better. I mean, he is gonna get better, right? He's not, like, dying, is he?" He looked up at me, and I saw the sheer terror in his eyes. The anger couldn't fully mask his fear.

I swallowed hard. "I don't know. It's not good. His disease is in stage IV. That's... that's the last stage. It's an aggressive kind of cancer. But," I added quickly, maybe even a little desperately, "it's responding to treatment. The chemo has helped. So he could get better..." I trailed off, adding silently in my head, "... *but he might not*." The thought made me feel sick to my stomach.

AJ nodded, blissfully naive. “He will,” he said, staring down at the table in front of him. “You don’t know Nick like I do; he’s a stubborn son of a bitch. He does everything the hard way. He won’t go down without a fight.”

I laughed, in spite of myself. “Oh, trust me; I’ve figured that out about him.”

He smirked at me briefly, before the smile dropped off his face. Looking down at the tabletop again, he said, “So... you said he’s doing chemo?”

“Uh-huh. He’s halfway through his fifth cycle of it. He’ll do at least six cycles, maybe eight. Either way, he’s on the final stretch.”

It made me feel better to hear myself say that. When I’d met Nick, he was just starting his third cycle, and now he was nearing his sixth and maybe last. Next week, he’d have another appointment with his oncologist in LA and another round of testing to see how he’d responded to the last two rounds of chemo, and if the results looked good, maybe she’d declare him in remission and move him into the maintenance phase of treatment. After all of the complications he’d had lately from the chemo, he could use the good news – and a break from the toxic, high doses of drugs.

“How come he still has his hair?” AJ wanted to know. “I thought chemo made you bald.”

I wondered if he was just a little bit jealous. Smiling as I remembered Nick icing his head, I replied, “Cause he’s a lucky bastard.”

AJ let out a humorless chuckle. “Some luck... catching cancer.” He glanced back up at me with a look of desperate hope in his eyes. “You sure this isn’t just some fucked-up, elaborate prank he paid you to play along with?”

Denial. I felt sorry for him. Sadly, I shook my head. “No... sorry... messed up as that would be, I wish it was.”

AJ sighed heavily, lowering his eyes again. “Man... this is some heavy shit. He should’ve told us sooner. Or you should have.” He raised his chin, piercing me with that same accusatory stare. I felt my face get red again.

“I wanted to,” I insisted. “But I couldn’t. It’s a confidentiality thing. He trusted me, as a nurse and as a friend, and I couldn’t betray his confidence. I hope you understand.”

He shook his head. “I don’t,” he muttered, “but whatever. It’s done. The secret’s out. What are we s’posed to do now?” He eyed my margarita glass, still half full. “You got the right idea. I need another drink.”

"I think we should go back upstairs," I suggested quickly, knowing that having another drink was *not* the right idea, at least not for him. "It sounds like you didn't hear the whole story from Nick before you came down. You should talk to him."

"Forget talking to him. If he didn't have fucking cancer, I'd kick his ass."

I couldn't help but giggle, though I wasn't sure if he was actually joking. Picturing Nick the way he'd looked with his nose gushing blood the other day, I said, "Yeah... probably not such a good idea."

"He deserves an ass-whooping for pulling this shit over on us," AJ growled, shaking his head in disbelief. "Jesus, how could he have hidden something like this from us that long?"

I shrugged. "He's a better actor than people give him credit for. He knew what he was doing. He'd thought it through. He just kept up his stage persona offstage and acted like he was okay, even when he didn't feel well. And when it was too much, he hid out on his bus or in his hotel room and kept to himself. Brian and Howie have been so busy with their families, I don't think they noticed. You did, but you thought he was on drugs."

AJ grimaced. "He reminded me of me, back when I was messed up. Sneaky... moody... withdrawn. I knew he was hiding something. I just never guessed it was something like this."

I swallowed hard. "I helped him hide it. I made excuses for him, too. I'm sorry. I felt terrible doing it... I hate lying. I'm just glad he finally told the truth."

AJ nodded, studying me closely. After a minute, he said, "You don't really have diabetes, do you?"

I blushed and ducked my head. "No."

"That needle I saw you with..."

"It was a hormone injection to get Nick's bone marrow to make more white blood cells. The chemo kills off healthy cells along with the cancer cells, and when his blood cell counts get too low, he's more vulnerable to infection," I explained. "The real reason we went to the hospital today was for a blood transfusion, to bring his counts back up. I don't think he would have made it through the show tonight without it. He was feeling pretty bad." I shook my head, imagining much worse it could have been. "Being out on the road like this, around so many people, I'm amazed he hasn't gotten really sick. He's lucky."

"Or stupid," AJ said, deadpan.

I laughed. "Definitely stupid."

After all that stuff he'd said about me to Nick, I was relieved he wasn't giving me a hard time for lying about having diabetes, too. Really, that made me no better than Nick. He'd been hiding an illness, and I'd been faking one. We made a terribly good team.

AJ sighed. "I guess I can't hide down here all night, huh? Even though I'd like to." He eyed the bar longingly.

"No," I said, taking the cue to stand up, leaving my margarita unfinished on the table.
"Let's go back up."

AJ hesitated, looking like he was tempted to stay and finish my drink for me, but finally, he got up, too. We settled our tabs at the bar and took the elevator back up to our floor. "I don't even know what to say to him," AJ mumbled, as the elevator doors slid open.

"You don't have to say anything profound. Let him apologize for lying to you, and then just treat him like you normally would. I think that's what he wants. He doesn't want you guys getting all weird around him," I replied.

"Weirder than usual, you mean."

I smiled. "Exactly."

We ran into Howie in the hall. "I was just coming to look for you," he told AJ. "You okay?"

AJ shrugged. "Not really."

Howie caught my eye. "We were just down in the bar, talking," I said, but a look of understanding passed between us that told him AJ had also been drinking. He could probably smell the whiskey on his breath, anyway. "We were on our way back to talk to Nick."

Howie nodded. "He'll be glad you're back," he said to AJ. "He feels bad, you know. He said to tell you he's sorry."

"Well, he can say it to my face then," AJ snapped. "He should feel bad. He's a fucking douche."

Howie smiled. "Brian used the word 'prick.'"

"He's that, too," growled AJ. But I knew he didn't mean it. Deep down, he loved Nick like a brother, and even if he wouldn't admit it, it showed in his face, in his whole demeanor. Angry or not, he cared about Nick, and the idea of Nick being sick was tearing him apart inside.

Of course, Howie knew this, too. He didn't say anything else, just let AJ vent, as he walked with us back to Nick's door. I had a key to the room, but I knocked instead of using it. "Nick?" I called softly. "It's just us."

Nick opened the door, looking sheepish when he saw AJ standing there behind Howie and me. He stood back to let us in. AJ shoved past him roughly, then rounded on him. "You're a stupid son of a bitch, you know that?" he hissed.

Nick's face reddened, but he nodded quite calmly. "I know. I'm sorry."

"You should be!"

"I am."

"I mean, how could you tell her—" AJ jerked his thumb over his shoulder at me. "- and not us? I thought we were a family."

Nick swallowed, his adam's apple bobbing visibly. "We are. I guess sometimes it's just easier to tell a stranger than someone you love. I didn't wanna upset you or make you worry or anything."

"Gee, how considerate of you," AJ said sarcastically. "It's not like I was worried when I just thought you were snorting cocaine again. And it's not like I'm upset now."

"I'm sorry," Nick said again, shifting his weight uncomfortably.

"You're also an asshole. Tell me something..."

"What?"

AJ got right up in Nick's face, and even though Nick was taller, AJ looked a lot more intimidating. "How is it that you can go through chemotherapy... and still have *way* more fucking hair on your big fat fucking head than I do? Huh? How is that fair?"

The corners of Nick's lips twitched as he cracked a smile. "Good genes, baby," he replied, the hesitant smile turning into his trademark smirk. "And ice," he added, winking at me.

I smiled. Even AJ was smirking, unable to keep a straight face. "You suck, dude," he told Nick. Then he pulled him into a hug. Watching them together, I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

Boys.

Chapter 48

Cary

Later that night, after the guys had gone back to their own rooms to talk to their wives, I looked over at Nick and said, “I’m proud of you for going through with it.”

He gave me a sheepish smile and didn’t reply.

“Don’t you feel so much better now that you’ve told them the truth?” I pressed. I knew I felt a lot better myself, like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. I was finally free from the burden of keeping such a serious secret, and I felt great. For once, my head was clear, my stomach didn’t hurt, and I didn’t feel almost feverish with guilt. Only then did it occur to me how much Nick’s secret had been stressing me out. I figured he had to feel the same sense of relief I did.

But Nick just shrugged and said, “I guess.”

“You guess?” I frowned. “Why? What’s on your mind?”

He did look distant, like he’d been deep in thought. When he answered, it was with another question. “I’m just wondering, what’s gonna happen now?”

What now? It was a question they all had to come up with an answer to, together.

The next morning, with a few hours until we had to leave for Reno, the four guys gathered around our room again to discuss their plans. I was a fly on the wall, not a part of the conversation, but invited to stay and listen in, anyway, since some of it – whatever they decided about the rest of the tour – would affect me, too.

“I wanna finish the tour,” Nick was the first to insist, sounding as stubborn as ever. “This leg, at least. We’re so close... only three more shows. I can make it.”

Brian, Howie, and AJ all gave each other looks, like they wanted to protest, but in the end, only Howie spoke, and all he said was, “If you think you’re up to it, Nicky, we’ll support you. We can finish this leg.”

“Good,” said Nick, with a satisfied nod.

“What about the next leg?” AJ asked.

The second leg of the North American tour was scheduled to start at the beginning of August in Washington, continue on up into Canada, and finish in Ohio at the end of the month. Tickets had been sold, and VIP packages had been purchased; the shows were only a month away, but I knew better than anyone, except maybe Howie, how

unpredictable cancer could be. Who knew what kind of shape Nick would be in in another month?

Nick seemed aware of this, too. “Let’s wait till after my appointment next week to discuss that,” he said. His sudden rationality impressed me, but I felt a chill of fear as I considered the possibility of him getting bad news.

“Do you want one of us to go to your appointment with you?” Howie offered. “I could.”

“I could, too,” Brian added. “We can stick around LA longer, if you need us to.”

I noticed AJ didn’t make the same offer; he was looking pretty squeamish just at the thought. It didn’t matter, because Nick blew them off. “Nah, I’m good,” he replied casually. “It’ll be a few days of testing while I’m in the hospital for my chemo before they know anything.”

I felt a sudden jolt as I realized I’d be out of the picture by then. He wouldn’t need me anymore; his next cycle would be administered in the hospital, like it was supposed to have been all along, and I would be a couple thousand miles away in Decatur. This wasn’t news to me; I’d always had a plane ticket home from Las Vegas for the day after our last show there. Still, it felt weird to think that, in less than a week, I’d be back to my old life again, and Nick would be continuing his journey through medical hell without me.

I’d been a part of that journey for so long, I really wanted to see him through the rest of it, but I was afraid to ask. I knew he didn’t feel the same way about me that I felt about him, and maybe he wouldn’t want me around anymore. I wasn’t going to invite myself to live in his condo again, and there was no way I could afford to stay out in LA without a job, so I had resigned myself to going back to Decatur and asking for my old position back at Idyllwood.

Once again, my dreams of a music career would be put on the back burner. Touring with the Backstreet Boys had been another chance of a lifetime, but this time I knew nothing would come of it. Nick had bigger things to worry about than helping me with my music. Even though he played it cool, I could tell he was nervous about his hospitalization and the next round of tests. Who wouldn’t be?

“Well, call us, once you know something,” said Brian, giving Nick a warning look. “We’re gonna have to work on the communication here, buddy.”

Nick smiled sheepishly and nodded. “Got it.”

“When are we gonna tell Jenn?” Howie wanted to know. “And the fans?”

Nick’s answer was the same: “Let’s wait till next week, when there’s more to tell.”

I think he was hoping for good news, to soften the blow. And if the news was bad – well, might as well hit them with it all at once. It would be enough of a nightmare for their manager and publicist and whoever else they had working for them, but I couldn't imagine how the fans were going to react. Actually, I could – they were going to absolutely freak out. There would be a widespread panic across the internet and around the world, as millions of distraught girls reacted to the news. I couldn't blame Nick for wanting to hold off on dropping that bomb for as long as possible.

The impromptu meeting ended with nothing set in stone, except that the tour would go on for the rest of the week. Before everyone went back to their own rooms to pack up, Brian said, "You guys wanna ride to Reno together?"

"Together?" AJ repeated, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, like, on the same bus. You know, like we used to... back in the good ol' days?" Brian flashed a wide grin.

Howie jumped right on board with the idea, which made me think maybe he and Brian had discussed it beforehand. I wondered if AJ had told them what I'd said about them being too busy with their families to notice anything was wrong with Nick. "Yeah, that's a great idea! That'd be fun," he said eagerly. He was pretty obvious, even to me.

Of course, Nick caught on, too. "Really, guys?" He looked between Brian and Howie in amusement, his tone sarcastic. "I appreciate your concern, but you don't have to start hanging out with me all the time now. I promise, I ain't gonna kick the bucket on the ride over."

No one smiled at his black humor. Suddenly, I could see exactly why he had waited so long to tell them. They didn't mean to, but they were giving him that look he had talked about the night he'd told me, the look like he was already at death's door. I knew their hearts were in the right place, wanting to spend time with him, but to Nick, it must have seemed liked they were ready to start keeping a death vigil.

"C'mon, that's not what I meant," Brian persisted, giving Nick a different kind of look. "It just seems like we haven't actually hung out much this tour, between you hiding out and us having our families around. It'd be nice to spend some more time together these last few days we're on the road."

Nick shook his head. "It's not a good day," he mumbled, his cheeks darkening. "I gotta do chemo today."

Even if we hadn't pushed his chemo back a few days, it would have still been a chemo day. With all the drama over him finally telling the guys, I'd almost forgotten. His blood counts would be better since the transfusion, though, so there was no good reason to delay his treatment any longer – and no reason to hide it. Nick may have been trying to blow them off, but when the other three guys looked to me, I said, "The actual

treatment won't take long, but he'll have to lie down the rest of the day, or he'll get a bad headache from it. Makes for a pretty boring day... You guys could keep him company."

I flashed my sweetest smile, ignoring the murderous looks I felt coming from Nick. It was about time he got a taste of his own medicine. That smirk of his could get him pretty much anything he wanted, but I was capable of charming people, too. Sure enough, Howie nodded, smiling back at me, and said, "Sure, we'll keep you company, Nicky."

"We can just kick it old-school and watch movies or something, whatever you wanna do," Brian chimed in.

He and Howie both looked to AJ to agree with them. Their fourth member didn't seem quite as enthused over the idea, maybe because he was still uncomfortable with the whole situation, or maybe just because he finally had Rochelle to keep him entertained, but finally, he nodded and echoed, "Yeah, whatever you wanna do."

When the three of them finally left the room, Nick scowled at me. "Why did you do that?"

"What, tell them the truth?" I beamed him that same, sweet smile. He didn't intimidate me anymore, and I was done dealing with his bullshit. There was no point in trying to keep the guys in the dark, now that the truth had been brought to light. "I think they deserve to know – to see – what you've been dealing with the last few months. Why don't you want them on your bus?"

He shrugged and looked down, his face reddening again. "I dunno. It's just awkward, I guess."

My attitude towards him softened. He looked so vulnerable and self-conscious. Even so, his reaction didn't make much sense to me. "You let me – a perfect stranger, a *fan* – into your home to *give* you chemo, yet you're embarrassed to have the guys around just to witness it?"

"It's different," he muttered. "You're a nurse."

"Yeah, and they're your friends. They want to be involved in this now that they know, and you need to let them. You're going to need some support when you go back home and don't have me around; you can't keep going through this all by yourself. You need to get over this denial problem of yours and accept that you have an illness. It doesn't change who you are, and it doesn't have to change the way people see you, but some things in your life are going to change. They already have. Deal with it."

I didn't mean to get sharp with him, but I couldn't understand how he could still be in this mindset of wanting to keep everything to himself and go through it alone. Finally, he had some support, other than me. I wished I could make him see how important that was.

Nick looked up at me, sheepishly, and nodded. “Yeah... you’re right,” he admitted reluctantly. “I guess we should get ready.”

Just like that, the conversation was over. We packed up our things in silence, then headed down to the buses. Sure enough, once Brian, Howie, and AJ had dropped off their luggage and their loved ones on their own buses, they came onto ours, bringing DVDs and video games, plenty of things to keep Nick entertained. Nick may have been annoyed, but I was touched by the way they rallied around him.

The bus was already running when we got onboard, but when I felt it lurch into motion, a startling thought occurred to me. I looked at Nick and said, “I am *not* sticking a needle in your spine while we’re on a moving bus.” I had the horrifying image in my head of the bus going over a bump right as I was trying to insert the syringe. If he was suddenly jostled, or my hand jerked, and the needle went in the wrong way... I shuddered, just thinking about it.

Nick gave me a pouty look. “C’mon, let’s just get it over with. If you don’t do it now, then I gotta wait till we get to Reno, and that means less time to recover before the show tomorrow night,” he complained. “The sooner, the better.”

I had to admire his discipline, the fact that I never had to act like his mother and remind him to take his medicine, but as usual, he was delusional. There was no way I was going to try a spinal tap while the bus was moving. “You’re gonna have to find an excuse for the bus to stop, then, long enough for me to do it.”

“Lunch,” said Brian, who had been listening in on our conversation. “It’s about noon,” he added, checking his phone. “We can just get the buses to stop for food.”

“Good idea, Rok,” AJ agreed quickly, nodding. “We can run in and pick something up, while you two stay on the bus and do your thing.”

I looked at Nick, who was looking back at me. Shrugging, I said, “I guess that works. It won’t take very long; as long as the bus is stopped for a few minutes, I can get it done.”

So AJ went to the front of the bus and convinced the driver to take us to McDonald’s. “We’ll special-order everything, to buy you some more time,” Howie said with a wink, as the two of them got off and went inside to order everyone food.

Brian stayed behind, wanting to be involved with Nick’s treatment. He perched on the edge of my bunk, across the aisle from the one Nick was lying on, curled up in a ball, facing the wall. I knelt on the floor, my supplies spread out across the mattress in front of me. It made me nervous to have someone – no, not just someone, Brian Littrell – watching over my shoulder, but I reminded myself that I was a professional, used to training young nurses and explaining procedures to anxious family members. This was no different – or, at least, I could pretend it wasn’t.

"This is just betadine," I said, as I swabbed the exposed skin between Nick's raised t-shirt and lowered shorts with dark orange antiseptic. "It's to disinfect the area."

"Enjoying the show, Bri?" muttered Nick.

I glanced over my shoulder at Brian, who grinned. "It's not like I haven't seen your ass crack a million times before, Captain Commando."

Nick groaned.

I showed Brian the first prepared syringe and said, "This is a shot of local anesthetic, so he won't feel the other needle." I injected the anesthetic into Nick's lower back, and we waited a few minutes for it to kick in.

"How often do you have to do this?" Brian asked quietly. His voice sounded calm enough, but I could tell he was a little freaked out. I saw the way his eyes kept darting between Nick's bare back and the other, larger syringe still waiting on the bed.

"This? Not that often," Nick answered. "Twice this cycle, not at all the next. Usually it goes into my port, through an IV." His voice sounded flat, almost robotic. I could remember him explaining things to me in the same, matter-of-fact tone, those first few days I'd spent with him at his condo. It had made me sad to hear him talk that way, to know that he'd been dealing with this disease long enough on its own to resign himself to the treatment, to accept it as a routine part of his life. Now I was used to it, too. It was time to acclimate Brian and the other guys, as well.

"Can you feel this?" I asked, tracing my finger lightly down Nick's backbone.

"No."

"How about this?" I used my fingernail this time, digging it into his skin.

"No. Just a little pressure."

I nodded. "Okay. We're all set then. Hold tight." I picked up the second syringe, with its long, thin needle, and twisted around to show Brian. "This is filled with the chemo. Cytarabine, this drug is called. It gets injected right into the spinal fluid, to kill any cancer cells that might have spread there."

I turned back to Nick, holding the syringe in one hand while I poked along his lumbar vertebrae with the other, searching for the right two to inject between, the L3 and L4. "Lie absolutely still," I warned Nick in a whisper, pressing two fingers against his back to mark my place. With my other hand, I guided the needle in between my fingers and slid it slowly, carefully, through the space between his vertebrae. I felt Nick go rigid, stiffening with the pressure he must have felt as the needle went in, but he managed to hold himself still as I injected the contents of the syringe into his spinal canal. When the plunger was all the way down, I released the breath I'd been holding and said, "Almost

done.” Then I sucked in another deep breath and held it as I slid the needle back out. “There,” I sighed. “You can relax now.”

I felt his body go limp, as I covered the injection site with a sterile dressing and pulled his shirt back down over it. Nick rolled over onto his back, raising his hips off the bed just enough to hitch his pants back up all the way, then lay flat.

“You okay, Frack?” Brian asked lightly. Despite his best effort to hide it, I could hear the shakiness in his voice.

“Yeah... I’m good,” mumbled Nick, who had closed his eyes.

I looked at Brian. “You wanna grab him a bottle of water? And a straw? There are some in the kitchen.”

Brian nodded. “Sure.” He got up from my bunk and went up to the front of the bus. While he was gone, I checked Nick’s pulse and blood pressure and was cleaning up when he returned. He’d already taken the cap off the bottled water and stuck a straw, the bendable kind, into it. Without needing to be asked, he sank down next to me and guided the straw to Nick’s lips, saying, “Here, Frack.”

Nick sucked some of the water and swallowed, whispering, “Thanks, Frick.”

A lump rose in my throat as I watched the two of them together, heard them use their old nicknames for each other, and I had to turn away before they could see the tears that sprang suddenly to my eyes. I busied myself with cleaning up, keeping my head down as I disposed of the syringes and packed the supplies back into my medical bag, and by the time AJ and Howie came back, carrying crinkly bags of McDonald’s food, I had gotten my composure again.

It wasn’t much easier watching their concert the next night. Of course, Brian, Howie, and AJ were seasoned performers – professionals, like Nick. They could fake it about as well as him, put on a good show even when their hearts weren’t into it. I doubted the fans could tell anything was wrong. But I could.

The guys just weren’t as playful onstage as usual. Even though they didn’t miss a beat, a dance step, a lyric, I knew they were just going through the motions, the same as Nick had managed to do each show he’d been under the weather. I caught them looking over at Nick often, but never with a smile or an imitation or a mouthed joke that would make him laugh. Instead, they looked at him with worry, as if they expected him to keel over at any second.

And oddly enough, through it all, it was Nick who performed with the most passion. Even if their hearts weren’t into it, his was, and it showed. I didn’t know where it came from, but somehow, he seemed to radiate a newfound strength and energy. He had

never sounded better. Maybe it was the blood transfusion, or maybe it was just the freeing feeling of having finally cleared his conscience, but he sang and danced and smirked and thrust as if he hadn't been flat on his back in bed the whole day prior, as if he wasn't sick at all. And if it hadn't been for the other three stealing furtive glances at him all night, it almost would have been possible for me to pretend he wasn't, either.

But not quite. As they finished their encore and took their final bows, it occurred to me that there were only two shows left. Two shows, and then I'd be heading home, and Nick would be going back into the hospital, to continue with the course of treatment laid out for him, without me.

At least he'll have the guys, I thought, noticing how tightly they clasped each other's hands as they bowed one last time and turned to leave the stage. I remembered Brian bringing him water, Howie bringing him food, AJ keeping him entertained the entire bus ride, and I smiled. *At least he'll have his brothers.*

Chapter 49

Nick

On Friday morning, I woke up in Vegas. It was the day of our last show, and I couldn't believe it.

In some ways, I was relieved. The next day, I'd be able to go home and get some much-needed rest. I could spend all day in bed or just lying around on my couch if I wanted to, and I wouldn't have to worry about getting up and performing when I didn't feel good.

But at the same time, I was sad to see the tour end. This would be my last chance to perform for awhile... and if I got bad news next week, maybe forever. I wasn't ready to face the possibility of this being my last concert... not just of this leg of the tour, but the last one ever.

Either way, I was determined to make it a good one. We were performing at The Beach at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, which had to be the coolest venue we'd played the whole tour. The stage was an island, set above an eleven-acre manmade beach outside the hotel, with real sand and a huge wave pool. The show was general admission, since there were no seats, only water to wade in and lawn chairs in the back. We'd had to adjust our blocking, since the stage was smaller than we were used to, but no one really minded. The last show of a tour was always a little more laidback than most, and it was fun to be able to change it up a little and do something different.

It was ninety-eight degrees outside when Cary went out to open the show. She wore a light, Hawaiian-print sundress, but even so, by the end of her three-song set, her bare

skin was shiny with sweat. “Take it easy out there,” she warned me, as we crossed paths backstage. “Drink as much water as you can. It’s really hot.”

“I’ll be alright,” I replied, and truthfully, I wasn’t too concerned. I’m a Florida boy; I’m used to the heat and used to performing summer concerts in too many layers of clothes. And besides, the guys and I had a plan.

By the time we took the stage, the sun had gone down, but the temperature was still in the lower nineties. We started the show in our usual stage outfits – black pants and dress shirts, Brian and AJ in jackets, Howie and I wearing vests – but during the first wardrobe change, we traded them for jeans and t-shirts. We were sweating buckets already, and no one felt like putting on our tour hoodies. By the last set of songs, we were in swim trunks. The crowd went crazy as we came out, one by one, for “All of Your Life.”

“Since we’re performing at the beach, we thought we better get in our swim trunks,” Brian joked with the fans later, showing off his crazy, turquoise, Hawaiian-print shorts. He, Howie, and AJ had on thin, plain, white t-shirts with their trunks; I wore a white button-down over a wifebeater, to make sure the bump of my port stayed hidden. It didn’t matter, though; I was comfortable, and it gave the end of the concert a fun vibe, like we were really at a beach party. We were pretending... like I’d been doing the whole tour, like I had the guys doing now. Pretending everything was carefree, pretending nothing was wrong. The whole thing was an act.

It really hit me when we got to the end of “Bye Bye Love.” As we sang, *“I’m saying goodbye to you... I’m saying goodbye to you,”* and waved to the fans down in the water below us, I realized I was saying goodbye in more ways than one. It wasn’t just a lyric in a song; it wasn’t just the end of a show or even a tour. This was my farewell to all the fans and the incredible career they’d let me have, in case there wasn’t another concert, another leg of the tour, in case the news next week was bad and I never got another chance.

It was hard to go on and act like I was having fun, with that depressing thought in my head, but somehow, I did it. I did it the same way I’d made it through all the other shows before this one: by faking it, by forcing myself to stay in the moment, forget everything else, and focus only on performing. This time, I knew Brian, AJ, and Howie were having to do the same thing.

We gave the fans a finale they’d never forget, busting out Super Soakers for the second half of “I Want It That Way” and spraying the crowd. *“Tell me why,”* we sang, and I shot a stream into the first few rows. *“Ain’t nothin’ but a heartache. Tell me why...”* Then I turned the gun on Brian and Howie and squirted them, too. *“Ain’t nothin’ but a mistake. Tell me why...”* I did the choreography with the Super Soaker in one hand. *“I never wanna hear you say... I want it that way...”*

I nailed AJ while Howie was singing his solo. By then, Brian had a squirt gun, too. I expected him to retaliate, but he sprayed the front row, instead of me. Again, I was

reminded of how much things were going to change, of how much they already had. Before they found out I had cancer, I'd never have gotten away with squirting any of the guys without taking a shot straight to the face as punishment.

We were all armed with squirt guns when we came back out for the encore, and we completely nixed the choreography to "Straight Through My Heart" and just played around onstage, instead. There were beach balls bouncing over the heads of the audience, and the fans in the first few rows were screaming wildly as we drenched them with water. It was fun, the perfect end to our last show. And when it was over, we set down the Super Soakers and grasped each other's hands.

As we took our final bows, the fans' screams making my ears ring, I suddenly thought of the quote I'd included in my thank yous for *Millennium*. Thinking I was clever, I'd put it in code: 5483-5433-86-843-3855378-367-843-388873-47-722723. *Live life to the fullest, for the future is scarce.* At the time, I'd been nineteen and on top of the world. I'd had limited experience with death – most recently, the passing of our producer, Denniz Pop, to cancer – but like most teenagers, I still felt invincible, untouchable. The saying sounded deep, and the code thing was cool, but when they were decoded, the words were still just words to me.

Standing on that stage over a decade later, at the ripe old age of thirty, with the same disease that had killed Denniz inside my body, I realized truer words had never been spoken.

That night, I'd lived by them.

"Thank you," I told the guys later, as we walked back up to our hotel rooms. "Thanks for letting me do this... and for doing it with me. It meant a lot to me."

I've never been too good with words, and it's weird for me to really say what I feel when it comes to the emotional stuff, but I wanted them to know how important our finishing the tour together had been to me. They all nodded and hugged me, one at a time, and Brian said, "Now that it's over, you just need to go home and focus on getting better, okay?"

I nodded, too. "That's what I'm gonna do."

We were all staying one more night in Vegas, and if things were normal, we would have spent most of it in the casinos, drinking and gambling, partying and celebrating the end of another leg of the tour. But the guys must have known I was completely wiped from the concert, because no one invited me out. That was just as well with me; I had already played in the casino at Mandalay Bay before soundcheck that afternoon, and I was ready to call it a night.

Cary was waiting for me with a bottle of sparkling grape juice when I let myself into the room. “Congratulations,” she said, filling two glasses and handing me one. “You made it.”

“Thanks to you,” I replied, smiling sheepishly, raising my glass to her.

She shook her head. “Thanks to your own stubbornness. If I’d had my way, I’d have sent you home weeks ago. Lucky for you, you’re persistent, and I’m a pushover.”

I grinned and clinked my glass against hers. “I’ll drink to that,” I said, taking a sip of the grape juice. I guess I could have been an ass and ordered real champagne, since our whole deal was off now that the guys knew the truth, but I knew she had my best interest at heart, and I respected that, even if I hadn’t always shown it. “Seriously, thank you,” I told her, wiping my upper lip with the side of my hand, “for putting up with my bullshit and... well, for everything.”

Cary smiled. “Thank you, too. For the experience. It’s been a roller coaster, but...”

“You love roller coasters.” I smirked, remembering her telling me so at that theme park in Georgia, where *Zombieland* had been filmed.

Her cheeks got pink as she laughed. I loved the way I could always make her do that – giggle and turn colors. The effect made her even prettier; her cheeks got rosy, her eyes got big and shiny, and her hair bounced on top of her shoulders. It occurred to me again that, under different circumstances, I probably would have tried to sleep with her by now, but I quickly suppressed the thought. I’d taken enough advantage of her already.

“Sorry it wasn’t what you expected,” I added, feeling a surge of guilt when I recalled how I’d basically tricked her into coming on the tour. “I hope you at least liked the performing part... and hopefully you’ll get to open for us again, if we do the second leg.”

“Are you kidding? I loved performing!” she gushed, still smiling. “I loved everything... being on stage every night, seeing the country, meeting you guys...” She blushed a little darker. “For me, the whole experience was worth the not-so-pleasant parts.”

Thinking of the long days on the tour bus, the long nights in hotel rooms, doing chemo in secret and feeling like shit and trying to hide it all so I could drag my ass on stage and perform, I nodded. “For me, too.”

Chapter 50

Cary

I didn't want to get up the next morning. Lying in bed next to Nick, listening to the slow, steady sound of his breathing, I felt totally content.

I had gotten over the awkwardness of sharing a hotel room and sleeping in the same bed; it was worth it to wake up, roll over, and see his face first thing in the morning. I usually woke up before him, so I could do damage control before he got a good look at me in the morning. But that day, I was in no hurry to get out of bed. Doing so would only remind me that I had to pack up my things and get ready to go to the airport, that in a few hours, I'd be on a plane, flying home. As eager as I was to see my dad and Hambelina again and sleep in my own bed, alone, I didn't want to leave.

The past two months had been like a dream come true. Sure, sometimes the dream had been more of a nightmare, but for me, there had been far more highs than lows. I had toured with the Backstreet Boys, a group I had admired for over ten years, and developed a friendship with Nick. I had performed on a real stage, in front of a real audience, opening their show each night, singing my own songs. No voting, no risk of elimination, just a Backstreet Boys concert to look forward to when I finished my set. When I thought of leaving all that and going back to work at the nursing home, I felt almost sick. I liked the work I did and the people I worked with, but I was going to miss touring and being around Nick and the Boys so much.

I was lying on my back, staring up at the ceiling of our hotel room and thinking these thoughts, when I heard the mattress creak and the covers rustle, felt everything shift around me as Nick rolled over. I turned my head towards him and found him looking back at me. "Morning," he croaked, his voice thick with sleep.

"Morning," I said back, hoping he wouldn't catch a whiff of my breath. I knew I should really get up and brush my teeth and my hair, but I still didn't want to. It wasn't fair that he could look so cute first thing in the morning, with his hair sticking up in tufts and his sleepy blue eyes at half-mast, while I looked more like Medusa.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Almost nine." Checkout wasn't until eleven, but since my flight left at one, I wanted to be on my way to the airport before then. The Boys and their crew had flights at similar times, so we were leaving from the hotel together. "I guess we should get up, huh?"

Nick groaned. "Yeah..."

I forced myself to get up first, making a beeline for the bathroom to freshen up before I faced him again. When I came out, he had only gotten as far as sitting up on the side of the bed, his long legs dangling over the edge of the mattress. He had the TV on and was staring at it blankly, a glazed look in his eyes. He didn't even look at me when I said, "We should get some breakfast." When he didn't respond, I added, "Want me to run down and grab something to bring back up?"

Finally, he acknowledged me with a grunt. "Eh... let's just order room service."

"Okay..." I picked up the menu from the desk and handed it to him. "Whatever you feel like."

I watched him scan the menu by the light of the TV. He looked exhausted, completely drained. For his sake, I was glad the tour was ending; he clearly needed the time off to rest and recuperate from the chemo and the crazy schedule.

We ordered a big breakfast of bacon and eggs, lots of protein, and had it sent up to the room. When it was delivered, we sat around eating and watching Saturday morning cartoons, until Nick's phone started vibrating. He picked it up off the bedside table and checked it, smirking. "Howie... making sure we're up."

I glanced at the clock; "almost nine" had turned into "almost ten." We really needed to start packing. "Tell him we are," I said, scrambling off the bed. Nick stayed put, texting Howie back, while I dug a clean outfit out of my suitcase and went into the bathroom to change. I could hear Nick fumbling around in the room while I tried to make myself look presentable. When I came back out, he had gotten dressed and was repacking what was left of his chemo supplies in between layers of dirty clothes in one of his suitcases.

"You know what the worst part of the end of a tour is?" he muttered, using both arms to try to squash the heap flat enough to get his bag zipped. "I'll tell ya – all the dirty laundry. I mean, damn, look at all this. I hate doing laundry. Usually I just leave it all in the suitcase, right inside my front door, 'til I run out of clean clothes, and then I finally unpack, like, weeks later... right before I gotta get ready to go on tour again. It's like a neverending cycle."

I laughed. "Typical guy."

He grinned. "Yeah... that's why I need a woman – to wash my clothes. And dry 'em and fold 'em and put 'em away for me..."

I smiled and shook my head at his male chauvinism, but inside, I was thinking, *I'd do your laundry. I'd use fabric softener, too, so it would come out soft and smelling good. I bet you don't even know about fabric softener...* "Clearly, you need help with the folding part," I said, eyeing the overflowing suitcase. He managed to get it zipped, even though the sides were bulging, and gathered up the rest of his stuff.

We lugged everything out into the hall and down to the lobby, the last of the group to arrive. The ride to the airport was long and quiet. I spent most of it looking out the windows, taking in the sights of Vegas before I left it behind. I wished I'd gotten the chance to do more sightseeing in the other cities we'd visited, but I would never say so out loud. Nick had already apologized for the tour being less than I'd expected, and I didn't want him to think I was ungrateful. It was true that it hadn't been exactly what I'd expected when I had first flown out to LA, but that didn't mean I hadn't had an amazing time.

Checking in and getting through airport security was an equally long process, but finally, we were all past the security checkpoints and ready to disband and head to our separate gates. Brian and his family were flying home to Atlanta, while most everyone else was going back to LA.

I hung back while Brian said his goodbyes to everyone, wanting to delay my own for as long as possible. A lump rose in my throat as I watched the way he hugged Nick, so tightly, patting his back and whispering something in his ear. It swelled even bigger when Nick squatted down to hug Baylee. I wondered if Brian and Leighanne had told him yet that his “Uncle Nick” was sick. Even Leighanne gave Nick a hug, and while she finished saying goodbye, Brian came over to me.

“It was great to meet you, Cary,” he said, offering a friendly grin. “Thanks for opening the show for us, and thanks for everything you did for Nick.” He hesitated, then added sheepishly, “And I’m sorry, for making assumptions about the kind of relationship you had with him. You know what they say about people who assume...”

I grinned back, astonished. Brian Littrell was actually blushing in front of me, instead of the other way around. “It’s okay. I don’t think you’re an ass, Brian. You’ve always been my favorite Backstreet Boy, you know.” I winked, blushing, too, by that point, and when he opened his arms to offer a hug, I accepted it eagerly. My hurt feelings had healed; I was just glad the guys knew the true story now.

“Take care,” he said, as he pulled away. “Who knows what’s in store for the rest of the summer, but I hope we see you again soon.”

I nodded. “Me too,” I whispered, as I watched him turn and walk away with his wife and son.

Then it was my turn to say goodbye. I started with Howie and AJ and everyone else I’d met on the tour, saving Nick for last. I hate goodbyes, and I was dreading saying it to him. When it was time, he took my elbow and walked me a few steps toward my gate, away from what was left of the group, and then turned me toward him. “I just wanna say thank you, again, for everything,” he started in a low voice. “I know I’m not the easiest person to live with, and I’m sure I created a really awkward situation for you, but...”

I quickly shook my head. “I had an amazing time,” I interrupted. “Really. I... I wish you weren’t sick, and I’d do anything to make this go away, but I really appreciate the opportunity it gave me, to get to know you and go on tour with you. Thank you for that.”

He nodded, pressing his lips into a tight smile. “We’ll do it again sometime,” he said lightly. “Hopefully in August.”

I smiled and nodded back, and neither of us acknowledged the fact that there might never be another tour. It may not be healthy, but sometimes, it’s just better to be in denial. “I’d love that,” I replied.

“We’d love to have you. You’re an awesome performer, you know. And an even better nurse... nurse practitioner... whatever the hell you are.” He made a face, his tongue poking through his teeth. “You’re a good friend, too. Thanks for keeping me company and... you know... keeping my secret, even though you didn’t want to. Here... this is to make up for all my bullshit.” He held out a strip of paper. I realized what it was and tried to refuse, but he thrust it into my hand, and before I knew it, I was staring down at a check. A check for twenty thousand dollars.

“Are you kidding me?” I said before I could help myself, my eyes bugging as I stared down at the check. “I can’t take this!”

“I told you I’d pay you,” he replied, shrugging, like it was no big deal. “You never said what you make at your day job, but hopefully this is enough to cover two months’ salary.”

It was way more than I made in two months. Hell, I could buy myself a new car with this! But I wasn’t going to accept it. There was no way I could. I shook my head rapidly, trying to force the check back into his hand, wrinkling it in the process. “Nick, really, I appreciate the thought, but you don’t have to do this. We had a deal; it was an even trade. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Take the check,” he persisted, and then, as if he could see the idea forming in my head, he added, “And if you rip it up, I’ll just send you another one. I’ve got your address, remember?” He grinned.

I sighed in exasperation and reluctantly tucked the check into my purse, deciding I could keep it, but not cash it. He had so much money, he’d probably never know if I had or hadn’t. “Thanks,” I whispered, feeling myself blush.

With a wave of his hand, he said, “No, seriously, thank *you*.”

I swallowed hard, red-faced and trying to keep my emotions in check. “You’re welcome. Just do me a favor, okay?”

“What?”

“Take care of yourself. And now that they know, let the guys in. Let them help you.”

He nodded. “Okay, Nurse Cary,” he sing-songed.

“I’m serious,” I said, but I was smiling, even though I sort of felt like crying. “Be a good little patient, and listen to your doctor’s orders.” Thinking of the days of testing and treatment ahead of him, I added, “Will you call me, after you meet with her? I mean, you don’t have to, if you don’t want to, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to keep in touch and hear how things are going...” I trailed off uncertainly, hoping he wouldn’t mind this request. I thought we were friends, and he’d used the word just now, but sometimes, I

wasn't sure how to read him and his feelings toward me. He could be so unpredictable and moody, playing hot and cold – warm and friendly, even flirty, one minute, cool and casual the next. I didn't always know how to react to him.

Luckily, he smiled and nodded again. "Sure."

I smiled back, feeling relieved. "Thanks."

He spread his arms wide then, and I stepped eagerly into his hug, wrapping my arms around his lanky body. Even though he occasionally looked puffy from the steroids he'd been taking with his chemo regimen, he felt so skinny and bony, like he was wasting away. Again, I wished I could go home with him and fatten him up with some of my home cooking and do his laundry and keep house for him, the way I had before the tour... but I knew that part of our relationship had passed. He didn't need me anymore. And if he did, he'd never admit it, just as I would never impose on him. So I patted his back and forced myself to pull away, saying, "Bye, Nick."

"Bye, Cary. Text me when you make it home, alright?"

"Sure. I will."

He gave me another nod and a grin, and I hiked my carry-on bag up onto my shoulder and gave him a little wave as I turned and made myself start walking.

I had a lot to look forward to when I got home. The next day was the Fourth of July, and there would be fireworks and a neighborhood barbecue in my dad's backyard. I was turning twenty-nine the day after that, and it would be nice to spend my birthday at home, with family and friends. I'd have dinner with my dad, then go out for drinks with Jess and the girls, telling them all about the tour.

But as I trudged off toward my gate, I couldn't help but glance back.

Chapter 51

Nick

For the Fourth of July, I chartered a seventy-five foot yacht and invited three of my best friends and their families along for a full day of fishing, fireworks, and fun.

"So what is this, practice for the big Backstreet cruise?" Kevin joked, as we cruised down the California coastline.

Howie and AJ and I all looked at each other. No one had mentioned the cruise since I'd told them about my diagnosis. December seemed a long way off; who knew what kind of

shape I'd be in then? It would have to be discussed at some point, once we told Jenn, but before then, I had bigger things to worry about: like telling Kevin.

It had come up on the plane ride home from Vegas. "When are you going to talk to Kevin?" Howie had asked, looking at me seriously. "You have to tell him soon. It's only fair, now that we know."

I knew he was right, but I was dreading it. Kevin has always been sensitive about the subject of cancer, after losing his dad to it so young. It's not like it's an easy topic for anyone to talk about; we've all known people who have had it and died from it. Still, I knew telling Kevin I was sick was going to be even harder than telling the other three. It was going to crush him.

I couldn't think of how I was even going to do it. I hated the thought of inviting him over or just showing up on his doorstep to drop the cancer bomb. I couldn't imagine doing it in public, either, like at a restaurant or on the golf course. What if he freaked out or cried or something? No, I definitely couldn't do it in public. I would have to tell him in private, but I still hated the idea of doing it alone. Call me a chicken, but just like I'd wished Cary would stay with me when I told the guys, I wanted them around for moral support when I told Kev, for him as much as for me.

That was where the Fourth of July came in. AJ had asked if I had any plans. My only plans were to spend the rest of the weekend lying around in my condo. I'd catch up on some sleep, and maybe I'd be able to watch some fireworks from my balcony. He and Rochelle had been invited to a friend's barbecue, he'd said, but they could change their plans, if I wanted to get together and invite Kevin. Howie was down for that, too, since he'd just been planning to spend the holiday with his family. By the time the plane landed at LAX, we had a full-fledged plan for how to break the news to Kevin.

Now here we were, onboard a luxury yacht, streaming down the west coast towards Mexico.

"You bet," I joked with Kevin. "I'm gonna drive the cruise ship."

"Lord help us," Howie chimed in, shaking his head.

Without missing a beat, Kevin said, "Watch out for sea grass."

Howie and AJ started cracking up. I'd never live down that boating accident, even though it had been, like, ten years. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up," I muttered.

"It's okay, Nick," said AJ. "I'll be your lookout." He put on his thickest Cockney accent and yelled, "Sea grass, right ahead!"

They all laughed again, and this time, I joined in. It was nice spending the day with the three of them, not touring or doing press appearances, but just hanging out. We didn't get to do that much anymore, which, I realized, was kind of sad. Of course, it would

have been better if Brian was with us, too, and if Rochelle, Leigh, Kristin, and the kids weren't, but there was no inviting the guys on a trip like this on a holiday without including their women. They were kind of a package deal these days. Kevin never would have come without Kristin and Mason, and I needed him there, even if I was dreading ruining his holiday with my bad news.

The day was overcast and unseasonably cool, which gave me an excuse to keep my shirt on. We were all bundled up in jackets and hoodies as we sat out on the boat deck, soaking up the little bit of sun we could whenever it peeked out from behind the gray clouds. Finally, in the afternoon, the sun came out to stay, and we took off our jackets and fished over the side of the boat. No one caught much, but that was okay; I'd brought along more than enough food, including thick steaks to grill for our dinner.

When the sun started to sink in the sky, we dropped anchor a few miles off the coast of San Diego. The others went into the cabin to warm up, while I got set up to cook the steaks on the back deck. "Wanna help man the grill?" I asked Kevin in what I hoped sounded like a casual way. I knew this was my chance to talk to him privately.

"You better go, dude," AJ told Kevin, before he could answer. "I like my steak well done, but not burnt to a crisp, if you know what I mean. Don't let him fuck up our dinner."

Kevin chuckled. "No worries. I'm on it." He followed me to the back of the boat, where I stalled as long as I could, making small talk while I messed around with the grill. By the time the steaks were cooking, though, I'd run out of things to say, except the one thing I had to tell him.

"I'm glad you could come out today, man," I said, leaving him sitting on one of the padded seats as I got up to check the steaks. I was more comfortable with my back to him; it helped not to have to look at him.

"Me too, bro," Kevin replied, in that mellow drawl of his. "Thanks for the invite. I feel like I don't get to see much of you guys anymore, even though we all have places in the same town. It's been nice hangin' out like this."

I felt a wave of guilt crash over my head as I realized that, one, he was right... two, I was about to ruin our nice day by telling him I had cancer... and, three, once he knew, he was going to feel guilty, too, for not spending more time with me. I didn't want him to feel bad. Hell, I still wished I could keep the whole thing a secret, but I knew it just wasn't possible anymore. Howie was right; now that he, AJ, and Brian knew, it wasn't fair to keep Kevin in the dark. He was my brother, the same as them. In a way, he'd practically raised me. I owed him a lot, least of all this. Telling him would hurt, but not telling him would hurt him even worse, in the long run.

"Yeah, it's been nice for me, too," I agreed. I picked up a spatula and started fumbling with one of the steaks. "I've been going through some shit lately," I added, as off-handedly as I could. I flipped the steak over, even though it wasn't even close to being done on that side yet.

But Kevin was way too sharp for the casual routine to work. He's always been able to see right through my bullshit, and this was no exception. "What kind of shit?" he asked me directly.

I sucked in as deep a breath as I could take. My chest felt tight, like it was being squeezed by a giant rubber band. I knew it had nothing to do with the tumor and everything to do with the fear I was feeling right then. *Just say it*, I urged myself. *Get it over with*. "Some health shit," I muttered.

His own intake of breath was loud enough for me to hear it, and before I could elaborate, he asked, "With your heart?"

I actually chuckled. "No. Not that." *I wish*, I almost said, but I wasn't sure that was really something to wish for. "Um, so... yeah... I have cancer."

I was still facing the grill when I said it, and he was still sitting behind me, so I never saw the look that flashed across his face when he first understood what I'd said, and I stubbornly kept my back to him until he finally said, "Nick... look at me. Are you bein' serious right now?"

Why did they all think I was just messing with them at first? I mean, I know I'm the biggest practical joker of all of us, but damn. Who the hell jokes about having cancer? Not even I would pull something that fucked up.

But I knew. In a way, I even understood. It was denial. They all wanted so desperately to believe I was just kidding because they couldn't handle the idea that I could really be sick. I got that much.

I forced myself to turn around so Kevin could see that I wasn't trying to fuck with him. "I'm serious," I said. I even pointed at my chin and added, "See? This is my serious face." But I sort of ruined the effect by cracking a smile. I didn't mean to do that; there was really nothing to smile about. I just wanted to lighten the mood. I think I only ended up confusing Kev more. "Sorry," I mumbled. "I wish I was kidding, but I'm not."

Kevin let out a sigh and slumped in his seat, dragging a hand down over his face. When he did that, he suddenly looked old. I could see all the lines on his face, wrinkles I hadn't really noticed in broad daylight. Those lines hadn't been there a few years ago, either, but I definitely noticed them now.

"Sorry," I said again, feeling guilty for making him look that way.

"No." He shook his head, straightening up. "Don't say that. What are you sorry for? *I'm* sorry, Nick. You're too young to be dealing with shit." I guess he meant actually having cancer, since he'd been a lot younger than me when he watched his dad go through it. "What kind is it?" he wanted to know.

I told him what I knew. It was easier to keep talking once I'd started, even though it meant telling him how serious it was and how long I'd been hiding it. Surprisingly, he didn't lecture me. That was a first. Instead, he just said, "Oh, Nick..." and somehow, that was worse. "The other guys know, don't they?" he asked, and I nodded.

"They just found out last week, though," I added quickly, as if that made it better. "I wanted to tell you in person, too, not over the phone."

Kevin nodded, putting his hand over his face again. He sat like that for a few seconds, not moving, and I just stood there, waiting for him to say something, not knowing what else to say, myself. Finally, he asked, "What kind of treatment have they got you on? You are doing treatment, aren't you?" He looked up at me sharply; I guess he was worried I was going to say there were no options or that I'd already given up on treatment.

"Yeah... chemo," I answered quickly. Then I launched into another explanation about that. I told him about Cary and how she'd made it possible for me to do my treatments on the road, how I was glad I'd done it that way, even though I was also glad the tour was over, for now. "It sucks, but I guess it ain't that bad. I'm still alive, anyway. And between cycles, I feel pretty good. Better than before I was diagnosed, anyway. So it seems to be helping."

"When will you know if it worked?"

"I go in next week for some tests and my sixth cycle. I guess I'll find out then how things are going and what's gonna happen next." I tried to keep my voice light and casual, like I wasn't worried about it, but I'm sure Kevin could see right through that, too.

"Let me know if you want someone along for moral support at your appointment," he offered, getting up. He came to stand beside me in front of the grill and slung his arm around my shoulders. "I've been down this road before, you know. I know a thing or two about the journey."

I nodded, reaching around to pat his back. "Thanks, Kev."

We both fell silent as we finished grilling the steaks. Once we had carried a plate of them in, Kevin excused himself to the bathroom and was gone a long time. We had already sat down to dinner by the time he got back. His eyes looked red-rimmed, but I pretended not to notice.

We talked about everything but my cancer at dinner, which was nice. Even though this whole trip had been about telling Kevin, now that my mission had been accomplished, I looked at it as an escape, a sort of vacation from my illness. But that was only on the outside; in my head, I could never escape it for long. It always managed to invade my thoughts, even when I least expected it.

Like after dinner, when we bundled up and went back out onto the boat deck to watch the fireworks. As everyone around me “oohed” and “aahed” over the bright bursts of color, I looked up at the sky and wondered if I was seeing my last Fourth of July fireworks show. Morbid thought, I know, but it really hit me right then. I had stage IV cancer, and if my next round of tests showed that it had spread, then I was probably screwed.

No one had come right out and said it, but I had seen it in the eyes of the people I’d told, people who had more experience with cancer than I did, up until that point. Cary... Howie... and most recently, Kevin. As soon as I’d told them it was stage IV, something faded in their eyes, like the light of hope had gone dim. Everyone knew I was living on borrowed time, and there were no guarantees that I’d be alive in another year or even another month.

I had to start living my life, or what was left of it, the same way I’d made it through the last leg of the tour: one day at a time. Live moment to moment, and cherish every one.

Out on the ocean, sitting under the stars with three of my best and oldest friends, watching fireworks explode in the sky over our heads, I decided I’d picked the perfect moment to start.

Chapter 52

Nick

It’s not so easy to cherish every moment when those moments involve pain and sickness and other forms of misery, as many of the ones in the hospital did that next week. I was put through most of the same tests I’d undergone in the days leading up to my diagnosis, including a spinal tap and a bone marrow biopsy, before I started my next cycle of chemo.

When I wasn’t being tortured, I was bored out of my mind. Howie and Kevin stopped by my hospital room every afternoon, and even though I’d acted like I didn’t care if they came or not, I really did enjoy their visits. Brian and AJ called me daily, too, and their phone calls helped break up the monotony. Still, it sucked spending most of my days lying around in a hospital bed.

I realized how good I’d had it on tour, when I could at least get my chemo while I played video games on the tour bus or relaxed in a swanky hotel suite. No matter how upscale, a hospital room could never compare. Neither could the company. The nurses there were nice, but busy. They didn’t have time to talk to me, except for a few minutes of chitchat while they checked my vitals or changed my IV bag. I missed having Cary around to keep me company.

On my fourth and hopefully final day in the hospital, as I was getting my last chemo infusion, Dr. Submarine came in to go over my test results. Kevin and Howie were both there; they had planned it that way, once they'd found out when the doctor would be visiting me. I didn't mind; it actually helped, having them around. It made me less nervous, more prepared to hear whatever Dr. Submarine had to say. If it was something good, they could celebrate with me. If it was bad, they could comfort me. And if it was confusing, they would know the right questions to ask.

I could still hear Kevin saying, *"I've been down this road before, you know. I know a thing or two about the journey."* He was right, of course. (Kevin's always right.) He and Howie had both been down this road with their dads; they knew a lot more than I did. It was stupid not to let them stay, and I was done being stupid about this. It was time to start making smart choices.

"Good afternoon, Nick," said Dr. Submarine in her musical accent, juggling her usual pile of paperwork. She looked around at the unusually crowded hospital room. "I see you have support with you today." She seemed pleased to see Kevin and Howie there.

"Yeah... these are my friends," I replied, introducing the two of them.

"I'm Dr. Subramanien," she said, shaking both of their hands quickly, before turning back to me. "And how have you been feeling?"

"Tired... a little nauseous... a lot nervous," I answered, being totally honest. I tipped my head toward the papers in her hands. "So what's the verdict?"

Her normally serious face split into a smile. "All good news, I'm happy to say. Your tests came out clear. No cancer cells detectable in your chest, bone marrow, blood, or spinal fluid. That means the chemotherapy has done its job, and we can now say that your disease is in complete remission."

Howie and Kevin reacted before I could even wrap my mind around what she had said, standing up on either side of me and squeezing my shoulders. "Congratulations... that's awesome, man," Howie said, and even without looking at him, I could tell he was smiling from ear to ear.

I had turned toward Kevin, who stood gripping my shoulder with his head bowed. "Thank the Lord," he murmured, saying it like a prayer.

I looked from him back to Dr. Submarine, still reeling, and asked, "Seriously? So... it's gone? Just like that?" I don't know what I had been expecting, but this good news seemed almost too good to be true. Even though it was what I had hoped for, I had gotten so used to the idea of being sick, I couldn't imagine being better all of a sudden.

Dr. Submarine's smile wavered. "Well, no, not exactly. The cancer is undetectable, but that doesn't mean it's fully gone or gone for good. Unfortunately, while this form of cancer responds well to chemotherapy, it's also quick to relapse. The goal of treatment

now is to make sure we eradicate any abnormal cells still lingering in your body, in order to prevent a recurrence.”

I nodded. “Kick it while it’s down, then. I get it.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Does that mean more chemo?” I asked, eyeing the bag of chemicals being pumped through my port. After the last three days, I wasn’t too excited about the idea of doing yet another cycle or two, even though I’d always known it was a possibility. I was tired of feeling like shit, tired of the upset stomach and grainy eyes and sore mouth and puffy face and everything else I’d been dealing with. I was tired of being tired. But if more chemo was what it took to get rid of the cancer for good, then I’d do it. I wanted to go on with my life without constantly worrying it was going to come back.

“There are two options to consider,” answered Dr. Submarine. “Both involve more chemo, but to different degrees. You’ve finished what we call the induction phase of chemotherapy, the goal of which is to achieve a remission. One option would be to proceed to a stem cell transplant, which means essentially destroying your immune system with high-dose chemotherapy and then rebuilding it with healthy stem cells, either your own that have been harvested prior or cells from a closely-matched donor. We call that the consolidation phase. It’s an intense treatment, but it’s also associated with a higher five-year survival rate in patients with your type of cancer.”

I stared blankly at the doctor. She’d lost me at “transplant.” That word freaked me out enough, bringing to mind images of operating rooms and surgeons carrying little coolers with hearts and kidneys inside. I had no idea what a stem cell looked like or if a transplant of those worked the same way, but I didn’t like the sound of it. “So what’s my other option?” I asked quickly.

“The other option would be skipping consolidation for now and going straight to a maintenance phase of chemo. The maintenance phase is much less intense – lower dosages of drugs, usually taken by mouth on an outpatient basis. The goal of it is to target any remaining cancer cells and prevent them from coming back.”

I knew which one sounded better to me. “I’ll go with that one,” I said right away, wondering why she would even bother giving me a choice, if the choice was between having a transplant and taking a few pills. If the maintenance plan was as simple as she’d made it sound, I could do the last leg of the tour, no problem.

Dr. Submarine laughed lightly. “Why don’t you take some time to think about it? I’ve printed some information for you to read so you can make an educated decision.” She handed me a stapled packet of papers. I glanced down at it doubtfully; there were a lot of words on those papers. “Do you have any questions right now, or would you like to call me when you’ve had a chance to review the research and talk it over with your loved ones?” She looked between Howie and Kevin.

"That sounds like a good idea," said Kevin, nodding. I should have known I wouldn't get off that easy with him around. He would want to read every word of the information she had given me, while Howie compiled the pros and cons of each option into a flashy Power Point presentation. Oh well... if that was the case, I could just let them do all the work and make the decision for me. No thinking required.

They both thanked Dr. Submarine, shaking her hand again before she left, making me feel like I was a little kid with my parents there to do the talking for me, instead of a thirty-year-old man who had done fine dealing with this on my own for the past few months, thank you very much. Once she was gone, I said, "Thanks, guys. I probably do need some time to just look at this stuff on my own and figure out what would be best."

There was a hint in there, but neither of them picked up on it. "Yeah, this is not a decision you want to take lightly," Kevin said wisely, looking serious, while on my other side, Howie couldn't stop grinning.

"This is such a relief, Nicky," he kept saying. When he got to talking fast like that, with that goofy grin on his face, he reminded me of a hyperactive chipmunk. "You should call AJ and Brian right away. They'll be so glad to hear the good news."

"Yeah, I will, after you guys leave," I said, dropping sort of another hint. "It'll give me something to do till I get discharged."

"Good idea," Howie agreed.

Still not getting the hint, Kevin offered, "We can hang around till then, if you want. One of us could give you a ride home."

"That's okay," I replied, maybe a little too quickly. "I drove myself in; my car's here."

"Will you be okay to drive after chemo?" he asked, looking warily at my IV bag. I knew he was remembering the way he'd seen me the other day, when I'd been sick and miserable from the methotrexate I got on the first day of the cycle. It was the stuff that always made me throw up. But the stuff I was getting today wasn't as bad.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I'll head straight home and probably just go to bed. This stuff makes me hella tired."

He nodded, eyeing me closely. "Maybe we should go, then, so you can get some rest," he said, finally catching on. "Will you call one of us later, if you need anything?"

"Sure," I agreed, even though I knew I probably wouldn't. As much as I appreciated their support, the two of them were starting to drive me nuts. I wished Brian lived closer and AJ wasn't such a pussy about hospitals; those two wouldn't have hovered over me like a couple of helicopter parents. "Thanks for being here."

"Anytime, Nicky." Howie smiled and squeezed my shoulder again. "Stay strong."

I nodded, even though I felt pretty weak. The chemo really was making me tired. *It's just doing its job*, I reminded myself. *It's worth it as long as it's working so well.* "Bye, guys," I said, as the two of them left.

Once they were gone, I looked down at the pile of research in my lap. I did some skimming, trying to make sense of it, but there were a lot of facts and figures, and all the statistics made my head hurt. I felt like I was gambling with my life, trying to go with the odds. Dr. Submarine probably thought she was doing me a favor, giving me all this stuff so I could make my own treatment decisions, but I sort of resented her for it. She was the medical professional; wasn't it her job to decide what kind of treatment would work best? I didn't want to be the one making that decision. What if I made the wrong one?

After lying there for awhile, looking through the articles she'd printed and feeling more and more frustrated, I gave up and got out my cell phone. I thought I was going to call AJ and Brian, but instead, I scrolled past their names in my long list of contacts and stopped on another, the name of the one person who I knew could talk me through this, help me unscramble all the information that was jumbled in my head and sort out everything.

I pressed the call button on my phone to dial that number, knowing that even if it didn't lead me to a decision, I would feel better after calling it. Because that's what Cary did... She made me feel better.

Chapter 53

Cary

It was hard being back home again, after spending the better part of the year in LA or on the road with Nick. I missed both. I missed Nick. But I had also missed my Dad and my pig and my apartment when I was away from them, so I tried to enjoy being back in familiar territory, with my family and friends.

I didn't go back to work right away, though I didn't cash the check from Nick, either. I tucked it into a desk drawer, planning to forget about it, and there it sat, while I eased back into the rest of my old life. I spent the first week at home just catching up with the people I hadn't seen in awhile. I spent time with my dad, Jessica, and my other friends. I spent time alone, too, just me and Hambelina, hanging out at home.

At first, it was nice to not be on the go all the time, to take some time off for myself. I needed it. I felt a little disoriented, like I'd lost sense of my place in life. Before *American Idol* and all the craziness that had come after it, I'd been happy here, living where I did and working where I worked. But after a few days at home, I started getting

restless. I wanted to be on the road again, seeing a different city every day, performing on a stage every night. And I wanted to be around Nick.

I thought of him constantly, and I missed him like crazy. Every day, I fought the urge to call him and wished instead that he would call me. But he didn't call, not on the Fourth of July or on my birthday, nor after we'd both been home a few days. I hadn't heard from him since the day we'd left Vegas, when he had replied to my text letting him know I'd made it home safely to tell me he had, too. I had wondered about him every day since. What was he doing? *How* was he doing? But I was determined not to be one of those clingy girls and take advantage of the fact that I had his phone number. He had mine, too, I reminded myself, and if he wanted to talk to me, he'd call.

I got my hopes up every time my cell phone rang, but it was always someone else. Finally, I got tired of feeling disappointed and set a special ring tone just for him, so I'd know it was him the minute he called. I made it "Evergreen," the song he'd sung to me over the phone the first time he had called me. But even after I did that, I always forgot I had and still got excited when I got a phone call.

One evening, the phone rang, and it was my dad. Recovering quickly from my disappointment, I made my voice sound bright and perky as I answered, "Hi, Dad!"

"Hey, honey," came my father's voice. We made the usual small talk, and then he got to the point of why he'd called. "I just wanted to remind you of the schedule for Friday..."

Like he thought I'd forget? I glanced at my Anne Taintor wall calendar, where I'd written in the squares for July sixteenth and seventeenth with a purple pen. That coming Friday was our county's Relay for Life, an annual fundraising event for the American Cancer Society. My dad had headed a team for as long as Relay had been around, in honor of my mother. It was made up of friends and neighbors, people who had known her or had come to know my dad and me since her passing. Every year, we raised money and walked the twenty-four-hour relay to celebrate survivors of cancer and remember victims of it, like my mom. It was important to me and even more important to my dad, which explained the unnecessary phone call. He always wanted to make sure everything went off without a hitch.

"I know, Dad... kick-off at four, opening ceremony and survivor lap at six, I'm on at seven, and the Luminaria ceremony's at nine." Pacing my kitchen, I rattled off the events in quick succession, so he'd know I had them straight. It had been March, right after my elimination from Idol, when I'd been invited to sing as part of the entertainment lineup at Relay, but I hadn't forgotten. I was honored just to have been asked, and I was looking forward to it. Even if the Relayers weren't exactly like the *American Idol* audience or the crowd at a Backstreet Boys concert, it would be nice to be back on a stage, no matter how small. At least my set would be bigger, a mix of my own material and covers, crowd-pleasers. It was going to be fun.

"You got it. And don't forget, we're signed up to walk the zombie shift," my dad added.

I laughed, leaning over the countertop. “Better bring lots of caffeine so you can stay awake, old man.” The two of us always volunteered to walk in the middle of the night. I’m sort of a night owl, so it’s no trouble for me, but my dad’s asleep by eight p.m. on a normal night. It was always a bit of a stretch for him to stay up and walk into the wee hours.

“Oh, I’m counting on you to keep me awake, kiddo,” he said.

“Yeah, okay... you’ll probably still sneak naps while I’m out on the track.” We could have gone on ribbing each other like that for awhile, but all of a sudden, my phone beeped. I lowered it quickly to see that I had another call... from *Nick*. “Hey, Dad?” I said, jamming the phone back up to my ear. “I gotta go; Nick’s trying to call me.” My dad didn’t know what was going on with him, but he did know Nick meant a lot to me. I knew he would understand.

“Okay, sweetheart; I’ll talk to you later,” he said, and I switched to the other call.

“Hello? Nick?” My heart was already pounding hard; I knew he had to be calling with news from his appointment, and I immediately started to worry. What if it was bad?

“Hey, Cary,” his voice rumbled in my ear. It always sounded lower on the phone than it seemed in person, but I liked it that way; it was sexy, the way he said my name.

“Hey!” I squeaked, just the opposite – my voice always went higher, especially when I was talking to him. “What’s up?”

“Not too much...” He paused. “Just chillin’ in the hospital, waitin’ for the rest of my chemo to finish. How ‘bout you?”

It was hard to translate the emotion in his voice, since he kept it pretty monotone. He sounded casual, but then, he always seemed to play it cool and act like things were okay when they weren’t. If he wasn’t going to come out and say it, I’d have to ask. “Well... just wondering how things went with your tests. Any updates for me?” I sank down into a kitchen chair, trying to prepare myself for the worst.

“May-be,” he sing-songed, and I felt myself start to smile. It had to be good news... right? He wouldn’t mess with me if it were bad.

“So...?” I felt impatient. “What’s the deal?”

Even though I couldn’t see him, I could tell he was grinning ear to ear when he finally said, “So... I’m in remission.”

I probably pierced his ear drum squealing over the phone. I just couldn’t contain it. “Really??” I gushed, pressing the phone tight to my ear. “Oh Nick, that is so amazing! That’s such a relief!”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I’m pretty relieved. The doctor said it was a complete remission. The tumor in my chest is gone.”

“That’s awesome news. I’m so happy for you!”

“Me too.”

We were both silent for a few seconds, while I soaked up the good news that the chemo had worked, that Nick was getting better. Still, even though the tumor was gone, I knew he wasn’t completely in the clear yet. My mom had been in remission almost four years when her cancer came back. She died less than a year later. A relapse is almost always harder to put back into remission.

Lost in my thoughts, I’d almost forgotten I was still on the phone until I heard Nick’s voice in my ear, saying, “So my doctor wants me to decide what kind of treatment to do next. She said there’s, like, a maintenance chemo that is basically just a bunch of pills I’d have to take, not a big deal, but she also talked about a stem cell transplant...? She gave me a bunch of shit to read and said I should make the decision, but hell, I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I don’t know anything about any of this.”

I could hear the relief in his voice turn to frustration, and my heart went out to him. As a medical professional myself, I knew it was important to give patients a say in their own treatment plan, but with plenty of support and guidance, too. The way Nick talked, I imagined his oncologist dumping a pile of pamphlets in his lap and walking out, leaving him to muddle through them by himself. I knew that probably wasn’t exactly how it had gone down; surely, she had asked if he had questions first, and maybe he hadn’t. Maybe he just hadn’t known what to ask.

“It’s okay,” I said reassuringly. “You don’t have to decide anything today. You need time to talk it over and get answers to your questions, so you can make an informed decision.”

“What would you do?” he asked, and I realize he hadn’t just called to tell me his good news, but to ask my advice.

I was no expert, but then, I did have more experience than him. I thought back to what I’d read about his disease after he’d first told me the diagnosis. “Well...” I said slowly, thinking out loud. “The type of lymphoma you have is similar to a form of leukemia, so the treatment is similar, too. A stem cell or bone marrow transplant is a pretty standard course of action for leukemia that has relapsed or is likely to; I saw quite a few kids go through it when I was working in pedes oncology.”

“You think I should do that?” Nick asked, his voice flat. I could tell that wasn’t what he wanted to hear me say. It wasn’t at all what I was saying, either.

“I don’t know... Honestly, it’s a pretty intense treatment...”

When I heard the words “stem cell transplant,” I pictured the little ones I’d cared for throughout the process – bald, weakened, deathly ill children, sealed off in sterile, isolated rooms because their immune systems had been completely wiped out. They were so susceptible to infection that anyone who entered the isolation unit – only immediate family and a select number of staff members – had to thoroughly wash their hands and gown up in full gloves, mask, cap, booties, and protective gown, as if they were scrubbing in to the OR. Any *thing* that entered the room, even a teddy bear, had to be carefully cleaned and disinfected first. Weeks would pass before they were well enough to leave after the transplant, assuming there were no complications, and even then, it took a long time for their immune systems to fully recover.

I knew if I told Nick all of that right then, I’d freak him out, so I chose my next words carefully. “The transplant procedure itself isn’t a big deal; it’s basically like a blood transfusion. It’s the high-dose chemo they do beforehand that is the rough part. The goal of it is to kill off any cancer cells left in your body, but it also destroys your bone marrow. That’s why you’re then given stem cells, so your body can start making healthy cells again. It’s sort of like wiping your whole hard drive to get rid of a computer virus. It’s extreme, but it works.” I figured the computer analogy was one he would understand. “The worst part is the side effects you’ll have from the chemo, and the hospital stay can be pretty lengthy, depending on which kind of transplant you do. It’s definitely not the easy way out, but at the same time, if it works, it could mean a longer remission or even a cure.”

“So... would you do it, or not?” Nick pressed.

I shook my head, letting out a nervous laugh. “I really don’t know. I can’t make that decision for you.” I knew he wanted me to tip the scale one way or the other for him, but it wasn’t my place to do so. In the end, this had to be his decision. To reassure him, I added, “I will say, you’re young and strong, and you tolerated chemo amazingly well. A stem cell transplant won’t be a walk in the park, but it’s something you can get through, if you want to go the aggressive route. But if you’d rather wait and go with the maintenance plan for now, no one would hold it against you. You have to do what feels right for you.”

He sighed into the phone. “That’s the thing, though, Cary. I have no fucking clue which one feels right. I mean, know which one sounds *easier*, but that just makes me think it’s not the way to go. When has taking the easy way out ever paid off?”

I could hear his hesitation, his fear of choosing wrong. “You don’t have to decide today,” I reminded him. “Sleep on it tonight. Take a few days, if you need them. Talk to your doctor; ask her questions, and get some more information to help you decide. Ask her what *she* would do; she has more specifics about your case than I do. She’s the expert.”

He sighed again. “I know. You’re easier to talk to, though.”

That made me smile. A lot. “Well, thanks. I didn’t mean to pawn you off on someone else; you know I’m always here to talk if you want to. Just a phone call away.” *Even*

though I wish I was closer, I added in my head. It had been just over a week since I'd hugged him goodbye in the airport, but I wished I could talk to him in person, give him another hug and see him through this. I hated being so far away.

"I know. I appreciate it," Nick said. He sounded genuine, and that made me miss him even more.

It was tempting to tell him to screw the transplant and go with the maintenance chemo, so he could finish the tour, and I could go with him. But I wasn't going to sway him to suit my own ulterior motives. His health was way more important than the tour or my feelings for him. For once, he had to put that first and make the decision that would offer him the best chance of beating his cancer.

In the lull that followed, my eyes wandered back up to my calendar. The picture for July was of a perfect forties housewife smiling down at her perfect little girl as she took a pie out of the oven. The typically snarky caption printed over it said, "*Remember, sweetheart... mommy loves you, but she doesn't have to like you.*" It made me smile, but also put a lump in my throat, because with her dark curls and pretty, smiling face, the woman in the painting looked like my own mother, during the years when she wasn't sick, when she was just a regular young mom who baked stuff with her daughter. I saw my own handwriting, the words "RELAY FOR LIFE" scrawled in purple pen across Friday and Saturday's squares, and I got an idea.

On sudden impulse, I blurted, "Hey... not to change the subject, but I have a proposition for you." I smiled to myself, remembering how he'd said the same thing to me the first time he had called, on that fateful day back in April. Then I backpedaled and added quickly, "I know you're just finishing chemo, so if you don't feel up to it, you can say no; it's not a big deal, but..."

He laughed and interrupted, "What is it?"

"Well..." I cleared my throat, feeling like I had a lot of nerve just for asking him. But what the hell? I'd already started; I might as well spit out the rest. "I was just thinking... This Friday, I'm doing Relay for Life – I don't know if you know what that is, but it's an all-day walking event to raise money for the American Cancer Society–"

"I know," he cut in again. "We almost performed at one of those one time. I think it was in Tennessee. We were supposed to, but our flight got cancelled. What, you want me to come and perform?"

Even though I was glad he knew something about Relay, I suddenly felt ridiculous for even thinking he might fly to Illinois to come to one. He had *just* gotten home; he had to be sick of traveling, and he was still in the hospital doing chemo, so he was probably sick from that, too. I was selfish and stupid for even bringing it up. Still, I babbled on, "Only if you want to. I'm singing, and I'm on a team, so I'll be walking, too, but I just thought, maybe... well, if you're not doing anything... maybe you'd wanna get away for a few days and come out. We could talk more, too, about... you know... your options. But I totally

understand if you don't feel like it. I'm sure you're tired from the tour and all the tests and chemo and everything this week, so..." I trailed off awkwardly, glad he couldn't see my red face for once.

But leave it to Nick to take me completely by surprise. "I'd love to," he said, hardly missing a beat. "When is it again? This Friday?"

"Y-yeah," I replied, my voice going high again. "Friday and Saturday... but most of the events are on Friday. Are you serious? You would come?" I was stunned by his response.

"Sure. It's for a good cause, right?" I could tell he was smiling, that smirky half-smile of his.

"A *very* good cause," I emphasized.

"Then I'm happy to do it."

My heart soared, then sank, as another thought occurred to me. "You probably won't get paid," I warned him. "The American Cancer Society... everything's volunteer-based."

"Trust me; I have enough money," he replied dryly. He was definitely smirking that time. "Besides, if I can help them raise more money by drawing a bigger crowd, some of that will go back to me, in a way. I mean, the research and stuff might help me out down the road."

I smiled. "That's a good way to look at it. Thanks, Nick... It means a lot to me, and I know the committee who's organized the whole thing will be thrilled to get a big act."

He chuckled. "I dunno how 'big' I am by myself, but I'm sure we can find some fans in the area to come. I'll do some Backstreet songs, some solo stuff, some covers... It'll be fun."

"And we'll talk," I promised, "face to face. We'll figure out a game plan for you to take back to Dr. Subramanien."

"Yeah, that'd be good. Thanks, Cary."

"Thank you, Nick. But seriously, if you don't feel up to it at the end of the week..."

"I'll be fine," he interrupted, feeding me his usual line. "Anyway, I owe ya, for everything I put you through. And since I notice you haven't cashed my check yet..." Once again, I was glad he couldn't see me blushing. "...we'll count this as part of me returning the favor."

He owed me nothing, but I wasn't going to try too hard to change his mind. We spent another ten minutes ironing out a few details, and he promised to call again the next

day, once he was home and had gotten a chance to book his flight. I promised to have spoken with the head of the Relay committee, to get him on the entertainment lineup. The committee was going to be thrilled; they'd never had anyone famous perform at the event before, and while I may have been somewhat of a local celebrity since *American Idol*, Nick was famous on a global scale. I figured fans from all over the Midwest would make the drive just to see him in person.

When I said goodbye and got off the phone, I looked one more time at my calendar. Just three more days, and I would see him in person again, too.

I couldn't wait.

Chapter 54

Cary

The arch of purple and white balloons, swaying gently in the breeze against the backdrop of blue sky, always made for a beautiful sight. On that day, it was made even more beautiful by the presence of Nick standing beside me.

He looked good, dressed for the occasion in a t-shirt and shorts, a baseball cap pulled low over his head, a pair of sunglasses tucked into his collar. "Perfect day for this," he remarked, tilting his face up toward the sun.

"Yeah, it really is," I agreed, relieved that it wasn't scorching hot or rainy. "The middle of July isn't really the best time to hold this; we're lucky it's only eighty-seven now. It'll get cooler tonight."

"Yeah, and it's still cooler than LA right now," he replied, grinning at me.

Nick had been in a great mood ever since I'd picked him up at the airport. The relief over his remission seemed to have sunk in, and he was all smiles. I knew the decision about his treatment was still weighing on him, but he had insisted that we not talk about it yet, wanting to enjoy himself and forget about his cancer for once.

Of course, it was hard not to think about cancer when we found ourselves surrounded by it. Everywhere I looked, there were reminders. White signs displayed cancer prevention tips and statistics from the American Cancer society. Team posters and homemade t-shirts carried slogans about beating cancer and pictures of loved ones who had not. Men and women of all ages walked around in the purple t-shirts designated for survivors.

"Wait here a sec," I told Nick, as we passed the survivors tent. I trotted into the tent, spoke to one of the committee members, and came back carrying two t-shirts. One was

a purple survivor shirt, the other a regular white Relay shirt, like the one I was wearing, with the word *HOPE* printed across the front in big purple letters. “Which one?” I asked, holding both out for Nick.

He gave me a look before snatching the white one. “Are you kidding? I haven’t even told my family. I can’t be seen walking around in one of the purple ones.”

I had figured as much. “Next year, then,” I said lightly, turning to take the survivor shirt back.

On our way to find my team’s campsite, I couldn’t resist asking, “When do you think you’ll tell everyone else?”

Nick was quiet for a few seconds, looking down at his feet as he walked. Finally, he replied, “I dunno. I was waiting to see what kind of news I got from the doctor. I guess now that I can say I’m in remission, I should tell them soon, huh?”

I nodded. “I think you should. Starting with your family. They deserve to know before the rest of the world.”

He snorted. “That’s all the Carter family needs, is more drama. Can you imagine my mom’s reaction?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Obviously, I’d never met his mother, but everyone knew Jane Carter was no June Cleaver. Still, I couldn’t help but think, *At least you still have a mom.* I knew better than to say it, though.

It was a relief to see my dad waving at us from under a big, white canopy in a far corner of the big parking lot. Most of the Relays in the area were held at high schools, so relayers could walk or jog around the track, but ours always took place at the local community college. The college didn’t have its own track, so they marked off a makeshift one in the parking lot, and we walked around that. The team campsites were positioned around the perimeter of the lot, with the big tents for different American Cancer Society services located closer to the main building. Food and bathrooms were located inside, which was a relief in the July heat.

We made our way over to the campsite, where some of my teammates, people I’d known since I was a child, sat in a circle of lawn chairs under the canopy. I saw my dad’s pick-up truck parked off to one side and our tent pitched in the grass at the edge of the lot. Not everyone camped out overnight, but since we were walking so late, we usually did.

I dropped my backpack and said hello to everyone, introducing them all to Nick. They were all polite and friendly, but since most of them were close to my dad’s age, no one made a big fuss over him. Nick seemed fine with that.

I threw our stuff into the cab of my dad’s truck, and when I came back, I caught him looking at the faded banner stretched across one side of the canopy. *Carol’s Cancer*

Crusaders, it said, the words painted in teal. Teal is the official color for ovarian cancer awareness, but it was also one of my mom's favorite colors. I had made the banner for our team as a teenager, before one of our first Relays, and I was amazed it had lasted this long. My dad kept it in a special place, folded up on a shelf in his garage, and only brought it out once a year for this occasion.

"Your mom?" Nick asked, leaning closer to the banner. There was an old picture of her attached to the banner, one from her last year of life; she was puffy and bald, her head covered by a bright scarf, but her smile was as radiant as ever. Even now, twenty years later, looking at it put a lump in my throat. This was one of the days every year – along with her birthday and mine, my parents' anniversary, the anniversary of her death, and all the major holidays – that I thought of her and missed her the most.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah. We started our team in honor of her."

He didn't look at me, continuing to study the banner. "Her name was Carol?"

"Yeah," I said again, smiling. "I'm named after her. Carol... Carolyn."

"That's neat," he replied.

"Thanks. I think so, too." I didn't tell him about how I'd sometimes felt sorry for my dad, having been left to raise me alone after she died. I was practically a clone of my mother, at least in looks, with almost the same name. I knew it hadn't been easy for him, that first year or so after her death, to look me in the face and call me by name. Even now, I wouldn't have been surprised if he saw my mom every time he looked at me. It was the reason I'd spent so much time with my grandparents, my mother's parents, after she died. They had become like a second set of parents to me, because my dad didn't handle grief well, and there had been a time when parenting me alone had been too painful. He had come around, of course, and taken back the responsibility as my grandparents got older and moved into the nursing home, and these days, he and I were closer than ever. Really, he was the only family I had left, which made me think more and more about the need to settle down and start a family of my own.

I cleared my throat again and looked over at Nick, suddenly anxious to change the subject. "You wanna walk around for awhile, check out the tents? Find some fans to sign autographs for? I'm sure there are some lurking around here somewhere."

He laughed. "I'm sure you're right. But yeah, sounds good. Just lemme change my shirt first, so I look like I belong." He grinned and loped off behind my dad's truck to take off his t-shirt, keeping his back turned so no one caught a glimpse of his portacath. When he came back, he was wearing the Relay tee. "What do you think?" he asked, spreading his arms for me to see.

I gave him a thumbs up. "You look ready to relay now." Then I added quickly, "But seriously, don't feel like you have to stay all night and walk with me. I can drive you back to my apartment any time you want, if you get tired or start feeling sick."

He held up his hand, shushing me. “Cool it with the nurse crap. None of that tonight. I’m fine, alright? I’m totally up for hanging out and having fun and getting in a good workout, so let’s go.” With that, he strode off across the parking lot, leaving me to chase after him.

I caught up, and we walked a lap around the lot, stopping to look at the other teams’ tents and check out the various other activities that were going on. Sure enough, quite a few fans found us, and Nick stopped to talk and sign autographs and take pictures with them. The girls who approached him were polite and respectful, even to me. I knew there were still rumors swirling about my relationship with Nick and that many of his fans weren’t such big fans of me, but no matter what they might have thought, they seemed to realize it wasn’t the place to be petty or rude.

After wandering around outside for awhile with groups of girls tailing Nick like he was the Pied Piper, we finally shook off the fans and went inside to eat dinner with my dad. By the time we were done, the opening ceremony was about to start, so we made our way back out to the parking lot, where a speaker was announcing all of the teams.

One by one, each team paraded out onto the designated track and stopped to pose while someone took our picture. Nick tried to step out of the picture, but I threw an arm around his waist and reeled him back in. “Consider yourself an honorary team member,” I told him through my teeth, as we smiled for the camera.

Once all of the teams had been introduced, we lined the track for the survivors’ lap, clapping to show our support as each survivor’s name was read. The survivors trooped around the track, an impressive mass of purple. Many of them were elderly, but more than a few were surprisingly young. Some of them rode in wheelchairs or golf carts or walked with the aid of a walker or cane. I saw one man limping along on a prosthetic leg. Some were noticeably frail or bald from chemo underneath their hats and scarves, but others looked perfectly fine. It made me wonder if they were long-term survivors who had beaten the odds and finished treatment years ago, or if they were like Nick – healthy-looking on the outside, still sick and fighting the disease on the inside.

I glanced at Nick and saw his jaw tighten as he watched them walk past us. I wondered what was going through his head. Acting on impulse, I reached down and found his hand, slipping my fingers through his and squeezing it lightly. “Next year,” I whispered, for only him to hear. “You can come back and walk with them next year.”

He looked over at me, but didn’t reply. I couldn’t read his expression underneath his baseball cap, but I hung onto his hand until all of the names had been read, and he didn’t pull away.

When the opening ceremony was over, it was my turn to take the stage. I got a great introduction. “And now, ladies and gentleman,” said the emcee for the evening, “We have a real treat for you. To kick off the entertainment portion of the night, we have a talented young lady who was born and raised right here in Macon County and, earlier

this year, made it all the way to the top twelve on *American Idol*. She's also part of a team here tonight, Carol's Cancer Crusaders, and she tells me that Relay for Life is a cause that's near and dear to her heart. Please welcome to the stage, Miss Cary Hilst."

I was actually surprised at the round of applause I got when I walked to the center of the portable stage that had been set up in the middle of the parking lot. The few rows of folding chairs in front were completely filled, and behind them, clusters of people were still milling around to watch. I had a feeling they were waiting for Nick, but I'd take whatever audience I could get. Usually, people were too busy walking or checking out the raffles and silent auctions and other activities to pay much attention to the entertainment; it was mostly background noise. But tonight, it seemed, we'd drawn a crowd that wanted to listen.

I played my set from the Backstreet tour, including "Just Want You to Know" and two of my original songs. I also covered "Bridge Over Troubled Water" on keyboard and one of my personal favorites, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's medley of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and "Wonderful World" on the ukulele.

To me, the latter was the perfect song for the occasion – uplifting, but a little sad, too. I had first played it in public at my grandfather's funeral, as a way of honoring the man who had taught me to play the uke in the first place. He had learned himself during the second World War, when he was stationed in Hawaii, and when his fingers became too arthritic to play anymore, he had passed his instrument on to me. I closed my eyes as I strummed it, singing, "*Somewhere over the rainbow... blue birds fly... and the dreams that you dream of, dreams really do come true... oo-oo-ooh...*"

There were no rainbows all the way across the sky that evening, but there was a beautiful sunset that was so bright and so vivid, it almost brought tears to my eyes. "Thank you," I murmured into the microphone when I was finished, swallowing away the lump in my throat. "Now I'd like to turn the stage over to a friend of mine, who I think you'll all recognize. He came all the way from California to perform here tonight for free, as a favor to me. So please make his time worthwhile and give a warm welcome to Nick Carter!"

Nick grinned almost embarrassedly as he loped across the makeshift stage, his guitar slung over his back. I turned over my stool to him and retreated to the audience, eager to watch his set. He'd brought along a backing track, but did most of his songs acoustic, accompanying himself on the guitar as he sang Backstreet classics like "As Long As You Love Me," "I Want It That Way," and "Shape of My Heart," as well as some of his solo stuff, such as "Who Needs the World" and "I Got You." He played for almost an hour, until it was completely dark and almost time for the Luminaria ceremony.

He kept his small audience hooked until then, and when he finally stepped off the small stage, they cheered louder than I would have thought possible. There were plenty of fans present, I knew, girls who had come miles just to see him, but I saw middle-aged women in Relay tees and old men in purple survivor shirts who gave him an enthusiastic round of applause, too. I shouldn't have been surprised. Nick could charm any crowd.

“You were amazing,” I told him, when he found me afterwards. “Thanks for doing this.”

He gave a nod, grinning. “Thanks for asking me. It was fun – and for a good cause.”

I glanced around at the luminaries being lit all around the parking lot, at all the purple shirts I saw in the crowd of people still milling around, and finally back at Nick. Then I nodded, too. “Definitely,” I agreed.

Chapter 55

Nick

I’ve always loved the night sky. It sucks because in LA, you can never really see the stars. Well – not the kind in outer space, anyway. Too many lights in the city. But out in the country, the stars really shine.

When they shut off the lights in the parking lot for the Luminaria ceremony, everyone “oohed” and “aahed” over how pretty the luminaries looked, little white buckets with candles flickering inside, lined up in a big rectangle around the middle of the parking lot. Some of them had been arranged to spell out the word “HOPE.” They did make for a pretty sight, but my attention was focused upward, on the stars overheard. With the lights off and mostly farmland surrounding the college campus, I could actually see some of the constellations. I named the ones I knew in my head. The Big Dipper and Little Dipper... Scorpius, the scorpion... Cygnus, the swan... Hercules, the hero... Cassiopeia, the queen, in her upside down chair.

I’ve always had a fascination with space... stars... planets... aliens. On a night like this, I wished I could put my spacesuit on, so I could jump into my rocket, break free from the gravity holding onto me, and take off. You know – pull a Lance Bass, only actually follow through with it. Take off and not come back. Destination unknown.

In a way, I guess I’d sort of done that in coming here. It wasn’t just about contributing to a good cause or returning a favor to Cary, even though, of course, I’d done it for those reasons, too. But really, it was just nice to get away for awhile, go some place else where I could distract myself from the decision I had to make. I’d only been back in LA two weeks, and I was already glad to be gone again.

Being out here in the heartland made me miss my house in Tennessee. I still owned the place, but I hadn’t been there in awhile. It had been easier to live out in LA when I was dating Lauren and recording with the Boys, and on our breaks between legs of the tour, that was where I had called home. And as long as I was getting treatment under the care of Dr. Submarine, that was where I had to stay. But really, although I loved the beaches

and the weather out in California, I liked the slower pace and the seclusion of this part of the country a lot better.

"You okay?" Cary asked, and I realized I'd been spacing out. See? I really am a space cadet. I do that a lot. She did that a lot, too, though – not space out, but check up on me, ask if I was okay. I guess it's a nurse thing.

Really, I felt pretty good, considering I'd just finished the chemo from hell in the hospital a few days earlier. I was just a little run down, like I was getting over the flu, but nothing I couldn't cope with. After making it through most of the tour feeling that way, this was nothing. "I'm fine," I told her, smiling so she'd know I was telling the truth. "Sorry, my mind's in outer space. I was just noticing how you can see so many more stars here than you can in LA."

She glanced up at the sky. "Yeah, I guess you can," she said, smiling back at me. She didn't sound too impressed; I guess she was used to it. But I marveled over how big the sky looked, stretched over the flat land like a giant dome. On a clear night like this, with no tall buildings or mountains in the way, you could see for miles. It made me feel small, but in a good way. Everything about this night had humbled me.

We got quiet as they started the ceremony with a poem and a prayer. All around me, people stood as still as statues, their heads bowed and hands folded. Except for the sound of crickets, it was silent. No one spoke over the people doing the readings. Every little sniffle or cough or clearing of the throat seemed magnified.

As the speaker talked about remembering loved ones who had lost their battle against cancer and honoring those who were still fighting, I heard Cary swallow hard next to me. My own throat felt tight, as the magnitude of what I was facing really hit me. I'd only been fighting this for a few months, but when I looked around, I realized that most of the people standing near me had been dealing with it, in one way or another, for a lot longer. Cary and her dad had been coming to this event once a year, every year, for who knew how many years. Cancer had affected their lives way before it was ever really on my radar, and the same thing was true of every person there. It had touched all of us, in some way. I had never felt so connected to a group of strangers – or to Cary.

Without really thinking, I stretched my hand out until I found hers in the darkness and took hold of it, the way she'd held mine at the opening ceremony. I knew she must be thinking of her mom, and I didn't have any more words of condolence to offer, but I hoped the gesture would comfort her, somehow. I felt her hand tighten around mine, clammy but soft, and it made me feel better, too. More hopeful, which I guess was the point of this whole thing.

While they read off the names of all the people who had been remembered with a luminary, we started walking slowly around the path, almost single file, so that everyone could read the labels on each of the white buckets. They all had the name of a cancer victim or survivor, along with the name of the person who had bought the luminary in their honor. The names were in alphabetical order, and as we passed the Fs and the Gs

and reached the Hs, I kept my eyes peeled for the one for Cary's mother that I knew must exist.

We were walking three across, Cary sandwiched in between her dad and me. I was on the outside edge of the track, her dad on the inside, but it was Cary who spotted it first. She stopped suddenly, pulling her hand out of mine to point it out to her father. The two of them drifted out of the slow procession, stopping at the inner edge of the path, and Cary sank down to a squat in front of one of the luminaries. Her dad stood next to her, resting his hand on her shoulder. Hesitantly, I came up behind and looked down over Cary's head at the white bucket. It glowed with the light of the flickering candle inside it, enough that I could read the label on the front.

In honor of
CAROL HILST

Remembered by
FRANK HILST

Next to it was an identical luminary, only this one said, *Remembered by Cary*, and as I looked down the row, I saw several more with her mom's name, purchased by others who must have known her. Cary and her dad stayed there, their heads bowed as they looked down at the buckets, for what must have been five minutes or more, not speaking or anything, just staring. Maybe they were praying, or maybe just remembering. To me, it seemed a little like visiting someone's grave.

I stood back out of the way, feeling awkward and not wanting to interfere. I was about to keep walking on my own and give them some time alone, when Cary suddenly rose up again. Her dad put his arm around her, and they turned around. She reached out her hand to me, and I took it wordlessly. Even in the dark, I could see the moisture in her eyes. I gave her hand a squeeze, and we kept walking.

After awhile, I stopped looking at the buckets and sort of spaced out again as I listened to the drone of names. It wasn't like I knew any of them. But then I felt Cary slow down and tug on my hand. I looked over at her, but her face was turned away, toward the luminaries. She stopped, and so did I. Looking down at the luminaries, I suddenly saw why.

In between the ones for "Elaine Nichols" and "Dave Nickerson," I saw a single bucket that simply said,

In honor of
Nick

Remembered by
C.R.H.

My throat closed up again, but I managed to ask hoarsely, “What’s your middle name?”

When I glanced at her, she smiled. “Ruth.”

I nodded, staring back down at my luminary. Just as I’d thought before, it was sort of like seeing my own tombstone. I was glad she had known better than to use my full name. It was still kind of weird, but I appreciated the thought. “Thanks,” I whispered.

As we kept walking around the track, I wondered what it would be like next year, once the public knew about my illness. Would other people, fans, put out luminaries in my name at fundraisers like this? Cary had said, “You can come back and walk with them next year,” meaning the survivors, but would I be around and well enough to do that? Would I be one of them, showing my pride over beating cancer with a purple shirt? Or would I be in the ground, memorialized with the marble version of this luminary, a headstone with my full name?

I didn’t ask any of these questions out loud; they were morbid enough inside my own head. But I still couldn’t help thinking them. I guess that’s just what happens when you’re faced with a serious illness. It puts everything into perspective. You realize how short life really is. You start to think about your own mortality. Even when you get the good news that it’s in remission, you wonder, *What if it comes back?* Even if I recovered completely, I knew I’d never take my life for granted again.

We made it to the end of the alphabet and did another slow circuit around the track before the reading of all the names finished. When it did, Cary’s dad said, “I’ll stay and walk awhile. Why don’t you guys go back to the campsite and relieve me in half an hour?”

Cary nodded. “Okay. Come on,” she told me, leading the way back to their campsite. Flickering tiki torches and battery-powered lanterns gave us enough light to see. It looked like everyone else had taken off for the night. “They’ll be back in the morning,” Cary said, noticing me looking around at the circle of empty chairs underneath their canopy. “My dad and I are walking until two, and then someone will be here to relieve us so we can sleep.”

“I’ll walk, too,” I said, realizing she hadn’t included me in that statement. “I don’t mind. I’d like to.”

“Sure... you can keep me company.” She smiled. “But if you get tired, you can come back here and crash anytime. It’s not a big deal. There’s sleeping bags inside the tent and an air mattress in the back of the truck, if you’d rather sleep under the stars.”

I looked, and she was right. An air mattress filled the bed of the pick-up. I hadn’t noticed it there before, but maybe someone else had inflated it before they left. “That’s a cool idea,” I said.

"Mine," she replied, grinning again. "As long as it doesn't get too wet and cold, I bet it'll be comfier than the tent."

"Let's see," I said, heading over to the truck. I climbed into the back and sat down on the mattress, scooting myself backward until I reached the cab. I rested my back against the window and stretched my legs out straight in front of me. "Hey, not bad!" I called to Cary. "C'mere, come test it out with me." I patted a spot next to me on the mattress.

She scrambled up into the truck bed and sat beside me. "It is pretty comfy," she agreed, bouncing a little before settling back against the cab windows.

We got quiet, listening to the chirp of crickets and the murmur of voices from other campsites. It wasn't an awkward silence, but I felt the urge to say something. "So..." I let the word hang in the air, not sure what else to add.

"So..." she echoed. We both laughed. "I'm really glad you're here," she offered.

"Me too," I replied, and honestly, I meant it. "I've never been to one of these before. Like I said, we were supposed to sing at one once, but we had airplane issues." It had been Kevin who'd insisted we do that gig, as part of his activism for colon cancer awareness. Maybe I'd get more involved with the American Cancer Society or whatever organization they have for lymphoma, once I was better. It would be a good way to give back.

"Well, again, I really appreciate you singing at this. I know it's pretty small and hick compared to what you're used to, but it means a lot."

I laughed. "You kidding? I've played amusement parks, water parks, county fairs... hell, I've sung for much smaller crowds who don't give a shit who I am, in bars and stuff, just 'cause I felt like it." I thought of the Brass Monkey, my favorite club in the Keys. I'd sung lead for local bands there countless times, doing mostly covers of rock songs I'd grown up with, just for the fun of it. "Sometimes it's nice to go up on stage with a mic and my guitar and not be a Backstreet Boy for once. You know, just sing whatever the hell I want and not worry about having to sing 'Quit Playing Games' for the five billionth time, just because the fans expect it, or bust my butt doing the choreography for 'Everybody.' It's nice to just jam solo and do my own thing once in awhile, you know?"

I looked over at her. She was nodding. "That makes sense. And that's really cool. I'm glad it was fun for you." She paused for a second, before adding, "I saw you at the Heart of Illinois Fair, back in 2003. You absolutely killed it. I hadn't seen any of your solo shows before, and I was so impressed." She grinned. I was still trying to remember what show she was talking about, when she went on, "That was back when your hair was long."

I grimaced. "Yeah, and I weighed, like, a ton."

"No," she said quickly. "You looked good." Then she added, "You look even better now, though."

I laughed. "Thanks."

Knowing Cary, she was probably blushing when she said that, but it was too dark to tell for sure. Still, I looked over at her, trying to read her expression in the flickering light from the tiki torches. Her hair was pulled back into a bushy ponytail, frizzed out from the humidity, and her face gleamed, dewy with a faint sheen of oil and perspiration. She didn't look as put together as I'd seen her, in her flirty dresses and high heels and red lipstick, but I could make out the hint of a smile that played at the corners of her bare lips, and that was all it took to bring out her natural beauty.

I knew she dug me, and selfishly, I liked that about her. But even though she was a fan, she didn't worship me like I was some kind of god. She knew I wasn't; she'd seen me at my worst and taken care of me when I needed her and put me in my place when I needed that. She treated me like a regular person, and that was something I needed, too. Being a celebrity *and* a cancer patient, I craved normalcy, and Cary had allowed me to have it. She always seemed to know exactly what I needed.

And in that moment, still studying her profile in the starlight, I was filled with a different kind of need. It hit me like a sudden craving that I just had to satisfy. I don't have much self-control around the opposite sex; to be honest, I've never needed it. Women fall at my feet. I don't get rejected by them very often. So I made my move, slipping my arm around her shoulders and drawing her closer to my side.

For a second, I just held her there, savoring the warmth and softness of her body, the way it seemed to fit with mine. And then, when she turned her head toward me in surprise, I leaned in and kissed her.

Chapter 56

Cary

It wasn't like a movie. More like a dream. It was surreal that way. One minute, Nick and I were sitting there under the stars, in the back of my dad's truck, just talking, and the next, he had wrapped his arm around me and was full-on kissing me.

That part happened so quickly, but once his lips were touching mine, time seemed to slow down. My senses were on overload. I was aware of everything. His arm, hard and heavy around my shoulders. His hand, soft and light against the side of my face. His lips, smooth and sweet on top of mine. I had closed my eyes instinctively, but I couldn't help but open them a tiny slit to sneak a peek at his face so close to mine. He had closed his eyes, too. Our noses brushed against each other as I kissed back. I could smell him,

the familiar musk of his sweat mixed with the soap he used. I had gotten used to that scent on tour; it was unmistakably Nick. But he had never kissed me on tour, and I thought, *Is this really happening??*

All of this must have occurred in a matter of two, maybe three seconds.

And then I woke up.

Just kidding! It wasn't a dream, even though it felt like it. I guess you could say it was a dream come true, for me, anyway. I'd had a crush on him all summer, a silly fangirl crush I would never admit to him, and all of a sudden, he was kissing me. I couldn't believe it.

When he broke the kiss, I pulled back and stared at him, stunned. "Sorry," he said, looking sheepish, like he'd been too forward or something. Like I minded! I didn't mind at all; I'd just been caught completely off-guard. But that didn't mean I hadn't enjoyed it.

"No!" I replied quickly, flustered. "No, don't apologize. I..." But I felt awkward telling him how I really felt about him, so I decided to show him instead. Actions speak louder than words, right? Impulsively, before I could second-guess myself, I tightened my arms around his neck, leaned over, and planted my lips right on top of his again.

It was a deeper kiss that time, less hesitant, more intense. He pulled me closer, his arms embracing me, his hands running up and down my back. I raked my fingers up into his hair, knocking off his baseball cap. He kissed me back until I was breathless, and we finally broke apart, practically panting for air.

"Wow," said Nick, with an impish little snicker. I glanced over at him and could tell he was smirking, his eyes glinting in the darkness.

I smiled shyly back. "Wow..." I echoed. My heart was hammering hard, and there were butterflies dancing in my stomach. I tried to remember the last time a simple kiss had caused such a reaction in me. I'd dated my last boyfriend for two years, and there definitely hadn't been sparks like that towards the end. There hadn't been any since, either. I didn't think I'd gotten a real kiss in over a year, and in my wildest dreams, I never would have guessed the one to break the dry spell would be Nick Carter...

There were so many things going through my head, so much I wanted to say to him, but I was having a hard time forming words. He didn't say anything, either, so for a few seconds, we just sat there, listening to the sound of our own breathing. Then I heard the sound of footsteps on the pavement and looked up to see a figure walking up to our campsite. I could only make out his silhouette in the shadows, but I recognized his loping gait as none other than my dad's. I quickly straightened up, pulling away from Nick, and scrambled out of the truck bed. I guess even at twenty-nine, no one really wants to be caught making out in the back of Daddy's car.

“Sorry, did we lose track of time?” I apologized. My voice sounded shrill, and I hoped he wouldn’t suspect what we had been doing back there in the dark. Luckily, my dad is pretty clueless most of the time – not that he would really care, anyway. He’s not that old-fashioned. I’m the traditional one and not usually into public displays of affection. But if Nick Carter wanted my PDA... A... A... well, then, of course I’d be the fingers to his instrument.

“You’re fine, sweetheart,” my dad said, and I was glad it was too dark for him to see my red face. “You ready to go walk?”

“Sure! You coming?” I asked, turning to Nick. He was already climbing out of the truck behind me.

“Absolutely.” He came up alongside me. “Let’s go.”

“We’ll be back,” I told my dad, flashing him a quick smile as we walked past.

Nick waited until we were a safe distance away to take my hand. I giggled, suddenly feeling like a silly teenage girl again, but that was what made it fun. A little thrill rushed through me as we started walking around the track, hand in hand. We didn’t really talk much, but that was okay. We didn’t have to. It wasn’t like we could read each other’s thoughts or anything; I didn’t have a clue what he was thinking and was dying to know what had been going through his head when he’d decided to kiss me. But even so, just knowing that it had happened, that there was some spark there for him, too, made me so giddy that words weren’t needed right then. Just holding his hand was enough.

We walked until my dad showed up on the edge of the track to take over, and then we headed back to the campsite. It was even darker now – the tiki torches were still lit, but he must have shut off the lanterns – and quiet, too. People were bedding down for the night; they’d shut off their music and turned down their voices. I heard only soft murmurs and the occasional chuckle from other tents. Even though we were surrounded by campsites, there were enough shadows to give us some privacy. We climbed up into the back of the truck again and sat the way we’d been before, side by side, our backs pressed up against the cab windows. Nick stretched his legs out in front of him; I crossed mine. We held hands, our fingers loosely entwined.

It was peaceful, sitting there under the stars, listening to the sounds of night, but I wished we would talk. I didn’t know what to say, though, so I waited for him to speak first. It took him a long time, but finally, he did.

“Sorry if this is, like, awkward.”

I smiled, because I had just been thinking that even though the silence hadn’t been awkward at first, it was starting to feel that way. “It’s okay. I guess usually a first kiss comes at the end the evening, when you’re about to say goodbye. You don’t really have to talk much right afterward.”

Nick snickered. “I was just gonna say, usually it’s the beginning of a one-night stand, when you’re about to take her home. First you’re kissin’ in the club... then you’re making out in the back of a cab... and then you’re in bed, doin’ the nasty. But like you said... either way, there ain’t much talking going on.”

Even as I laughed, I realized how different he and I were. I had never had a one-night stand. I’d always been a good girl. I’m no virgin, but I’d still only slept with three guys in my lifetime, and all of them were serious boyfriends whom I’d been in love with at the time. I couldn’t imagine going home with a strange man I’d only just met in a club. Yet I wasn’t naïve enough to think Nick hadn’t picked up his fair share of groupies before he got sick, not including all the models, singers, socialites, Playmates, and aspiring actresses he’d been linked to in the past.

It made me wonder how I could possibly live up to the likes of them, or if he even thought of me that way. I started to feel insecure and uncertain, like maybe I was reading his signals all wrong. Maybe the kiss hadn’t meant anything to him at all. Just a sudden impulse, acted on in the moment because he’d been bored or horny or just caught up in the emotion of the evening.

So I did something I never thought I would have the guts to do: I asked him.

“So... why did you kiss me?”

“Why did I kiss you?” Nick repeated, sounding amused by the question. “Well... uh... ‘cause you’re beautiful, for one. And... I dunno... I was just thinking about how much you’ve done for me the last couple months. You got me through that tour. I never would have been able to do it without you.”

I blushed at the compliment; coming from him, it was especially flattering, but it also left me feeling a little hollow. I didn’t want it to be just about my looks... or about gratitude, which felt like the real reason. I didn’t want to be a charity case, but all of a sudden, his kiss reminded me of his check, still sitting uncashed in my drawer, and I felt almost sick to my stomach.

“We’ve already talked about this,” I said quietly. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“What? No... no, I didn’t mean it like that,” he replied. “Is that what you think? That I’m, what, like, trying to make it up to you in sexual favors or something?”

He made it sound so ridiculous that I relaxed a little. Maybe I was reading too much into his original answer. “No... I’m sorry. I was just wondering.”

“I kissed you ‘cause I felt like kissing you,” he said flatly. “No ulterior motive, I swear. In all honesty, I probably woulda tried to make a move on you a long time ago, on the tour, if I’d thought it wouldn’t have been weird.”

That made my heart start to flutter again. “Really?” I asked, my voice lifting right along with my eyebrows.

“Yeah. But it would have been weird, wouldn’t it?”

I considered that. He was probably right. It would have been weird, mixing any sort of romance into the already unconventional nurse/patient relationship we’d had. In my line of work, getting involved with a patient was a big no-no. A crush was innocent enough, but taking it any further than that would have felt wrong. “Yeah,” I agreed, “I guess so.”

He got quiet again, and in the pause, I thought about it from his perspective. He wouldn’t have faced the same ethical dilemma I had. And he’d certainly flirted with me, teasing me about the whole naughty nurse fantasy, even if he’d never acted on it. I wondered what had changed for him. “So it’s not weird now?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Not so much. I mean, you’re not shoving needles into me now.”

I smiled at the way he said it, but I also sensed the insecurity that he felt, too. It must have been hard for him to open up to me, to let me into the part of his life that he’d shared with no one else and trust me to take care of him and keep his secret, when he barely knew me. He had allowed himself to be vulnerable – not an easy thing for any guy, but especially one who was famous and who’d been taken advantage of for it before. We had shared an intimate experience, but not in a sexual way, and that had been for the best. But now that it was behind us, I wondered if there might still be a place for me in his life. Not as a caretaker, but as a friend... and maybe more than a friend?

“True,” I said. “That does take some of the weirdness away.”

“So... it’s not weird for you either, is it? Now, I mean.”

I smiled again. “No. Not in that way.”

“So it’s okay that I kissed you?”

“Totally okay. In fact,” I added, feeling another surge of braveness, “it’d be okay if you kissed me again.”

“Yeah?” He scooted closer. “I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Then he pulled me into his arms again.

By two a.m., we had walked three more shifts around the parking lot. My legs were cramping, and my feet were killing me. Nick looked about ready to drop, but he’d been

a trooper, keeping me company until the very end. When one of my teammates, a friend of my dad's, appeared on the edge of the track to relieve us, we limped back to the campsite, totally exhausted.

The tent was zipped up, and I could hear my dad already snoring inside it. I unzipped it partway and slipped in just long enough to grab a spare sleeping bag and a couple of camp pillows. I took those and a waterproof blanket from inside the pick-up's cab and tossed them onto the air mattress in the back. "You don't mind sleeping out here, do you?" I asked Nick. "It's either that, or listen to my dad snore all night."

He laughed. "Nah, this is good," he replied, climbing up into the truck again.

I threw on the sweatshirt I'd brought along and climbed up with him, much preferring the thought of sleeping next to Nick Carter under the stars to sharing the musty tent with my father. "You gonna be warm enough?" I asked Nick, noticing his short sleeves. We were both still warm from walking, but the temperature had dropped considerably since sundown, and I knew it would get chilly soon.

"If you keep me warm," he replied without missing a beat, smirking at me through the darkness. He lifted one edge of the blanket, and I crawled under. We unzipped the sleeping bag and threw that over both of us, too. The air mattress was comfortable, and it was cozy under the cover of the two thick blankets, with the heat from our bodies acting like a furnace.

We had shared a hotel bed for much of the tour, but this time, I turned toward Nick instead of away. We whispered in the darkness for awhile, until Nick's voice got slow and sleepy, and eventually, he stopped replying. I finally closed my eyes, letting my exhaustion take over.

When I woke up, just before sunrise, I found myself snuggled up closer to him, my arm thrown loosely over his torso. Had I done that in my sleep? I wondered, removing it carefully so I wouldn't wake him. What on earth had I been dreaming?

I couldn't remember, but I knew one thing... Whatever dreams I'd had while I was sleeping, they couldn't have been much better than the reality I'd woken up to.

Chapter 57

Nick

Every inch of me hurt. My legs were stiff from all the walking I'd done late the night before. My back was sore from sleeping in the back of a pick-up truck. My head pounded from being outside all night, and my eyes stung from all the pollen and ragweed and shit in the air. But even as I dragged my tired ass up the flight of stairs that

led to Cary's apartment, I didn't regret coming. I'd had a good time at the Relay for Life... and I was looking forward to more good times with her before I flew home the next day.

"What do you need?" Cary asked, ushering me into her apartment. "Food? Shower? Bed?"

"Two outta three ain't bad," I replied, thinking of how nice a hot shower followed by a soft bed would feel. We'd already eaten a big pancake breakfast at the Relay that morning, so my stomach was full. "I'll take you up on the shower/bed part."

She smiled. "Sure. Just lemme grab you some fresh towels." She opened a linen closet in the short hallway, while I walked past her to the bathroom.

Her apartment was small, but spotlessly clean. I figured she had tidied the place up for me, but I was also willing to bet it stayed pretty neat normally. It was done in neutral tones – beige carpet, white walls and trim – but Cary had added her own accents of color everywhere to brighten it up. I noticed she tended to favor primary colors, especially red. Most of her kitchen appliances were red – the toaster, the blender, the coffee maker, the big mixer that sat in the corner of her counter. The bathroom had touches of robin's egg blue, from the pattern on the shower curtain to the matching set of towels she handed me. I swear I'm not gay, but I'd thought about taking up painting since I'd gotten home from tour, as a way to pass the time and sort of channel some of the things I was feeling, so lately, I had been paying more attention to colors and the way they worked together.

I stripped out of my smelly, sweaty clothes and took a long, steamy shower, trying to loosen up my sore muscles under the hot water. When it started to run lukewarm, even with the faucet cranked as far to the hot side as it would go, I shut it off and got out. I dried off and wrapped the towel around my waist. "Sorry, I think I used all your hot water," I called to Cary, sticking my head out the bathroom door.

She appeared in the hallway, hands on her hips. "Are you serious?" she demanded.

"Yeah... sorry," I apologized again, sheepishly.

"Ugh... all I wanted to do was take a hot shower," she sighed, pouting. Just when I was starting to feel like a terrible guest, she winked, a grin sprouting across her face. "Just kidding. It's okay – it never lasts long, but there'll be more soon. I'll just wait awhile."

I laughed, feeling relieved. "Okay."

"You can change in my bedroom, if you want," she said. I noticed the way her eyes dropped from my face, panning down the rest of my body. Just to tease her, I shifted my weight and sucked in a deep breath, puffing out my bare chest and tightening my abs, so that the towel slid lower down my hips. The way her cheeks suddenly turned pink told me she had noticed.

Releasing the breath, I replied, “Yeah, alright... I’ll be in your bedroom, then. Naked.” I left her with that thought, as I turned and went into her room, shutting the door behind me. Flirting with her was more fun than ever after last night, with the weirdness past us.

I really hadn’t planned on kissing her before it happened, but I didn’t regret it either. Her kisses were sweet and sensual. I’d enjoyed the night we had spent together, and it made me wonder what she’d be like in bed. My eyes drifted to her bed. It was perfectly made, of course, the comforter pulled tight, without a wrinkle, the pillows arranged neatly on top. A smirk spread across my face, as I imagined the covers on the floor, the pillows thrown every which way, lumpy from being squeezed in clenched fists in the heat of the moment.

I had shared a bed with her, but only in the most literal sense. I couldn’t imagine she was easy to get into bed in the other way. She definitely liked me, but Cary was no groupie; she wasn’t the type to throw herself at my feet. She was more reserved than that – classier, too – and I had a feeling it would take some time and trust to get her to open up to me in that way.

Normally, I’m up for a challenge, but I wondered if it was even worth it. Cary might be worth the effort, but what could come of it? I was flying home to LA the next day, and her home was here. Depending on which kind of treatment I chose, there might be another leg of the tour to spend together, but there might not. And if there wasn’t, when would I even see her again?

Before I could think of an answer to that question, she knocked on the bedroom door, and I jumped. *Oh, hell yeah! She can’t wait for a piece of this*, I thought, rushing to the door in my towel. I thought about dropping it just before I opened the door, but I’m glad I didn’t. Because when I opened the door, she was standing there with my suitcase.

“Thought you might need some clean clothes out of here,” she said, smiling, as she pushed it toward me.

“Oh. Yeah. Well... you know... I thought I’d just borrow something from your closet. Didn’t think you’d mind,” I joked, covering quickly.

She grinned. “You’d look just lovely in some of my dresses. Need help picking something out?”

I threw up my hands and put on a ridiculous, high-pitched and, for some reason, Southern voice. “Do I ever! I just can’t find a *thing* in my size,” I lisped, flapping my hands in distress. Then I sashayed back into the room, wagging my hips from side to side. It’s a miracle the towel didn’t fall off then.

Cary didn't follow me, though. She just smiled at me again, her eyes sparkling, and said, "Make yourself pretty. I'll be out here when you're done." Then she turned and walked away, closing the door again behind her.

Well, so much for that. I put on a clean t-shirt and my most comfortable basketball shorts and then went to find her. She was in the living room, putting sheets on the newly re-inflated air mattress. Her dad had let us borrow it, so that I wouldn't have to spend the night on her couch, and we'd brought it back, deflated, in the trunk of her car, along with the pump to blow it back up. I took that as my sign that I'd been right to consider her a challenge.

She said, "I thought I'd get this ready, in case you wanted to go back to bed. I could use a nap, myself."

I felt better than I had before the shower, but it would still be nice to lie down. Nodding, I replied, "Yeah, I think I'll join you."

"Alright." She turned down the sheets, gave the pillow one last fluff, and got up. We crossed paths in the middle of the room, as I went over to my bed, and she headed for hers. But in the doorway, she stopped and turned, looking back at me. "Aren't you coming?" she asked.

I had already sat down on the air mattress, so I looked up at her in confusion. "Huh?"

A flirtatious smile spread across her face. "I thought you said you'd join me," she replied, before she slipped around the corner and out of sight.

I stared after her for a few seconds, my eyebrows raised. Then I followed her back to the bedroom.

We didn't have sex.

I think both of us were too tired and too sore to even consider it, no matter what thoughts had been floating through my head earlier. We literally just lay down together in her bed and watched TV, until we fell asleep. Still, her full-size bed was a lot smaller than the queens and kings we'd gotten used to sharing in hotel rooms on the tour, so we got pretty cozy under the sheets.

When I woke up from my nap, her side of the bed was empty, the covers pulled straight and folded over neatly again. The TV had been turned off, and it was quiet in the bedroom, until her voice startled me. "Feel better?"

I rolled over and saw her standing by her dresser, towel-drying her wet hair. She had changed into a tank top and a pair of yoga pants, and I could see beads of water still

sparkling on her shoulders from her shower. It made me wonder, had she gotten dressed right there in the room while I was still asleep?

“Hello? You awake?” she laughed, and I realized I’d never responded to her first question.

“Sorry,” I said, blinking. “Yeah, I’m good... just a little out of it still.”

She smiled. “Yeah, you were zonked out pretty good when I woke up.” She turned to the mirror over her dresser, wrapping the towel around her head like a giant turban. “Hope it was a good nap.”

I sat up slowly, surveying my body as I stretched. I could still feel the soreness in my legs and back, but it was a good kind of pain, the kind you feel after an intense workout. I needed that; I hadn’t done shit as far as exercising went since getting home from tour. It’s kind of hard to find the motivation to work out in between cycles of chemo kicking your ass. My body was tired, but at least now my head was clear.

“Yeah, it was,” I replied. “I feel better.”

“Good. You hungry or anything?”

I considered that for a moment, then nodded. “I could eat.”

She made sandwiches, and we took them into the living room to eat. We were both pretty quiet; I guess we’d run out of small talk. I knew it was time to get to the deep stuff, the real reason I had agreed to come. I couldn’t avoid the decision I had to make forever, and before I flew home, I wanted to talk, really talk, and get her opinion.

“So,” I said, setting down the remnants of my sandwich, “what do you think I should tell my doctor next week? You know, about the whole treatment thing?”

She chewed thoughtfully for a minute before putting her plate down on the coffee table in front of her. Then she said, “I went to school with this kid named Jonathan. He was, like, the dirty kid in class. I’m not trying to be mean, but it was true. His family didn’t have much money, and he would wear the same, dirty clothes to school, week after week. I remember he had long hair that he wore in a mullet, back when mullets were sort of in style.” She paused to laugh, shaking her head. I chuckled, too, but I was wondering what the hell this had to do with anything. I was asking her about cancer treatment options, and she was talking about mullets.

“Anyway...” she continued, “he was always getting sent home from school with head lice. He’d be gone for a day or two, while his mom tried to shampoo his hair and comb out the lice and clean the house, and then he’d come back, and a few weeks later, it would happen again. Finally, one day, he showed up at school with his mullet completely buzzed off, all except for a thin little rattle in the back. He tried to pretend he’d just

done it to be cool, but everyone knew his mom shaved his head to get rid of the lice, once and for all.”

Just listening to her talk about head lice made me itchy, but by the end of this random story, I was starting to see where she was going with it. I stayed quiet, though, waiting for the moral of the story.

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I guess your decision really depends on how aggressive you want to be,” she said. “Maintenance chemo lasts a long time, up to two years, but it’s nothing you couldn’t handle, nothing compared to the chemo you’ve been through already. You could still tour and do all the things you want to do while you were on it. The only downside to it is that you’re counting on the chemicals in a few pills to hunt down and kill every last cancer cell in your body. If they don’t get every one, the cancer could start spreading again. Once it relapses, it’s a lot harder to treat.”

She paused, letting me absorb that information, before she went on, “A stem cell transplant is more extreme, but the high-dose chemo you would get if you went that route would be more likely to wipe out the cancer quickly and keep you in remission. Then it would just be a matter of rebuilding your immune system, which is where the stem cells come in. The downside is that there are a lot more side effects, and some of them are severe.” She looked at me closely and added, “You’d probably end up losing your hair after all. You’d feel sick... sicker than you did on tour. And there are some long-term effects, too.” Blushing, she looked away as she said, “Infertility is one of them.”

She made it sound like that would be the deal-breaker, and maybe it would have been, for her, but I just shrugged. “Yeah, they warned me about that before I first started chemo, too. I went to a sperm bank...” I trailed off, leaving it there. The whole sperm bank experience was weird. I wasn’t sure I even wanted kids, but I’d gone ahead and had some of my sperm frozen anyway, just in case. Who knew what the future would bring? I didn’t want to have any regrets in my life; it was good to leave every door open, every option still available.

“Oh! Well, that’s... good,” said Cary, shifting her weight on the couch.

“Yeah... I figure if I never need to thaw out my little swimmers, maybe I could auction them off for charity. You know... *For Sale to the highest bidder: Nick Carter’s sperm! Make your own Backstreet baby!*” I grinned at the headline, imagining the reaction it would get.

Giggling, Cary shook her head. “Oh my gosh, don’t even go there. Can you imagine the crazy girls who would spend their life savings to have your babies?”

I smirked, thinking of some of our more “passionate” fans. “Oh, I can imagine.”

She laughed again, but quickly got back to business. “So what you really need to decide,” she said seriously, “is if the transplant is worth it. Do the benefits outweigh the

risks? It's a lot more intense, and the side effects are worse. You'd have to be in the hospital for at least a few weeks, so it would interrupt your life and change the tour plans. There's a higher chance of complications, but also, probably a better chance of curing the disease or at least keeping it in remission longer."

I thought about her lice analogy, the slow process of picking out the lice one by one, compared to the quick, yet extreme choice to just shave the head and get rid of the lice and the hair they lived in, all at once. Nothing about the transplant sounded fun, except the fact that it might be able to cure me. But that one word, *cure*, was powerful enough to make it tempting. "Do you think it's worth it?" I asked Cary. When she hesitated, I added, "You're the expert – at least, more of an expert than me. I really wanna know what you think. Would you do it, if you were me?"

She sighed, but finally, she answered, "You have so much more life left to live, Nick... so much to live for... and so much to lose. If I were you, I would think about the big picture. Not about the tour or anything else in the immediate future, but about down the road... the far-off future. I would ask myself if it would be worth a couple months of pain and misery to buy myself years of time to do the things I still want to do with my life... and for me, I think the answer would be yes."

"So you'd choose the transplant?"

At first, she shrugged, but then, she slowly nodded. "I think so. It's the more aggressive route, but I'd want to fight as hard as I could. It's all just hypothetical with me, though. You're the one who would actually have to go through it. I've seen people go through it before, but I have no idea what it really feels like. And there are no guarantees that it will work, that it will buy you any more time than the other option would. It just seems to me like your best shot in the long run."

I thought about that. There was no way to know what the future would bring; neither of us were psychic. But she had a point. My cancer had been in its last stage when I was diagnosed, and I knew there couldn't be many options that offered a chance of curing it. I had to take the one that gave me the best chance. Go hard, or go home. Even though it sounded like torture, the transplant did seem like the best option for fighting the disease. It was the choice between throwing a hand-grenade and dropping a nuke. If it was cancer I was out to kill, then hell, I wanted the damn nuke.

Slowly, I said, "Yeah, it does seem like it. And now that the guys know, I guess the tour's not such a big deal. We could always postpone and finish it afterwards, when I'm better..."

"You could," Cary replied, "but don't make that choice just because I said it's what I would do. You're not me. You have to make up your own mind. It's your body, and like I said, you're the one who would have to suffer through the side effects to get better."

I nodded, wondering how much worse it could be than what I'd already experienced. I knew I was lucky to still have my hair, but I'd had other side effects. They had been bad,

but not unbearable. Of course, it had helped having Cary around for the worst of it; I knew I never would have survived the tour without her.

That gave me a thought. “If I do go through with it,” I said, sucking in a deep breath, “would you come stay with me, like you did before? I mean, visit me in the hospital and stuff? I know I’ve got the guys now,” I added quickly, before she could say anything, “but you know more about this than they do. You get it. Like, on tour, you always knew the right thing to do to make me feel better.”

She smiled, her cheeks flushing pink. “They have good nurses out there who would know what to do, too, you know,” she pointed out, “but yeah, of course I would come, if you wanted me to.”

I smiled back and nodded, suddenly more sure of that than I was of anything else. “I do.”

“Then I’ll be there,” was her reply, simple and sweet and said without the slightest hesitation.

And I felt better.

Chapter 58

Cary

On Tuesday morning, I woke up in Los Angeles.

Even as I sat up and looked around the familiar guest room in Nick’s condo, it was hard to believe I was actually there. I’ve never been a spontaneous person; I’m more cautious, a planner, the kind of girl who looks before she leaps. But the only plans I’d made over the past couple of days had been thrown together at the last minute, just to get me to LA. It was, I knew now, where I was meant to be.

Although I’d tried to play it cool and not sound too eager, I had known the moment Nick had asked me to be there for the transplant that I would come. I couldn’t imagine not being there. The two weeks of separation following the tour had been hard enough for me, and ever since that kiss at Relay, I’d known I wouldn’t be able to stand being apart from him again. More than anything else, I wanted to be with him. That emotional need felt as strong as any physical one; it was a hunger, a thirst I just had to quench. Now that I was back in LA with him, I finally felt satisfied.

The rest of the weekend had been a whirlwind of last-minute arrangements. Nick had managed to find me a seat on the same flight he’d booked back to LA on Sunday, which gave me only a day to pack my bags and say my goodbyes, yet again. We went over to

my dad's house for dinner on Saturday night, to drop off my poor Hambelina and tell him why I was leaving. I told him the whole truth this time – about Nick's cancer and the treatment he was facing, about everything except for the kiss. I left that part out, but I think he was starting to notice that there was more between us than just friendship. I know he wasn't happy about my leaving again, but as a widower who had lost the love of his life to cancer, he understood better than anyone my need to be with Nick and see him through this.

And so, back to California I went.

We had an appointment that afternoon, a consultation with Nick's oncologist. He had called on Monday to tell her his decision, and she had found time to meet with him the very next day to discuss it. I was going along, and so was Kevin. "You know Kevin; he likes to get in there and put himself in charge of everything," said Nick when he'd told me, rolling his eyes. He acted annoyed, but I could tell that, deep down, he was pleased. Even though the decision to go ahead with the stem cell transplant had been made, he still seemed so unsure about it that I knew he would need as much support as he could get. I was excited; Kevin was the only Backstreet Boy I had yet to meet, and along with Brian, he had always been my favorite. When I realized I'd be seeing him in a few short hours, I felt butterflies in my stomach.

I got out of bed and went to the bathroom to do damage control on my hair and brush my teeth before I left the guest room. Nick wasn't up yet, so I let him sleep while I made breakfast.

It was funny how quickly we had settled back into this routine. I enjoyed it, being domestic, having someone other than just myself and a pet pig to take care of. Not to mention, Nick's kitchen was awesome. Everything was shiny and new and stainless steel, and he had just about every gadget I could imagine – he probably didn't even know what to do with half of them. I had learned my way around the place from living there before, so in no time, I'd mixed up some pancake batter and was ladling it onto a hot griddle.

"Whatcha makin'?" a deep voice rumbled behind me, over the sizzle of the griddle.

"Pancakes," I answered, turning around with a smile, as Nick staggered into the kitchen. He looked like a zombie, with his hair sticking out in tufts and dark circles under his glazed, heavy-lidded eyes. The bright kitchen lights washed out his tan, and he seemed pale and exhausted. My smile faded. "Did you sleep okay?" I asked, trying to sound casual and downplay my concern.

He shrugged, sinking down onto a kitchen chair. "Not really."

"Aww... how come?"

"Dunno... too much on my mind, I guess."

The honesty of his mumbled answer surprised me. He was nervous, I realized. We hadn't talked much about the stem cell transplant since he had agreed to pursue it; he'd made it seem like he wanted to forget about it, to avoid thinking more about it until he had to. That was typical Nick, wanting to pretend everything was normal even when it wasn't. I had played along, not wanting to push him, but now I could see how much it was still weighing on him.

"Understandable," I said, offering a sympathetic smile. "Hopefully talking to the doctor today will help put your mind at ease."

"Or give me even more to think about," he countered, making a face.

"Well, that's what Kevin and I will be there for – to help you sort out everything." I kept my voice light and cheerful, hoping to reassure him. "I know it's overwhelming. It's okay to be nervous."

But he shrugged off the nerves, playing it cool again. "I'm good. Nothin' a big stack of pancakes won't help." He flashed a wide grin.

I smiled back. "It was either pancakes or dry cereal. Your fridge and pantry are looking pretty bare. How about we stop at the grocery store on the way home from the doctor?" It didn't look like he'd done much in the way of grocery shopping since getting home from tour, which made me wonder what he'd been living on. I was eager to fill his shelves with healthy food and cook him nutritious meals in this beautiful kitchen.

"Sounds good," he replied, chuckling. He seemed perkier, but when we sat down to breakfast together, he got quiet again and only picked at the big stack of pancakes I'd piled onto his plate.

Lunch was the same, but then, it's not like I ate much either. I was nervous, too, for a completely different reason: the green-eyed, black-haired Backstreet Boy sitting across the table from me. We had met Kevin for lunch at a nice restaurant on our way to the appointment, but we probably should have just waited until afterwards. No one seemed very hungry – Nick was fidgety, I was flustered, and even Kevin acted anxious, pushing the food around on his plate and checking the time on his cell phone every few minutes.

We'd made small talk while we waited for our meals to arrive, but with Nick being so unusually quiet, the conversation felt stilted and awkward. Kevin was pleasant, but reserved, and I felt shy around him. Still, I hung on to his every word, even when they were few and far between, totally entranced by his mellow Kentucky drawl. I've always had a thing for Southern accents – and tall, dark, and handsome Southern gentlemen. Even with Nick sitting beside me, I was in awe of Kevin.

When he finally pocketed his phone again and said, "We should probably get goin'," no one hesitated. We all got up from the table at once, leaving our unfinished meals and a generous tip behind, and headed for the door.

I don't know how Nick felt, but for me, it was a relief to finally arrive at the clinic where his oncologist had her practice. He may have been dreading the meeting, but I figured he would leave it feeling more confident about his decision, with a better idea of what to expect in the coming weeks and months. If nothing else, I hoped it would put his mind to rest.

The clinic's waiting room was decorated in shades of beige, with eggplant-colored chairs, rather than the sterile whites and sickly pastels I was used to seeing in hospitals and nursing homes. It gave the place a warmer, less institutional feel, yet the clean, modern lines of the furniture and architecture reminded me that we were in a place of science, a place full of professionals, who could offer Nick the best chance for a cure. I felt encouraged as we were called back to meet with the doctor.

I had talked to Dr. Subramanien several times on the phone, but it was my first time meeting her face to face. She was a petite Indian woman, slightly younger-looking than I'd pictured her, with long hair braided down her back. It seemed that she'd already met Kevin, but I introduced myself to her, and she recognized my name at once. Cary Hilst, the nurse practitioner Nick Carter had tricked into helping him carry out his idiotic scheme – I'm sure that's what was going through her head as she shook my hand.

She invited us to sit down around a table in a small conference room, where another doctor was waiting. "This is Dr. Schnabeltier," she introduced him, as he stood up to shake hands. Apparently, it was Nick's first time meeting him, too. "Dr. Schnabeltier is part of our bone marrow and stem cell transplant team; he specializes in lymphoma."

"A pleasure to meet you all," said Dr. Schnabeltier, nodding around the table as we all sat down. He was middle-aged, with blonde hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and some sort of European accent – German, I guessed. To Nick, he added, "Dr. Subramanien tells me you've chosen to proceed with a stem cell transplant."

Nick nodded, licking his lips uncertainly. "If that's my best shot at beating this thing, that's what I wanna do, yeah," he answered. He looked between the new doctor and Dr. Subramanien. "Are you, like, in charge of the transplant? Will you be my new doctor if I go through with it?"

"I would work closely with Dr. Subramanien to oversee your care, yes, along with a team of nurses and other specialists. If you would like, we can discuss what the transplant would entail."

Nick nodded again, watching Dr. Schnabeltier closely. He seemed to be hanging on to his every word, but maybe that was just so he could understand, in the most basic sense, what he was saying. I found myself having to focus hard to do the same.

"First, we would need to decide which type of transplant would be best. There are two types, you see. An allogeneic transplant uses cells from a donor, most likely a sibling or an unrelated match we would find through a database. An autologous transplant uses your own cells, which have been harvested prior to chemotherapy. With the allogeneic,

there is a slightly higher cure rate, but also a higher risk of complications – rejection, you see, or graft versus host disease. The autologous is much simpler because your body will not reject its own stem cells.”

I could practically see the gears in Nick’s mind turning, as he weighed these two options. It was a tough decision. Either one had the potential to extend his life by keeping his cancer in remission longer, but he had to choose between the riskier procedure and the safer, yet less successful alternative.

“Which would you recommend, for Nick’s case?” Kevin asked, looking from one doctor to the other.

“Ven an autologous transplant is an option – it isn’t always, you see, because cancer cells can be found in the bone marrow or peripheral blood – but ven it is, that is the option I usually suggest because it is less stressful on the body, you see. Studies show the long-term survival rate is only slightly less than with an allogeneic transplant.”

“On the other hand, Nick is young and strong and tolerated a rigorous chemotherapy protocol quite well,” put in Dr. Subramanien, her eyes circling the table. “These factors make his risk for complications relatively low. I believe he could handle an allogeneic transplant, if a donor were available.”

Nick spoke up. “If I went with that one, you said a sibling could be my donor?”

Dr. Schnabeltier nodded. “Siblings have a twenty-five percent chance of matching. Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“Four of them,” Nick said flatly.

Four siblings who don’t even know you’re sick, I thought. I’m sure that’s what was going through his head, too.

“Four? Then it’s likely at least one of them is a suitable match,” replied the doctor. “They should be tested as soon as possible.”

Nick didn’t say anything to that. He just nodded, looking down at his lap. I knew he must be trying to decide how he was going to spring that kind of news on his family so soon, after keeping his secret so long.

“No matter which option you decide on, the timeline is much the same,” Dr. Schnabeltier went on. He passed a piece of paper across the table to Nick. Kevin leaned in to study it; I sat back, once I saw that it was just an overview of the transplant process, broken down by phase. The doctor pointed to each phase as he discussed it. “First, you will undergo a pre-transplant evaluation, with medical testing to make sure you are fit for the procedure. Then you enter the mobilization phase, when the stem cells are harvested, either from you or a donor. The next phase is called conditioning, and that is when you are given high-dose chemotherapy. The transplant takes place two days after

the chemo, and then you wait for engraftment, which is when the stem cells grow into bone marrow and start making new cells. Without complications, you will spend about three weeks in the hospital."

Nick slumped back in his chair. "I'm supposed to go back on tour in two weeks."

I saw Dr. Schnabeltier look over at Dr. Subramanien, but before either of them could speak, Kevin did. "Nick," he said sharply, his heavy eyebrows furrowing as he frowned. "Your health is more important than any tour, and if the other guys were here, you know they'd agree with me. You can't delay treatment just to finish your tour."

Go Kevin, I thought, secretly thrilled at seeing him in action. If anyone could convince Nick not to tour again, surely Kevin could.

"It's just for a month," Nick muttered. "You know what a hassle it'd be to reschedule all those dates?"

Kevin didn't miss a beat. "We did it for AJ. And we should have done it for Brian."

"But the fans..." started Nick.

"...will understand," finished Kevin, and I nodded for emphasis.

"You just have to tell them first," I added.

Kevin nodded, smiling at me. I felt my heart flutter. He and I were on the same team. "That's what you need to spend the next few weeks doing, Nick," Kevin said wisely. "You need to talk to your family first, then go public with this. Don't worry about the tour; get your personal affairs in order so that you can just focus on getting through this and getting better. That should be your top priority."

"I know," Nick admitted, ducking his head sheepishly. "I mean, it is."

"Then get your head in the game and stop talking about touring." Kevin sounded like a coach, lecturing his star player. It made me smile, though I was careful not to let Nick see. "You'll enjoy the tour a lot more when you're healthy again, and all this is behind you."

Nick nodded. Watching him, I couldn't wait for that day to come. He didn't deserve to be sick, to have to make these kinds of life or death decisions. Not that anyone does, but cancer is especially cruel when it strikes someone so young. People our age were supposed to focus on their careers and families, not worry about serious health problems. But I knew all too well that it didn't always work out that way. My mother was younger than me when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and she'd died from it at thirty, the same age as Nick.

I had been trying to hold back, but I couldn't stop myself from speaking up. "He's right, Nick; you can't delay this. You can't give the cancer a chance to come back."

"Studies have shown a significantly higher survival rate when stem cell transplantation occurs after a first remission, rather than a relapse," Dr. Subramanien added, before Nick had a chance to reply, and Dr. Schnabeltier nodded, backing her up.

"Alright, alright," Nick grumbled finally, dragging a hand through his hair. I could tell he was frustrated; he probably felt like we were ganging up on him. I hoped he could see that we were on his side, that we all just had his best interests at heart. Everyone in the room just wanted him to be healthy again. "Forget I mentioned the tour. The transplant comes first."

He didn't sound happy about it, and I couldn't blame him, but he had made the right decision. I felt relieved.

Kevin patted his shoulder and said, "Good. It's not gonna be easy, but you'll get through it, and you know we'll be there to help you through, whenever you want or need us."

I nodded, slipping my hand underneath the table to find Nick's. It felt cold and clammy, and I realized again how much more apprehensive he was about this than he wanted to let on. I squeezed his hand, trying to reassure him, to let him know I'd be right there with Kevin and the other guys, if he still wanted me.

"Thanks," Nick told Kevin. He didn't look at me, but I felt him squeeze my hand back. Message received.

Chapter 59

Nick

It ain't easy trying to get the Carter clan all together. Usually it takes a funeral or an E! reality show to do it, but somehow, I managed all on my own. Granted, I had to foot the bill to fly BJ and Aaron in from Florida and pay for Leslie's plane ticket from Canada, too, but it was worth it to be able to talk to them face to face. At least Angel lived close enough to drive herself over – not that we ever got together much. I wondered if that would change once she found out I was sick.

Looking around at the four of them, I tried to remember the last time we'd all been in the same room together. It had been a long time. Years, probably. I couldn't remember us having done much as a family since we'd finished filming *House of Carters*. That was sad, and so was the fact that it usually took bad news to bring us together.

“So what’s the deal, Nick?” Leslie broke the silence that followed the small talk. I hadn’t wanted to spring it on them without at least giving us a chance to catch up first, but with that part out of the way, I was glad she had asked. “You said you had something important to tell us.” She seemed antsy; she’d been jiggling her foot nonstop since she’d sat down in my living room, practically bouncing in her chair. We’re all a little ADD in this family, but it was starting to get on my nerves.

Chill out, Leslie, I wanted to say. *Once I’m done crushing you with my cancer diagnosis, you can turn around and go back to Canada if you want.* But of course, I didn’t say it. Leslie’s like a land mine; it just takes one wrong step to set her off. She used to be like that, anyway. It seemed like she’d grown up over the last few years, though. Marriage suited her; she had never sounded happier or looked better. She’d lost weight and had sort of a glow about her that made me feel guilty for the bad news I was about to give her.

Then again, maybe it wouldn’t crush her. Maybe she would just shrug it off and go back to her own life, where she’d forget all about me and my problems. That seemed to be her best coping strategy for all the shit our parents had put us through. We all had them. Aaron was an attention-seeker. Angel was a partier. BJ was a drunk. And Leslie was like me – an avoider. She had followed the same path I’d taken years ago, moving far away and isolating herself from the family. It was no secret she had always felt like a black sheep, but she and I weren’t so different, really. Still, I felt more distant from her than any of the others, like I barely knew her at all anymore.

We had never been close – not like BJ and I, the two oldest, or Aaron and I, the only two boys. Even Angel and I shared a special bond that I can’t really explain, except to say it existed. Maybe it was because Angel was the only one who never seemed to resent me for my success, for being gone so much when we were kids, for making more money than the rest of them put together. I’d always gotten that vibe from BJ, who was bartending at a Ruby Tuesday to support herself, and Leslie, who had been forced to try to follow in Aaron’s and my footsteps by our stage mom. That was why it was weird that on the day I’d called Leslie to invite her to LA, I’d found a voicemail she’d left for me first, asking me to call her. It had taken another day of playing phone tag to actually get a hold of her, and when I finally did, she just said, “I have news, too, but it can wait – this way I can tell you in person.”

I wondered vaguely what her news was, but then Angel chimed in, “Yeah, Nick, spit it out,” and I realized they were all looking at me, waiting to hear mine. I couldn’t stall any longer. They were going to kill me when they found out I’d already been keeping this secret for four months.

“It better not be about a reality show,” said BJ dryly, rolling her eyes. “No way in hell will I sign up for that again. Those douchebags at E! made me look like a total alchy the first time around.”

Angel snickered. “I don’t think that was just the editing. You were pretty drunk most of the time, Beej.”

“Tipsy!” corrected BJ, waving a finger at Angel. “I prefer the word ‘tipsy,’ thank you very much.”

“You guys, shut up!” Leslie bellowed over the two of them, leaning forward in her seat. “I wanna hear Nick’s news!”

“Yeah, me too. Wuzzup, bro?” Aaron cocked his head at me. He hadn’t bothered to take off his baseball cap when he’d come into my condo, and he was wearing it tilted to one side, his greasy hair sticking out from under it in tufts. He looked like a complete jackass.

I cleared my throat and coughed into my fist. Shifting awkwardly in my seat, I said, “Sorry to bring you all out here to hear this, but it ain’t good news. Um... I’ve been, um, keeping this from you guys... from everyone, really... for awhile now, but it’s time I told you what’s been going on.”

As I paused to collect myself, my eyes darted around the room. They were all staring back at me, looking worried now. Aaron’s eyes were narrowed; Angel’s were huge. BJ and Leslie were both frowning. I sucked in a deep breath. This was the fourth time I’d had to do this, but that didn’t make it any easier, especially when it was my brother and sisters I was breaking the news to. I still had to force the words to come out.

“I’m... sick. I’ve got something called lymphoblastic lymphoma. It’s a kind of cancer.”

Their reactions were pretty much what I’d expected.

BJ and Leslie got all dramatic. BJ broke down into tears, while Leslie screamed at me about how I should have told them sooner. Then she cried, too.

The twins were more stoic. Angel just hugged me, holding on a little longer than usual. Aaron sat in the corner and hugged himself, looking sort of lost.

He came around the next day, when I brought them all to the cancer clinic to be tested for the transplant. “It’s all good, bro. I’m sure I’ll be a match,” he kept assuring me. “How could I not be? I mean, look at us. We’re completely alike. We both got the blonde hair, the good looks, the musical talent, the star power...”

“...The humility,” added Leslie from the backseat, and I looked up into the rearview mirror just in time to see her roll her eyes.

I pretended to check my side mirror to hide my smirk from Aaron. He was right, in a sense – he did remind me of myself at his age, in all the wrong ways. He seemed to be heading down the same dark path of addiction I’d stumbled along for years before

cleaning up my act, and of course, he was in complete denial about it. Aaron was a cocky little shit, and his attitude didn't help things.

"...So why shouldn't we have gotten the same kind of stem cells?" he finished with confidence, ignoring Leslie's jab at him. "I'll share mine with you, bro, no worries. *Mi stem cells es su stem cells.*" He laughed at his own joke, and I forced myself to chuckle, too.

I was worried that the testing would involve a bone marrow aspiration, like the ones I had come to dread, but it turned out to be a simple blood draw. The results wouldn't be back for a few days, so Aaron, BJ, and Leslie all arranged to hang out in LA longer than they'd planned, until we found out if any of them were a match.

"What about Mom and Dad?" BJ asked at one point. "Do they know? When are you going to tell them?"

I just shrugged. "I dunno. You know how Mom is. I don't really wanna deal with her bullshit on top of everything else. And Dad..." I trailed off, not knowing what to say. I hadn't felt close to my father in years. He'd basically turned his back on us when he'd divorced Mom – not that I could blame him for that – and married his third wife. He had a new family now, and he was probably happier not knowing what I was going through. He would find out eventually, of course, and so would Mom. Either one of my siblings would tell them, or they'd hear it on the *Ellen* show, which was where I planned to go public, keeping the promise I'd made to Ellen months ago, when she'd given me Cary's phone number.

My secret had all but completely unraveled, and soon, everyone would know. I wasn't looking forward to all the press I'd get for it, but at least I wouldn't have to hide it anymore.

When my new German doctor – Dr. Schnaz, I called him for short, on account of the fact that he had a bigger nose than Brian's and a last name even harder to remember than Dr. Submarine's – called to tell me he had the results of the stem cell testing, the whole Carter clan plus Cary headed back to the clinic to meet with him and Dr. Submarine. We gathered around the same table we'd sat at the first time, filling all of the chairs.

"Thank you all for coming in," said Dr. Schnaz, nodding around the table at us. "As I told you over the phone, vee have the results of the HLA typing. Let me explain briefly vat vee vere looking for. HLA stands for Human Leukocyte Antigens, vich are special proteins, or markers, found on cells in your body. You inherit half your HLA markers from your father and half from your mother, vich means all of you have a twenty-five percent chance of having the same markers. There are ten in particular that vee look at ven considering a match for bone marrow or stem cell transplantation, and vee require that nine out of ten match the donor's markers in order to proceed with a transplant."

He showed me a diagram, where the markers were represented with different-colored circles. In a perfect match, the patient's circles and donor's circles were all the same

color. In an acceptable match, only one circle stood out, different from the others. I looked up from the diagram and around the table, studying the faces of all of my siblings. It was obvious we shared the same genes. Surely, at least one of them would share the right combination of those markers, too.

"So did any of us match?" Angel asked impatiently.

"One of you did," answered Dr. Schnaz, and I saw Aaron sit up straighter, puffing out his chest and looking pleased with himself. I watched his face fall as the doctor added, "Your sister Leslie."

"Me?" Leslie squeaked, as Aaron slumped back in his chair.

"Yes, you were the only nine of ten match. Unfortunately, there is a problem."

I was still getting used to the idea that Leslie would be my donor, when I heard him say "problem." My head whipped towards the doctor. "What problem?"

He didn't answer at first, looking at Leslie instead of me. To her, he said, "I think perhaps you know?"

Leslie sat there, open-mouthed, for a second, before she put her head in her hands. *Oh great*, I thought, staring at her with a sinking feeling in my stomach. *What now?* It wouldn't have surprised me if they'd told Aaron he couldn't donate because of all of the drugs and shit he'd been putting into his body, but I thought Leslie was above all of that. I guess I didn't know for sure, though, since it wasn't like I hung out with her very often.

When Leslie finally looked up again, her eyes were filled with tears. "I'm sorry, Nick," she said, and then she looked back at the doctor. "It's because I'm pregnant, isn't it?"

Pregnant?! I was so stunned, I didn't even see the doctor nod, though I guess he must have. "You're pregnant??" I asked.

She nodded, smiling through her tears. "I just found out last Tuesday. I wanted to tell you... that's why I called, that day you called me, but when you said you wanted me to come here, I figured I'd just save it to tell you in person. But then you gave us your news, and it just didn't seem like the right time..." Her face suddenly crumpled, the tears spilling down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry... I should have said something before I got tested, but I didn't think... I didn't know if..." She looked over at Dr. Schnaz again.

"Unfortunately, vee can't use pregnant women as donors," he gently confirmed.

"I'm sorry, Nick," Leslie started again, but I shook my head quickly to stop her.

"Don't be sorry," I replied, still trying to wrap my head around these two major revelations I'd heard in the span of, like, two seconds. "You're gonna have a baby... that's awesome! Congratulations."

I meant it, too. I was happy for Leslie because, despite the tears, she seemed happy. Her husband, Mike, was a good guy, and they'd been married for almost two years, so why shouldn't they start a family? I just hadn't seen it coming, hadn't even considered the possibility. I'd been so wrapped up in myself and my own problems, I honestly hadn't thought much about Leslie or any of my siblings until I needed them. That made me feel like shit.

"So when are you due?" I asked, wanting to sound interested, so she'd know I didn't resent her for getting knocked up when I needed her stem cells.

As I said it, I realized I was the only one asking questions. Looking around the table again, I saw that no one else looked surprised. *They all knew*, I realized, with that same sinking feeling. Aaron, Angel, BJ... Leslie must have already told all of them and then sworn them to secrecy. Suddenly, I felt like the black sheep.

"Not until March," she answered, looking miserable again. "Can the transplant wait until then? I'll give you my stem cells as soon as the baby's born, Nick, I promise."

I didn't mind waiting. "Hey, if we wait till March, I could still finish the tour... ow," I said, as Cary kicked me under the table.

"I don't think that would be wise," spoke up Dr. Submarine. "Like I told you before, the whole process has a better chance of working if we do it now, while your disease is still in remission, rather than waiting for it to relapse."

She acted like it was a given that my cancer would come back. I didn't like that pessimistic attitude. What did she know? Maybe it wouldn't come back. The chemo had made my tumor go away, and she said there was no cancer in my blood or bone marrow anymore, so why wasn't I cured? I looked at her defiantly, about to tell her I wasn't going to sit by and let her make my sister feel guilty for not being able to donate her stem cells now, but Dr. Schnaz spoke first.

"Vee still have other options to consider," he said. "Although it's unlikely they would match, vee could test other family members. Are your mother and father still living?"

"No," I said flatly. "I mean, yes, they're alive, but no, I don't want them tested. I don't want them involved in this at all." I could just imagine how my mother would react, if it turned out she was the only match. She'd milk that for all it was worth. There would be TV appearances, magazine interviews, a *Dateline* documentary... She'd probably write a book about it, some sappy shit about a selfless mother giving her son the most precious gift, the gift of life. Gag me now. Even if she was a match, there was no way I'd take her stem cells. I'd be paying for them the rest of my life, figuratively *and* literally.

Dr. Submarine raised her eyebrows, while Dr. Schnaz's brow furrowed. They both looked surprised and sort of concerned by my response, but neither of them pushed the issue. "There's also the possibility of finding an unrelated donor," Dr. Schnaz added.

“Vee could do a search of the national database of registered donors to look for a match. It can take time for a suitable one to be found, however. My recommendation is that vee proceed with an autologous transplant, soon, vile your blood is cancer-free. Vith that option, you vould not need to vait for a donor.”

I remembered them saying that an autologous transplant, where I was my own donor, was less risky anyway, even if it didn’t always pay off. I was willing to try it. If it didn’t work, maybe I could still try the other kind after Leslie had her baby. That sounded a lot better than waiting around to find some random stranger to give me their stem cells.

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “Let’s do that, then.”

As I said it, I took another look around the table, trying to gauge everyone’s reactions. Leslie was wiping her tears. Angel looked worried. Aaron looked disappointed. BJ looked like she needed a drink. The two doctors’ expressions were unreadable; I knew it didn’t really matter to them what I decided. They were only involved on a professional level, not a personal one. But then my eyes came to rest on Cary. She seemed calm and composed, and when I caught her eye, she nodded back at me, offering an encouraging smile.

That was all the approval I needed.

Chapter 60

Cary

Three weeks into my stay in LA, I was starting to question my decision to come.

I enjoyed spending time with Nick, but it wasn’t like what I’d expected. After our kiss at the Relay for Life, I thought things would be different between us. Instead, our situation was pretty much the same as it had been before, with me sleeping in Nick’s guest room and keeping house for him while he went about his business. Only that part had changed – now, instead of lying around the condo while he got his chemo, he spent his days running around LA, tying up loose ends and talking to the people he still needed to tell about his condition before going public. As a result, I spent a lot of time at the condo by myself, lonely and bored. I didn’t dare complain; I knew that what Nick needed was a caretaker, not a girlfriend, and so I put on a happy face and continued to be supportive, as a friend and nothing more. But inside, I felt a little let down and led on.

The turning point was when Nick said, “So I’ve been thinking... I wanna go to Nashville for a few days before all this transplant stuff starts.”

I looked over at him in surprise. “Nashville?”

He stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the road. “Yeah... I got a house there, ya know, and my lawyer’s there, too. I gotta talk to him about some stuff before I check into the hospital, get my legal shit in order, just in case...” He trailed off, his jaw tightening.

I swallowed hard, finishing the sentence in my head: *...in case you don’t make it out*. I wondered if he had an advance directive, a living will, to specify his wishes if he was no longer able to make his own treatment decisions, or if that was some of the “legal shit” he had to take care of.

“Anyway,” he went on abruptly, clearing his throat, “we could do it over the phone, but I thought it’d be better to meet in person, and besides, it’ll be nice to get out of LA for awhile. After this interview, I don’t wanna have to deal with any press or paparazzi for awhile.”

I smiled. “Makes sense.”

We were on our way to the Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank, where *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* was taped. The show was on hiatus for the summer, but Ellen had agreed to meet Nick there for the exclusive interview he had promised her, which would air once her new season started in September. It was the perfect arrangement for Nick, who had wanted to make the announcement before he went in for the stem cell transplant, while he was still looking and feeling reasonably good. This way, he wouldn’t have to do it in front of an audience, and by the time the story broke, he would hopefully be on the road to recovery.

When we arrived at the studio, Ellen was all smiles at seeing the two of us together. Nick had been on her show before, and of course, she knew me from *American Idol*. “When you two announce your engagement, make sure you mention I was the one who set you up,” she joked, winking at Nick. Then her jaw suddenly dropped. “That’s not what you’re here to announce, is it?”

I couldn’t tell if she was kidding or not, but Nick played along. “No... I wish,” he said, with a nervous chuckle.

“Well, so what is it? You’re not gonna make me wait until we’re in front of the camera, are you? Come on, spill!”

When Nick told her, the eager smile dropped off her face, and her whole demeanor changed. “...And you picked *my* show to tell your fans this?” she asked, at one point.

“Why not?” Nick replied, shrugging. “It’s perfect... You’ll keep it light, right? I like that. I’m not ready for the heavy Oprah stuff.”

Ellen laughed weakly. “Well... I’ll certainly try. Rest assured, I’m no Oprah.”

But she was plenty professional, going over the questions she wanted to ask Nick ahead of time, so neither of them would be caught off-guard during the on-camera interview.

There was a hair and makeup crew on set to fix Nick up for the cameras, and by the time he sat down with Ellen, he appeared to have a healthy glow. Dressed in a simple button-down and designer jeans, with his hair styled, he looked gorgeous, and if I didn't know better, it would be hard to believe the truth he was about to tell Ellen. He didn't seem sick at all.

Nick had invited me along for moral support, and I was allowed to watch behind the cameras as they filmed the interview. Under different circumstances, it would have been fun to be behind the scenes like that, but there was no joy in seeing Nick spill his guts to Ellen. I just felt sorry for him and sad for all the fans who would watch this interview in shock.

True to her promise, she tried her best to keep it light, focusing on the positives, cracking a few jokes where it seemed appropriate. Nick spoke seriously, but sounded hopeful as he emphasized certain points, like that the treatment he'd already finished had been successful, and that he wanted to finish touring sometime in the new year, once he had recovered from the stem cell transplant. All in all, I thought it went as well as could be expected, and I told Nick so when he was done.

"I hope so," he muttered darkly, as we left the studio. The optimistic smile he'd maintained for much of the interview had dropped off his face, and he looked pensive. "I'm dreading the fallout after it airs. I just hope the news doesn't leak before then."

"That would be terrible," I said. "The fans deserve to hear about this the right way, straight from your mouth, not from some rumor."

"I know," he agreed. As we headed back to his condo, he asked, "So what do you think about Nashville?"

I wasn't sure if he was asking my opinion or inviting me along. I didn't want to assume anything, but I hoped it was the latter. "I think it sounds like a great idea," I replied, figuring that would cover all bases.

He smiled over at me. "You'll love Nashville."

I guess that answered my question.

A few days later, our plane touched down on the tarmac at Nashville International Airport. Nick rented a car, and we drove forty minutes to Franklin, the suburb of Nashville he called home. Between the beaches and the mountains, Southern California sure was beautiful, but Tennessee, with its gently rolling hills and dark green forests,

had its own charm. Looking out the window while he drove, I could see why Nick had wanted to come here.

He lived on the outskirts of a large, upscale neighborhood called Westhaven. The homes we passed were perfectly maintained, their lawns perfectly manicured. Everything seemed bright and shiny and new, but the architecture had a classic feel; many of the larger houses reminded me of old Southern plantation homes, while the smaller ones looked more early twentieth century. They were a far cry from the outdated split-level and ranch houses and modern McMansions that divided my hometown.

When Nick pulled into the driveway of a large, foursquare-style house, I said in surprise, “This is yours?” The house was cute and charming, with pale gray siding and a dormer on the top story, cheerful red brick and a big front porch on the bottom. After seeing his condo, it just wasn’t the type of home I’d expected him to live in. Sandwiched in between a big, gray McMansion and an equally pretentious Tudor-style home, it looked surprisingly modest, not at all like some celebrity palace you’d see on MTV Cribs.

“This is it,” said Nick, coasting on past the house to park in front of the three-car garage in back. “What do you think?”

“I love it!” I replied, eager to see the inside.

As it turned out, the house seemed much bigger and more luxurious on the inside than it had on the outside. Nick showed me through room after room, all tastefully decorated with dark wood and leather furniture, accented with warm, bold colors to compliment the neutral walls. The floors on the main level were all hardwood, while the second story had plush, beige carpet, and there were white baseboards and crown molding throughout the whole house. It was clear to me that he hadn’t decorated the place himself; the artwork on the walls were generic landscapes and still-life paintings. Still, I could see touches of him throughout, especially when he took me upstairs, where his platinum record plaques lined the lofted landing at the top of the staircase. There were more in his huge office, which held a few pieces of music equipment, and on the walls of a smaller TV room, where his drumset sat in the corner, next to a huge, cream leather, wrap-around couch.

“Wow, Nick... this is amazing,” I said, digging my big toe into the fibers of the red shag rug that sat under the couch.

“Thanks,” he replied casually, slipping past me to sink down onto the couch. The leather squeaked underneath him as he made himself comfortable, stretching out his long legs and leaning his head back leisurely.

I saw then how much he needed this trip before he went back into the trenches of transplant hell. He had already spent two more days at the hospital, being poked and prodded and tested and evaluated to make sure he was fit for the transplant. I knew his doctors were concerned about his heart, since high doses of chemo can damage it, and his was already weakened. But it would take a few days for them to process all of the

results, so Nick had been granted this reprieve. Besides meeting with his lawyer, he had no other business to take care of here, and I hoped he would be able to relax and take his mind off everything. I also hoped we could spend more time together.

"Thanks for bringing me here," I returned, as I sat down next to him.

"No problem. I'm glad we came."

"Me too."

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I looked around, while Nick just stared down at the rug. I expected him to turn on the TV or something, but eventually, he just stood up and announced, "I'm taking you out tonight."

I looked up at him in surprise, and my heart soared, but I tried to play it cool. "Aren't you tired?" I asked, thinking of our early start, the long flight, and the drive out of Nashville. Heck, I was tired, so I couldn't imagine he wasn't.

"Yeah, but I don't wanna just sit around. I'm gonna be sitting around, lying around, in the hospital for three weeks when I do the transplant. Gotta live it up, make every day count before then." One side of his mouth jerked upward in a little half-smile, and then he asked, "Why? You're not too tired, are you?"

Too tired for a date with Nick Carter? Never. I smiled back and answered quickly, "Nope. Let's go out."

"Good." He grinned. "There'll be plenty of time for sleeping later." But the way he said it, with a wink and that little smirk of his, made me think he wasn't talking about *just* sleeping. My heart started to race with anticipation.

As I got up and followed him out of the room, I decided Nick was right: I was going to *love* Nashville.

He took me out to eat at an Italian place in the city called Valentino's. I couldn't help but wonder if there was any significance to the name of the restaurant. Wishful thinking, probably.

Still, the place sounded romantic, and it was – intimate dining rooms, filled with tiny tables set for two or four, each with a crystal vase of flowers in the middle. It was just the right amount of fancy, without being too hoity-toity. The tables were dressed with black linen tablecloths and white linen napkins, folded into pyramids that sat in front of the crystal wineglasses, and the menus didn't list any meals under twenty dollars or in English, but at least the descriptions were in English, so I had some idea of what I was ordering, even if I wasn't sure how to pronounce it.

“What are you getting?” I asked Nick, once I’d narrowed the choices down to lasagna or a fettuccine dish with meatballs.

“I’m thinking the *Fettuccine alla Pescatora*,” he said, putting on an accent to pronounce the Italian words.

I giggled, looking for it on the menu so I could read the description. “*Shrimp, scallops, mussels, clams, calamari, extra virgin olive oil, garlic, white wine, and fresh parsley.*” I couldn’t help but wrinkle my nose at the thought of eating clams and squid. “Mmm,” I said, without much enthusiasm.

Nick laughed at the look on my face. “Not a seafood fan, I take it?”

“Not so much. Sorry.” I blame my less-than-distinguished palate on my father. He’s always been a meat and potatoes kind of guy. His idea of Italian is a thin crust supreme at Pizza Hut, and except for there, he won’t go to any restaurant that doesn’t have a burger and fries on the menu. If it weren’t for my more cultured friends, I’d probably have never experienced anything but classic, American fare. As it turns out, I like a lot of different things, but I guess I’m a little old-fashioned – I’d much rather have sausage meatballs with my pasta than squid.

“No need to apologize.” He smiled easily. “What are you getting?”

I decided on the fettuccine and meatballs. When the waiter brought it out, I was suddenly reminded of *Lady and the Tramp* – you know what scene. Sitting there at the tiny table with Nick, the big plate of pasta and meatballs in front of me, the brick wall behind me, the Italian music playing softly in the background, I thought of Lady and the Tramp sharing spaghetti and decided Nick had picked the perfect place. It really was romantic. Not that we were going to start slurping on the same noodle, but maybe, if I was lucky, I’d get another kiss that night.

We split a slice of tiramisu for dessert, and I finished my second glass of wine, feeling warm and just the slightest bit tipsy. Nick had just had one glass, and I hadn’t said anything – he’d been off chemo for a month, and anyway, a glass of red wine is supposed to be good for you. Once he’d taken care of the check, we went outside to have the valet bring his car around.

The night was overcast and misty with a light rain that seemed to float in the air, rather than fall. “Should have thought to bring an umbrella... sorry,” Nick apologized, as we stood under the awning in the narrow entryway.

“It’s okay... I don’t mind getting a little wet.” To prove my point, I stepped out from under the awning to move out of the way of a family leaving the restaurant. Even after they had strolled off, I stayed on the sidewalk, letting the drizzle fall on my bare arms and face. My hair was going to frizz out, and my dress would show the water stains, but I didn’t care. I wanted to show him I wasn’t as prissy as I looked in my red lipstick and

heels. There was something romantic about being out in the rain, and for the second time since we'd been there, I wished he would kiss me again.

He didn't, though, just came out and stood beside me, until the valet pulled his car up to the curb. We got in, and Nick turned the air conditioner down and the radio up. Soon we were cruising out Nashville, warm and dry, with the music blasting. Katy Perry's new single "Teenage Dream" came on, and automatically, I started singing along.

You... make... me... feel like I'm living a... teen... age... dream... the way you turn me on. I... can't... sleep... Let's run away and don't ever look back, don't ever look back. My... heart... stops... when you look at me. Just... one... touch... Now baby, I believe. This... is... real... so take a chance and don't ever look back, don't ever look back...

Tossing my damp hair in time to the music, I felt looser and lighter than I had in months... probably since the time Nick got me drunk and had me dancing around in the back of a cab, singing along to Lady Gaga. That was the day I'd met him... and the night he'd told me about his cancer. Looking back, that drunken cab ride was like my last moment of innocence before everything changed. My life ever since had revolved not only around Nick, but around his illness, and for the first time, I felt like I could finally forget – or at least push it to the back of my mind, where it wouldn't bother me. This trip to Tennessee was proving to be the perfect escape for both of us.

When the song ended and the radio cut to commercials, Nick turned it down and looked over at me, smiling. "Anyone ever told you you look like her? Katy Perry, I mean."

I smiled back. "Actually, yeah... Kara DioGuardi said that at my first audition for *Idol*." I'd taken it as a compliment; I wasn't out to copy her or anything, but I liked Katy Perry's colorful, vintage style.

"You can sing circles around her, though," Nick added, making me blush.

"You're sweet."

He made an adorable face, scrunching up his nose and flashing a toothy grin. I giggled. In that instant, I felt like the luckiest woman in the world, riding shotgun next to Nick Carter on the way back to his house. The feeling bubbled up inside me, overwhelming me with sheer joy, and by the time we'd pulled back into the driveway, I couldn't hold it in any longer. "I'm glad we came here," I said. "It was nice, going out tonight, like a date."

He smiled. "I had fun, too." But even though I was glad he'd enjoyed himself, that wasn't what I'd hoped he would say. I wanted him to offer me some reassurance, some confirmation that this had, in fact, been a date. I still wasn't sure where I stood with him. The last few weeks had me all mixed up. How did he think of me? As a caretaker? A friend? More than a friend?

He hadn't shown me any real sign of affection since we'd left Illinois, but I hadn't given up hope that there was something there. Why else would he have kissed me, if he didn't

feel something? He had just been preoccupied with the whole transplant business. Maybe now that he was away from LA again, he'd be able to think about something else... like me. But maybe it was my turn to make the first move.

I was grateful for the wine I'd had at dinner; it made me braver than usual. As soon as he shut off the engine, I unbuckled my seatbelt, leaned over, and kissed him. It was just a peck on the cheek; my lips grazed his jawline, that was all, but just as I'd hoped, he turned his head toward me, giving me the perfect angle to kiss him again – a real kiss this time, full-on and deep.

I felt him react, his lips pressing against mine, his arm sliding around my shoulders to pull me closer. I opened my mouth, letting his tongue slip in and tangle with mine, and like a couple of teenagers, we made out in the driveway for a few minutes before we stopped long enough to get out of the car.

But it didn't end there. As soon as we got inside the house, we were back in each other's arms. I had flipped a switch and turned him on; he was horny, flattening me against the back of the door with his frantic kisses. How long since he'd been with a woman? I wondered. I had shared a bus and a hotel room with him on tour; he hadn't brought back any groupies. As far as I knew, he hadn't slept with anyone since he'd broken up with Lauren, since before he was diagnosed with cancer. I could tell by the way his hands groped over my body that he'd been deprived a long time. I'm not normally an easy lay, but in this case, I was happy to provide.

He took me into his room, the largest of the four bedrooms, and flopped me down onto his bed. I sank into the cream-colored duvet as he crawled on top of me, bracing himself with his arms so he could keep on kissing me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, sliding my fingers under the collar of his shirt. Untucked, it hung loose from his trim body, until he finally got tired of it getting in the way and took it off. Sitting back on his haunches, he tossed the t-shirt aside and offered me a little smirk. "You wanna keep going?" he asked.

"Yeah..." I breathed. My heart was thumping so hard, I was sure he'd be able to feel it if he got down close to me again. "Do you have...?"

"Yeah... hold on one sec." He got off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. I sat up, reaching around for the zipper in the back of my dress. "Let me," he said when he came back a few seconds later, stripped down to his boxers and carrying a box of condoms.

I turned without a word and shivered with pleasure as I felt his fingers on my back, fumbling with the zipper. Cool air hit my bare skin, causing goosebumps to rise, as he parted the material and slowly slid the dress straps down my shoulders. I freed my arms and lowered the front, revealing my strapless bra. Soon that was gone, too, as he undid the clasp in the back and climbed onto the bed to face me again.

I was surprised to find that I wasn't embarrassed to expose my body to him, maybe because I'd already seen so much more of his, and because although he was beautiful, he wasn't perfect either. I tried not to look at the little, round lump of the port in his chest, but I felt it, hard against my breast, as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. His skin was warm, and my goosebumps melted away as our bodies pressed together, burrowing back down into the soft bedding.

Lying there, underneath his warm weight, I closed my eyes in bliss and blocked everything out, everything but him and his body and his lips and his kisses. I wished I could stay in the moment forever, for in that moment, there was nothing else weighing on my mind. No worries, no regrets. Nothing else mattered – nothing but Nick and me.

Chapter 61

Nick

It felt good to wake up in my bed with a beautiful, naked woman beside me. *Worth the wait*, I thought, looking over at Cary and remembering all the other mornings I'd woken up next to her, after sharing my bed in a more platonic way.

Not the case last night.

The sex had been good, maybe just because I hadn't gotten any in so long. There wasn't anything wild and crazy about it, nothing too kinky, but that was okay with me. I've done wild and crazy, I've done kinky, but sometimes it's kinda nice to just take it slow and make it sweet.

That was Cary... sweet, with her peaches and cream skin and cherry red lipstick. She was still asleep on her stomach, clutching one corner of the pillow in her fist. The covers had slipped off her when I'd pushed them back on my side, and in the sunlight streaming through the window blinds, I could see the wispy little hairs standing up on her bare back. My eyes followed the curve of her spine between her shoulder blades, down to the slope of her ass underneath the covers. She had a nice body – curves in all the right places and the perfect amount of cushion. It wasn't as tanned and toned as Lauren's bangin' bod, but she wasn't all bony and spindly like some of the models I'd slept with, either. Like Paris. Swear to god, fucking Paris Hilton was like having sex with a giant praying mantis. But Cary was all woman, thank god, soft and pretty and not gross or scary at all.

I turned my head and smiled up at the ceiling, resting my hands on my bare chest. For just a few seconds, I felt relaxed and peaceful, so full of pleasure that wasn't any room for worry in my gut. It had been a good idea to come here, I decided, just the break I'd needed. But of course, it couldn't last.

As I lay there, just enjoying the lazy morning in bed, my fingers crawled absently over the hard little disc embedded under my skin. I couldn't help touching the port, just like you can't help picking at hangnails or scabs, the normal things on your body that feel weird and annoy you. But this thing wasn't normal. It didn't hurt or anything; I couldn't even feel it when I wasn't thinking about it. But when I did start thinking about it, when I touched it with my fingers and felt it there, it kind of freaked me out. It felt foreign, like a parasite that had burrowed into my body, or some alien probe implanted into my chest, sealed underneath my skin.

I wondered how long it would have to stay there. Would they take it out after the transplant, or just leave it, in case I relapsed and needed more chemo? Would I spend the rest of my life with this thing in my chest, waiting for my cancer to come back? The thought made me feel sick. As much as I tried to hide it, the gut-wrenching worry was never gone for long.

It had actually gotten worse since Dr. Submarine told me I was in remission. Before, my biggest fear was that the chemo wouldn't work, but I'd been prepared for that. That was partly why I'd insisted on touring through the chemo; I knew if I didn't do it then, I might never get another chance. But now that the cancer was gone, I had to worry about a relapse, and for some reason, that was even scarier. Fear of the unknown, I guess. I could have accepted dying, if I'd known from the beginning that there was no hope. No hope was better than false hope. It would be worse to start believing I was going to be fine, only to find out later that I wasn't.

I saw this whole stem cell transplant thing as a type of insurance, a way of buying myself more time, but what if it didn't pay off? There was no satisfaction guarantee that came with cancer treatment. Once I went through with it, there'd be no going back.

That thought started my heart racing, as I wondered again if I'd made the right decision. I could feel it thudding against my ribcage, and I slid my hand over to that side until I felt its beat, fast and strong underneath my palm.

At the hospital the other day, they'd hooked me up to all kinds of wires to track my heartbeat and injected me with a radioactive dye for a special scan that would show how well my heart was pumping blood. I'd had to lie flat and totally still on this narrow little table with my arm up over my head for what seemed like forever. I'd hoped I would at least get some super powers out of it, like Spiderman did from the radioactive spider bite, but all that happened was that I was sort of stiff when they finally let me get up.

The tests were to make sure my heart could handle the high-dose chemo they were going to give me before the transplant, which was toxic enough to fuck it up even more. I'd find out the results when I got back to LA. I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if I failed the tests. Would they call the whole transplant thing off? That would be an easy out... decision made for me, simple as that. But it would be stupid to wish for it. The last thing I needed was for my heart to crap out on me.

I remembered the night it had started beating fast enough to make me pass out, the shocks in the emergency room to get it under control. But it wasn't like that now; it was just nerves making it race. I sucked in a deep breath, my chest puffing up underneath my hands, and held it for a long time. I don't know if it was the lack of oxygen or just the relaxing effect of deep breathing, but after awhile, I felt my heartbeat start to slow. I released the breath slowly, sighing long and deep.

"What are you thinking about?"

Her voice startled me. I looked over, and Cary was awake, looking back at me with her sleepy green eyes and sweet smile. I managed a weak smile back. "Nothing much. Just... stuff." *Just the stem cell transplant that could kill me, or cure me, or fail me and leave me for the cancer to kill. You know, nothing major.*

She reached back and hitched the covers up over herself before she rolled over, modestly clutching them to her chest. I missed the days when I could wake up in bed with a woman and have nothing more on my mind than what was for breakfast and whether we had enough time for a quickie before I had to get up. Not even my mornings were carefree anymore.

Cary looked pretty damn happy, though, snuggled up in my bed. Her cheeks were rosy, and she was still smiling, like she couldn't stop herself from doing it. *It's 'cause she just had Nick Carter's dick inside her*, I thought, smirking, despite myself. *Yeah, that's right... Cancer or no cancer, I still got it.*

That cheered me up a little, and I rolled over to face her, smiling back wickedly as I pushed my covers down just enough to show one hip bone, but not far enough to unleash Nick Jr. "So..." I said, waggling my eyebrows at her. "How 'bout a quickie before breakfast?"

That was pretty much how the rest of our stay in Tennessee went. The whole time, I tried not to think about cancer or the transplant, but whenever I remembered what I was facing when I got home, Cary was there to make out with me and make me forget. Nashville was the perfect escape, and she was the perfect distraction.

We spent the first few days just fooling around. I took her sightseeing, and we had a lot of sex. I didn't want the vacation to end, but eventually, it had to. My meeting with my lawyer on the day before we left brought me back to reality.

It was overcast that day, and I could see the dark gray clouds reflected in the glass walls of One Nashville Place, threatening rain. On a clear day, the skyscraper was beautiful, with the sunlight bouncing off the windows that mirrored the blue sky. But that day, it just looked intimidating. I reached for Cary's hand as we walked inside, and I held it the whole way up to the eighteenth floor, where the law offices of Lassiter, Tidwell, Davis, Keller, & Hogan were located.

Before long, we were sitting across a desk from my long-time lawyer, Jordan Keller. I had talked to him on the phone a few times in the last couple of weeks, but it was our first time meeting face to face since my diagnosis. “You’re looking good, Nick,” he said, pushing his glasses up higher on the bridge of his nose. He sounded surprised; I guess he figured I’d be bald and wasting away by now. Maybe he was just jealous that I still had a fuller head of hair than him. “How are you feeling?”

I shrugged. “Fine, for now,” I said. True story; I’d felt better on this trip than I had all year. With no chemo in my system and my cancer in remission, I finally felt normal again, for the first time in a long time. It just sucked that it wouldn’t last. Once I started chemo before the transplant, I’d probably go back to feeling like total shit. It was tempting to say “fuck it” to the whole thing and stay in Tennessee, having sex with Cary and hoping for the best.

But instead, I found myself listening when Jordan got down to business and started talking about advance directives. I’d heard the term before, but only applied to old people or vegetables in comas. It had never seemed relevant to me. Before, when I’d sat in this office, it was always to discuss something related to my career, everything from copyrights for my music to lawsuits filed by the group. Both good and bad stuff, but never anything this scary... never anything life and death. It felt surreal to sit there and hear him explain, “There are two types of advance directives to consider: the living will and the durable power of attorney. A living will states your wishes about treatment, should you be unable to express them later. A durable power of attorney appoints someone to make medical decisions for you, if and when you can no longer make them yourself.”

I’m only thirty, I thought. I’m not supposed to have to think about this stuff for at least another thirty years.

But before I knew it, Jordan was passing a packet of paper across the desk to me, saying, “This is the Advance Health Care Directive form for California. I figured you should fill out that one, since you’ll be spending the most time there for your treatment. Each state has their own version of this form, but they’re more or less the same and will hold up no matter where you are. Once you’ve completed the paperwork, I’ll give you a card to keep in your wallet, stating that you have an advance directive. That way, if there’s ever an emergency, hospital staff will know.”

I shuddered at the thought of collapsing in some random city, being taken to some random hospital, with no one I knew around, and could appreciate why I had to go through with this, morbid as it seemed. I looked down at the form in front of me. The first part asked for the names and contact information for the person I designated as my power of attorney, along with two alternates.

I wrote down Kevin’s name on the first line. He seemed like the obvious choice; he was level-headed and responsible, and he’d always been there for me. He lived in LA, so he’d be around while I went through the transplant stuff. Besides, he had some

experience when it came to this stuff, going through what he had with his dad. I didn't want to think that my situation was at all the same, but I knew it very well could be – otherwise, I wouldn't be filling out this form.

Without hesitation, I added Brian's name next. Along with Kevin, he was the one I trusted the most with my life. He'd been my best friend for over half my life, and even though he lived far away from LA, he could cover my ass if anything ever happened while we were on tour. It made sense to have both cousins on there for that reason.

On the third blank, I paused to consider my options. I would have put Howie next, but it seemed kind of pointless to add another Backstreet Boy. What were the odds of Howie being around to speak for me when neither Brian or Kevin were? I decided maybe I should change it up, but I didn't know who else to name. Someone in my family? Ha! I'm sure that's what most people do, but most people's last name isn't Carter. My dad doesn't give a shit, my siblings are completely unreliable, God love 'em, and if it was up to my mom, she'd happily turn me into the next Terri Schiavo before pulling the plug. There was no way in hell I was writing any of their names down.

That left... who? A friend? I had plenty of friends, but none who cared about me as much as the guys did, none that I trusted with my life. Honestly, most of my buddies are idiots; I wouldn't want them making medical decisions for me. I needed someone I could trust, someone who cared about me, who would have my best interests at heart and know the right things to do. As it turned out, that someone was sitting right next to me.

I looked over at Cary, who I'd invited along mostly for moral support, because I couldn't face this meeting alone. I did trust her, and I knew she cared about me. She was smart; she knew a lot about medicine. And even though I'd only known her a few months, she was with me almost all the time now. She was the perfect person to put on the form.

"Will you be the second alternate?" I asked her. I felt like I was naming her second runner-up in a beauty pageant, or asking her to be my best man. At least those would have good things, sort of. This was just depressing.

"Are you sure?" Cary asked, her eyes widening a little.

"Completely," I replied with a nod, feeling confident that she was the right one.

"Well, okay... yeah, of course I will."

"Thanks," I said. I started to write her full name, then realized I had no idea how she spelled it. "Um... Carolyn is spelled...?"

She laughed and spelled it out for me, then gave me her home address and phone number. I felt stupid writing it all down, realizing how little I knew about her. It didn't matter, though. I had put my trust in her already, and she'd never let me down. She'd

kept my secret. She'd taken care of me. So what if I didn't know how to spell her name? I knew I could count on her, and that was what mattered.

The second part of the form was harder. It started with a box labeled "End of Life Decisions," where I had to initial one of two blanks: "Choice Not To Prolong Life" or "Choice To Prolong Life." I stared down at that box for a long time. I could feel Jordan's and Cary's eyes on me, but neither one of them spoke, and I didn't look up. Finally, I scribbled my initials on the first line, next to the paragraph that said, "*I do not want my life to be prolonged if (1) I have an incurable and irreversible condition that will result in my death within a relatively short time, (2) I become unconscious and, to a reasonable degree of medical certainty, I will not regain consciousness, or (3) the likely risks and burdens of treatment would outweigh the expected benefits.*"

Even as I did, I questioned my decision. I didn't want to die. I wanted to live a long, full life. But that was just it... emphasis on *full*, not just *long*. If something went wrong, I hated the idea of being a vegetable, kept alive by machines. If it came to that, I'd be better off dead. Still, I looked down at the sloppy *NC* of my initials, and my stomach clenched at the thought that those two letters might one day decide my fate.

The rest was easier. Yes, I wanted relief from pain. Yes, I wanted to donate my organs, if possible. I wrote down Dr. Submarine as my primary physician (Cary helped me again with the spelling), and then I signed my own name to the bottom. And that was it. Paperwork complete; done deal on the advance directive. I probably should have felt relieved, but instead, I still just felt sort of queasy.

Cary and I went out to lunch after we left the law office, but I didn't eat much. That night, after we'd finished making love, I lay awake for hours after she'd fallen asleep, still wondering if I'd made the right choices and worrying about what was in store for me.

Chapter 62

Cary

I woke up first the next morning, our last one in Tennessee.

I rolled over onto my side, and there was Nick, still sound asleep on his back, his arms folded loosely over the top of the covers. I watched his bare chest rise and fall and his eyelids flutter as he slept, and I wondered what he was dreaming. He looked pretty peaceful, so it must have been something good. It couldn't have been much better than the dream I was living, though.

That was how this whole week had felt to me: surreal, like a dream come true. I wasn't just living with Nick Carter these days; I was loving him, and he was loving me back.

Often. I've always been traditional – I'd never moved in with a boyfriend before, not even the last one – but I had no qualms over living in sin with Nick. It was like that Billy Joel song: *Sinners are much more fun...*

...*Only the good die young.* I finished the lyric in my head, and the smile slipped off my face, my stomach somersaulting as I looked over at Nick. How could I be having fun when I'd just spent the previous day with Nick in his lawyer's office, discussing his last wishes? How could I be living a dream when he was stuck in this nightmare?

But it wasn't just him. It was my nightmare now, too – a recurring one. I'd been a part of it from the day I'd met him, from the moment I'd agreed to help him, but I was more than just involved now. I was totally immersed, in way over my head. I knew it was dangerous, to let myself get so attached to someone in Nick's situation. I'd been down this road before, with my mom, and I knew it might lead to heartbreak. But I couldn't change the way I felt; I couldn't stop caring about him. That's why they call it "*falling in love*" – it happens accidentally, and sometimes, it hurts.

Was it *love* I felt for Nick? Probably not, at least, not then. But I was certainly smitten with him, and the way my poor heart fluttered in his presence told me it didn't care about getting broken. He was worth the risk.

My smile returned, and I snuggled closer to him as he slept on. I thought about getting up to cook breakfast, figuring he'd be awake before long, but I wasn't ready to get out of bed. The gray light filtering through the window blinds told me it was going to be another dreary day, and I was in no hurry to start it. We were flying back to Los Angeles that afternoon, but I wished we could stay in bed in that house in Franklin forever. It was peaceful there; everything seemed more relaxed. Until yesterday, we'd hardly spoken of his illness or the upcoming transplant, pushing both to the backs of our minds so that we could enjoy ourselves. I wasn't ready to go back to LA, back to the world of medical testing and treatments that awaited us there. I wanted to stay in this moment as long as I could.

As I burrowed under the down comforter, I felt Nick stir beside me. I shrank back, self-conscious over being caught watching him sleep. "Morning," I said softly, once he opened his eyes.

"Morning," he mumbled back, offering me a sleepy smile. There was drool crusted in the corners of his mouth, and his hair was sticking out all over the place, but I was a girl with a crush and didn't care; the rumpled, disheveled look was sexy on him. "What time is it?" he wondered.

"Nine-thirty. We don't have to get up quite yet."

"Mm... good." He smiled with satisfaction, closing his eyes again. Within seconds, he'd gone back to sleep. I was a little disappointed, but I let him rest. He was going to need it.

While he slept in, I forced myself to get up. I made a big breakfast, using the last of the groceries we'd bought for the week, and cleaned up the kitchen while I waited for him to join me. When he didn't, I loaded the food onto a tray and took it upstairs to him. We ate breakfast together in bed, which was even better, except that it made it that much harder to get up again and get ready to go.

I showered and took my time getting dressed and fixed up for the day, packing carefully as I went. Nick lounged around in bed until the last possible minute, then threw on some clothes and crammed the rest back into his suitcase. It took him all of ten minutes to get ready, and then we were out the door, on our way back to the airport.

"Do we have to go back?" Nick groaned when we got there, hanging back from the check-in kiosk. I could tell he was feeling the same way I was.

"Hm... where could we go instead?" I mused, playfully tapping my chin as I looked up at the list of departures on a screen overhead.

He followed my gaze, a smile creeping across his face. "Hey, there's a flight to Fort Lauderdale leaving in a few hours. We could fly there, then hop on down to the Keys. Bum around on the beach for a few days or go boating..."

"...Just sail off into the sunset and forget all about this whole crazy stem cell thing, right?" I added, smiling.

He nodded. "Exactly."

It was funny how we both wanted to go somewhere familiar, comfortable. I was eyeing the flights to Chicago, missing my dad, but I didn't want Nick to know I was homesick. Instead, I said, "Or what about Denver? We could go hiking, get lost in the mountains."

"Why stop there?" Nick played along. "You want mountains, I want the ocean... We could just grab a connecting flight all the way to Tokyo. Gorgeous city. You haven't tasted sushi till you've had it in Japan."

I wrinkled my nose. "I haven't tasted sushi, period, and don't plan to, thanks."

He shook his head, looking disappointed in me. "Man... you're missing out."

"I'd rather go to Europe... maybe Paris, or London..." I'd never been outside the country before, but all of a sudden, being with a Backstreet Boy had opened a whole new world of possibilities to me. I'd already seen more of the United States than I ever had before, thanks to Nick; I wished I could tour the globe with him, too.

The only problem was, like it or not, my Backstreet Boy had to go back to California. We both knew it, but we pretended otherwise, making more and more elaborate plans for increasingly exotic locations even as we sat on the plane, waiting for our LA-bound flight

to take off. And while Nick was happy to get his feet back on the ground, I don't think either of us were thrilled about landing at LAX.

"*California, here we come, right back where we started from...*" Nick sang under his breath during the cab ride back to his condo.

I looked over at him in surprise, but he was staring out the window and didn't look back. "Did you watch *The OC*?" I asked, giggling.

When he finally turned his head, I was even more amused to see that he was blushing. "Only when I was dating Paris. She had a cameo on one episode, and she would, like, force me to watch that one episode with her over and over again on TiVo."

"Just like Summer got stuck watching outtakes of *The Valley* with Grady Bridges in his Escalade? I remember that episode." I laughed at the incredulous look he gave me. "What? I'm not judging you. *The OC* was a great show! Do you have the DVDs? We could have a marathon while you're having your stem cell transplant."

Nick snorted, shaking his head. He thought I was kidding. I wasn't. It was a good idea!

"So, I have to ask... Seth or Ryan?"

He stuck his tongue out at me.

"Okay, fine... Marissa or Summer?"

"Stop."

"Ohh, I see... Taylor, right?"

"I don't even know who you're talking about anymore."

I grinned. "Well, I'll just have to educate you, then, won't I?"

"No... you won't."

"Of course, Season One is still the best, but the other seasons are worth watching..." I chattered on as long as I could, and by the time we got back to his condo, I, at least, was in a good mood again. And even though he acted like he was annoyed, I suspected Nick was, too. His mouth kept twitching at the corners, like he was trying not to smile.

I had to hand it to him: the trip to Tennessee really had been a great idea. It had been good for him, to get away for awhile, and it had definitely been good for us. I had never felt closer to him or more comfortable in his presence.

For once, I didn't feel like a starstruck groupie who had scored with a celebrity. Despite the lovely house in Franklin, the lavish condo in LA, and the first class plane seats that

had carried us between the two, Nick Carter was just a normal guy. Just a normal guy who happened to be great in bed and still look sexy the morning after. Just a normal guy who liked to tease me and flirt with me, who made my knees go weak with the right look and my heart race with the slightest touch. Just a normal guy who was sick and who needed me, not only to help him through the next few weeks, but to help him forget.

The weekend gave us two more days to relax, but Monday morning found us back at the oncology clinic to meet with Dr. Subramanien, Dr. Schnabeltier, and the rest of the transplant team. The German doctor made a round of introductions and then went over the results of the pre-transplant testing Nick had undergone before we left for Nashville.

"I'm pleased to say that everything checked out," Dr. Schnabeltier announced, smiling. "I think you will make an excellent candidate for transplant, Mr. Carter."

Maybe it was just his accent, because I was used to the way doctors talked, but this one made it sound more like he was nominating Nick for political office than clearing him for a stem cell transplant. Even Nick seemed a little taken aback. He blinked and stammered, "So... so the tests all came out okay, then? You think my heart's in good enough shape and everything?" He looked uncertain, and it seemed like a part of him had been almost hoping the transplant would be a no-go. Maybe he was just scared. I didn't blame him.

Dr. Subramanien spoke up. "You'll be closely monitored during all phases of the treatment, Nick, but we feel you're strong enough to tolerate it."

Then they started talking about each of those phases, laying out a schedule for the whole process. It would start the following week, with chemotherapy and more of the injections I'd given him on the tour, to stimulate stem cell production. Ten days later, they would begin the process of harvesting his stem cells, which could take a few days. Then he would have to undergo a course of high-dose chemo, which would wipe out his immune system, before getting the so-called "transplant" of his own stem cells to help build it back up again. He was looking at spending half of September and probably a good chunk of October in the hospital, and that was if there were no major complications. I assumed I would be spending a lot of that time at the hospital with him.

It was a lot to take in, and even when we finally walked out of the clinic and into the sunlight, Nick looked pale. Neither of us said much during the drive home, but I know we were both doing a lot of thinking. He was probably worrying, still wondering if he had made the right decision. I was just wishing I knew what to say to reassure him. But I'd said it all before, and the truth was, there were no guarantees. The transplant could cure him, or it could kill him, or it could do neither, but we wouldn't know until he tried it. In my mind, it was worth a try, worth the risk, if it could prolong his life. Now, more than ever, I couldn't handle the possibility of losing him.

Life and love are both full of risks. And we were a pair of risk-takers, Nick and I.

Chapter 63

Nick

The first day of my trip through stem cell transplant hell was the last day I felt good.

When I checked into the hospital that morning, I'd been off chemo for seven weeks, and the cancer I'd been diagnosed with was undetectable. I was finally feeling like my old self again, but I should have known it wouldn't last. By the time I checked out, twenty-four hours and one chemo drip later, I'd gone back to feeling like... well, a cancer patient. I spent the rest of the day within running distance of the john – let's just say I had it coming out both ends. It helped to be home, instead of on a tour bus, but needless to say, Cary and I didn't have sex that night.

The rest of the week wasn't much better. "How in the hell did I get through the tour like this?" I griped on Saturday morning, when I woke up still feeling like shit. My "digestive issues" had cleared up, but all week I'd felt run down, like I had the flu. It was a familiar feeling, but I couldn't imagine singing and dancing that way. I didn't even feel like getting out of bed. How had I managed to drag my ass onstage all those nights?

"I always wondered the same thing," Cary replied, offering me a sympathetic smile. She'd been as sweet as ever to me all week, taking care of me and putting up with my complaining. I think I complained a lot more than I had during the tour, and maybe that was the difference. I had nothing to hide and no reason to pull the tough guy routine anymore, so I laid it all out there and acted like a big baby. "I couldn't have done it, if it were me," she added. She didn't seem to mind me being a baby; in fact, I think she liked it better that way. At least I was being honest with her. Truth be told, I liked it better that way, too. It was easier than having to lie.

That was the morning I was supposed to start the shots of some drug called Neupogen, which was the same thing I'd gotten from the doctor in Boston when I was sick on tour. The way I understood it, its job was to kick my bone marrow into high gear and get it to make more blood cells – in this case, stem cells that they'd take out of me in a few days and put back later. Cary had given me the shots before, so I wasn't worried about them. They were just a pain in the ass – or wherever she decided to stick me.

"I'm gonna go get the stuff from the fridge," she said. "Be back in a few."

But she was gone longer than just a few minutes, and when she finally came back, I saw why. "Oh. My. God," I groaned appreciatively, as my eyes panned up and down her body. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Cary tried to pull a sexy smirk, but she was blushing too much for it to have the right effect. It didn't matter, though. The rest of her was just right. She had squeezed herself into a short, skin-tight, white dress that hugged her curves as it buttoned down her body, stopping at mid-thigh. Below that, she wore white thigh-highs and red high heels. Perched on her head was a little white hat with a red cross, and she'd put on a fresh coat of red lipstick to match. My naughty nurse had arrived.

"Not kill you," she purred, slinking closer. "I'm gonna make you feel *much* better." She came around to my side of the bed, managing to look sexy and embarrassed about trying to look sexy at the same time. "Don't you worry," she said, expertly flicking off the cover the syringe in her hand. "This won't hurt a bit. Now drop your shorts, big boy." But on the last two words, she lost it, dissolving into a fit of giggles, her cheeks burning redder than ever. "I can't do this," she gasped, shaking her head, her hand covering her face.

"But you were doing so well." I grinned up at her, totally amused. I could tell she had never role-played before, but I appreciated the effort. "I knew you'd make a hot naughty nurse."

"Well, I'm glad you're enjoying this, at least... watching me degrade myself," grumbled Cary, rolling her eyes. Her face was still bright red.

"Aww, don't say that. You're not degrading yourself; you're... highlighting your assets," I assured her, nodding.

"Right... my assets." She turned around, sticking out her butt. The dress cupped it perfectly, stopping just below. If she bent over a little further... But she straightened up and spun around again before I could even finish the thought. "Okay, you've had your show. Now seriously, let's get this over with." She flashed the syringe again.

I groaned. If only that was just part of the game, too. "Alright..." I sighed, throwing back the covers and pushing up my boxers so she could get at my thigh. I shivered as she swiped it with an alcohol wipe, but felt warm again, too warm, when she leaned over and put her hand on my bare skin. She'd left the top few buttons of her dress unbuttoned, and I stared into her cleavage, refusing to watch while she gave me the shot. I was fantasizing about motorboating those babies when I felt the pinch and the sharp sting of the stuff being injected. Then it over, and she was straightening up again, handing me a little gauze pad to hold against the tiny hole in my leg.

"All done."

"For today..." I had at least three more days of taking these shots to look forward to, before there might be enough stem cells in my system to "harvest," as they kept putting it – like I was a farmer, growing a crop of them. "You gonna wear that outfit for the rest of them?"

She made a face, probably wishing she'd never put it on in the first place. Now that she had, I'd never let her live it down. "We'll see."

"I hope so. That dress... it does a body good."

"My body or yours?"

"Yours... but you can do good things to my body, if you want. C'mere..." Smirking, I pulled her on top of me, grabbing a handful of ass as I helped her get situated. Her dress hitched higher as she straddled my legs, hooking hers around my back. Her heels grazed my bare skin, but I didn't care. It was a good kind of pain; it took away from the throbbing in my thigh. Cary made a great distraction, I decided again, kissing her.

"I guess you are feeling better," she said, smiling.

I smiled back. "You're good medicine. Especially in that dress. I'd feel even better if I could take it off you, though." I waggled my eyebrows at her, already working on the first button.

She blushed again. "I'd feel better, too."

The day of the first "harvest," it was cloudy and unusually cool in California. Of course, that just meant it was, like, seventy, but seventy degrees in September in LA feels pretty cold. I wore long sleeves and jeans into the hospital. Cary tried to compensate for the gloomy weather with a bright yellow top and a plaid scarf that whipped around in the wind as we walked in. She held my hand and matched her pace to mine, even though I was moving pretty slow.

My whole body ached, right down to my bones. According to Cary, the bone pain was a normal side effect of the shots; she said it was a good sign, that my bone marrow must be working overtime, churning out millions of stem cells. I took her word for it, but I still felt like an old, arthritic man, shuffling along beside his much younger, hotter girlfriend. I had to remind myself that I was only a year older than Cary and still looked thirty, even if I didn't feel like it. When I wondered what the hell she was doing with me, I remembered, *Oh yeah... I'm Nick Carter. I'm a hot pop star, and she wants me.*

It was easy enough to tell myself that, but a lot harder to understand why. Cary was beautiful and could sing like a bird; she'd been on *American Idol* and on tour with the Backstreet Boys. The doors were wide open for her; she could do anything she wanted, but instead, she was here with me. I had promised to help her, and instead, I was holding her back.

I felt guilty, knowing I had conned her into helping me, into falling for me, into being with me now. I knew if I said anything, she would swear she wanted to be with me, but I wondered, *How could she?* I hadn't been very good company the last week or so; I was

sick and tired and not up for doing much. She'd already seen me through worse, but I had a feeling that the worst was yet to come, and I felt bad for putting her through it. It couldn't have been easy for her, after losing her mother to cancer, yet she never cried or complained or let on to how hard it was. She was more than I deserved, but I was too selfish to give her up. Cary was good for me, even if I was bad for her.

These were the thoughts messing with my head as I lay on a hospital bed, watching her look around the room. It seemed like she had run out of things to say, and I wasn't up for starting a conversation. We were quiet as we waited for someone to come and set me up for the procedure. I didn't know what to expect; I'd been told several times that a stem cell transplant really wasn't much different from a blood transfusion, so I figured they'd just come in, suck some stem cells out through my port, and I'd be on my way.

As usual, I was wrong.

First, my nurse came in and announced, "The doctor's ordered a catheter placed for the harvest procedure, so I'm going to take you down to radiology for that to be put in."

"Oh, I already have one of those," I said quickly, pulling down the hospital gown to show her my port.

She took one quick glance at it and shook her head. "That's a portacath. It's not designed to handle the amount of blood going in and out of your body during this procedure. You need a Vas-Cath, a special kind of catheter that goes in your neck. It's just temporary," she added quickly, when she saw the look on my face.

"My *neck*?" I repeated, staring at her.

"Usually the neck. It can also go in through the groin, if you'd prefer that." She gave me a wry smile, already knowing what my answer to that would be.

"Um, sorry, but hell no. I don't want another tube coming out of my neck *or* my..." I left it there, shaking my head. "Just, no. I thought this was supposed to work like a blood transfusion."

"It is similar. Your blood will go out one tube and into a pheresis machine, which will take out the stem cells and send the rest of your blood back into your body through another tube," she explained patiently, even though I was being a pain in the ass. "If you don't want the catheter, we'll have to put an IV in each of your arms, which means you won't be able to move much during the harvest, which takes about four hours. Also, you'll have to get new IVs put in each time you come in. If you choose to get the Vas-Cath, your hands will be free, and once it's in, it can stay in for the next few days, until they collect enough stem cells. Then it can be taken out."

"Okay, fine," I sighed, caving in. I knew I was way too fidgety to handle lying in bed for four hours without being able to move my arms. A tube in my neck couldn't be as bad as that – and it was definitely going in my neck, *not* the other place. The portacath had

turned out to be okay, not nearly as bad as it had sounded, so I figured this Vas-Cath thing would be the same way.

Wrong again.

When I got back from radiology, I had a giant tube hanging out of my jugular, which split into two different ends, like the Y adaptors I used to hook up my electronics. They hooked me up pretty much the same way, plugging two IVs into the ends of the catheter – line in, line out. Both lines ran dark red with my blood, as it was pumped out of my body, through this giant, noisy machine next to my bed, and back into my veins through the other line. My arms were free, but the catheter was taped to my neck so it wouldn't get pulled out. It was threaded through my vein, all the way down to my heart, and every time I turned my head, I could feel it pulling on the inside. It freaked me out, and it hurt like a bitch.

While I lay there getting tortured and feeling sorry for myself, Cary tried to look on the bright side. At one point, after she'd been sitting at my bedside for a couple of hours, keeping me company, she stood up to stretch. "Look at this," she said, poking one of the IV bags hanging above the pheresis machine. It was a small bag, about a quarter full of red liquid. "Those are your stem cells." It just looked like blood to me, but Cary seemed impressed. "There are probably millions of cells just in that little sample."

Even so, they told me I'd probably have to come back two more times just to get enough. I was discharged with instructions for how to take care of the new catheter, a prescription for painkillers, and an appointment for more harvesting the next day. When it was time to go, I looked at Cary and said, "How am I supposed to just waltz out of here with this thing hanging out of my neck?" I flicked the ends of the catheter in disgust, making them swing. I felt like a freak. "What if somebody recognizes me?"

My interview with Ellen wasn't scheduled to air until the following week, so the public was still in the dark about my illness. I didn't want them to find out the wrong way, through paparazzi photos snapped of me looking like this. It's not like I expected a whole herd of paparazzi to be hanging out at the hospital, unless they'd followed someone like Lindsay Lohan or Britney Spears there, but still, we were in LA. They could be lurking anywhere, waiting for a sighting.

"Here," Cary said, taking off the scarf she'd been wearing. I hadn't paid much attention to it before, but when she handed it to me, I recognized it and snickered.

"Is this one of Leighanne's Wylee things?" I asked, holding it up.

She blushed and nodded. "It's the Brian tour scarf," she mumbled, and on closer inspection, I saw Brian's signature going down one end of the scarf in big, iridescent lettering. The other end was bedazzled with the Wylee logo in little, silver rhinestones.

"You *bought* one of these?" I asked, laughing again. AJ and I had ripped on Brian behind Leighanne's back about being such a tool when it came to his wife's line. He was

always modeling scarves and hats and bags for her. We would never let him live down carrying around the little man-purse she'd made for him on the *Unbreakable* tour, but still, he had worn it onstage for the encore every single show. The guy was completely pussy-whipped then and still is. But I guess he knows, just like the rest of us, that only BSB fans buy Leighanne's stuff, and only because she's the wife of a Backstreet Boy, so he keeps on promoting it.

"I like it!" Cary insisted, fingering the rhinestoned end.

"You like it 'cause it's got Brian's name on it," I teased, grinning at her.

"So what if I do? Here, let me help you put it on." She took the scarf back and started to sling it around my neck, but I twisted away.

"You think I'm gonna-? *Fuck*," I hissed, feeling the catheter pull again. I touched the dressing tenderly, making sure it was still in place.

"You okay?"

I grimaced. "Yeah. But you think I'm gonna walk out wearing *this* fruity thing around my neck instead?"

Cary shrugged. "Take it or leave it. If you end up on TMZ tonight, do you want them questioning your sexuality, or wondering what you have implanted in your neck?"

They didn't need a pastel, plaid scarf to question my sexuality; that kind of speculation was nothing new. I shrugged. "Point taken. Go ahead. Just, please, don't tie it in a bow or anything."

She laughed. "Guys *do* wear scarves, you know."

"Not straight guys. And not purple plaid scarves with sparkly shit on them."

"Okay, okay, fine... I'll put it on backwards, so the sparkly stuff doesn't show. It's really not *purple*, by the way; it's more of a lilac." She grinned at the look of pure disgust I gave her, as she fashioned the scarf around my neck. By the time she was done, I'm sure I looked like a total queen, but better than that than a sideshow freak.

As we left the hospital – quickly – I wondered what I would do the next day. Wear a turtleneck? Pop my collar? There really aren't many good ways for guys to cover their necks without looking like pretentious douchebags. I decided the *8 Mile* look – a hoodie, with the hood up – would be my best option. I'd remember that for tomorrow.

I hadn't completely realized it yet then, but slowly, the last shreds of normalcy I had clung to were being stripped away. At some point soon, I would no longer care about what I looked like or what people thought. And I would never feel "normal" again.

Chapter 64

Cary

The countdown was on. T-minus eight days till transplant.

When that thought crossed my mind, I had a sudden flash of Brian, in the middle of a crowded coliseum, dirt-streaked and dressed in a gladiator's armor, shouting, "*The countdown is on!*"

In spite of the tension, I smiled.

Nick noticed. "Whatcha grinnin' 'bout?" he asked.

I turned to look at him, still smiling. "Remember those commercials you did, for *Millennium*? 'The countdown is on?'"

He smiled, too. "Oh yeah... we had a blast shootin' those. I was, like, swinging on this tire swing in front of green screen."

"In the jungle," I remembered, picturing the younger, heavier version of him, with his floppy, blonde hair and boundless energy. He had aged well; the man sitting next to me was way more attractive than I'd found him back then. When he smiled, I didn't notice the shadows around his eyes; his smile lit up his whole face. Yet it was obvious, just by the way he was curled up in the corner of the couch, that he didn't have that same energy.

"Yeah, and Brian was a gladiator. AJ was a royal guard. Howie was..." He stopped and scrunched up his nose, trying to remember. I even had to stop and think, but Nick came up with it before I did. "Oh yeah, he was running with the bulls. And Kev... what the hell did Kevin do in his?"

Now *that* one I knew right away. "He was in Egypt, driving through the desert with a surfboard," I replied quickly, remembering how hot he'd been, in his sleeveless shirt and sunglasses. Those Kentucky cousins have nice arms. "Surf's up..."

"...and the countdown is on," Nick added in unison, nodding. We grinned at each other. "What made you think of that?"

I didn't tell him what I'd really been thinking. I wanted to take his mind off tomorrow, not make him dwell on it more. "Oh, nothing... just watching the VMAs always takes me back to 1999. You know, back when MTV was still mostly about music?"

Nick laughed. “Yeah... that was a good year.” He was still smiling, but the smile had changed. It was crooked and wistful. He looked away, fixing his eyes back on the TV screen, where Kim Kardashian was introducing the next performer. As I watched his profile, sadness swelled up inside me. I felt my throat tighten, and for a few seconds, I couldn’t breathe.

I heard the high-pitched screams for Justin Bieber, who had taken the stage with his troupe of dancers, and I thought of Nick and the Boys doing “Larger Than Life,” back in ’99, when they had been larger than life and on top of the world. I had watched those VMAs with Jessica, when we were both still teenagers and Backstreet Boys fans, and in my wildest dreams, I never could have imagined I’d be sitting next to Nick Carter to watch the 2010 awards. Just like Nick probably never imagined he’d have to trade touring for cancer treatments.

The second leg of the U.S. tour should have wrapped at the end of August, but instead, it had never started. Fan speculation had been running rampant since the abrupt announcement that the tour had been postponed, without explanation. The official reason wouldn’t be given until the next day, on the season premiere of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. There was a lot of buzz surrounding Nick’s interview; everyone knew it was going to be big news, but no one knew just how bad. They didn’t know Nick would be watching himself from his hospital bed.

He was scheduled to start chemo again the following morning, an intense, high-dose regimen that was meant to wipe out any last cancer cells lurking in his body – and his immune system along with them. It would be a rough week of treatment before the actual transplant, and a long recovery afterward. Already, I could see the process taking its toll on him. The G-CSF shots he’d gotten before the stem cell harvest had made him achy and sore; the bone pain was bad enough to keep him awake at night, and he tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. It hadn’t helped that, for three days, he’d had the Vas-Cath in his neck to contend with. That had been taken out on Friday, after they’d collected enough stem cells to use for the transplant, and he was left with a healing puncture wound in the side of his neck, like a vampire bite. “Maybe you can get a neck tattoo, like AJ,” I’d suggested, after he complained about having a scar there. That was my role, at this point – to say and do whatever I could to make him feel better.

On his last night of freedom before he was locked up in the hospital, that meant cooking a nice dinner, watching the VMAs, and trying to take Nick’s mind off the torture that awaited him in the morning. I’d grilled shish kebabs with thick pieces of steak, chicken, and fresh fruit and vegetables, taking advantage of the opportunity to load him up with protein and nutrients before he started the chemo. Once his blood counts dropped again, he’d be back on a neutropenic diet – no fresh fruit, no raw vegetables or sushi, nothing that hadn’t been carefully cooked to get rid of bacteria. He would be under constant threat of infection until his body built up its defenses again. It scared me, to think of him surviving cancer, only to succumb to an infection.

I could tell Nick was scared, too. He'd been quiet all night, and the silence persisted as we got ready for bed. "Are you going to set an alarm for tomorrow?" I asked, poking my head out the bathroom doorway.

Nick was already in bed, lying on one side to make room for me. "Yeah... guess I should," he mumbled, reaching over to fumble with the clock on his bedside table. "What time?"

"They said we should be at the hospital by eight, so... six-thirty? That way we can both shower and eat breakfast before we have to leave."

"Okay," was all he said.

I ducked back into the bathroom to finish brushing my teeth. By the time I came out, he had already shut off the lights in the bedroom. Only the flickering glow of the TV mounted on the wall lit my path to his bed. He didn't reach for me when I slid under the covers next to him. I didn't expect us to make love that night, but I thought he'd at least want to cuddle awhile. He stayed on his side, though, and I stayed on mine, lying still on my side while he flopped around, shaking the mattress in his struggle to find a comfortable position. Finally, I said, "Would it help if I went back to the guest room, so you can spread out?"

"What?" His voice drifted through the darkness. "No, no, you don't have to do that."

"I don't mind." I sat up, squinting over at him. "I want you to be able to sleep."

"That won't help."

"Did you take a painkiller?" His doctor had recommended Tylenol or Advil for what he described as "mild" bone pain. I thought he should have prescribed Vicodin or something equally strong.

"That doesn't help either."

Nick was as stubborn as ever, shooting down all my suggestions, trying to tough it out himself. I tried to be patient, wondering what else might work. "Would it help if I gave you a massage?" I offered. I remembered how I used to stand behind my mom and rub her back and shoulders when she was hurting; she always made a big deal out of how good it felt. I'm sure she was just trying to make me feel better, as much as I was trying to do the same for her, but it did seem to help her relax. Who doesn't like having their back rubbed?

"I dunno," Nick said doubtfully. "You can try, if you want. You don't have to."

"I want to." I reached over and turned on the light by my side of the bed. "Flip over," I told Nick, patting the mattress. He pushed back the covers and rolled over onto his stomach. He had complained about the pain in his hips and lower back the most, so I

started there. “Tell me if it’s too tender,” I warned him, as I gently touched the small of his back. “I don’t want to make it worse.”

“You won’t.”

“Okay.” Leaning over him, I started to massage. At first, my hands were light and careful; I rubbed his back in slow, soft circles with my fingers, grazing the length of his spine with my fingernails, tracing each of his tattoos. When this didn’t seem to bother him, I dug deeper. I could feel the tightness of the muscles in his back, muscles he’d been clenching in pain, and I used the heels of my hands to work out the tension in them. “Is this helping?” I asked hopefully.

He groaned into his pillow in response, and I immediately pulled back, mistaking it for a moan of pain, instead of pleasure. But he begged, “Don’t stop. Keep going; it feels awesome. Your hands are warm.”

Heating pad, I thought, wondering if he had one, for when I was done. I went back to massaging, smiling with relief. It felt good to be able to do something for him, and I certainly didn’t mind running my hands all over his body. I finished with his back and moved lower, my fingers slipping under the waistband of his boxers as I worked his hips. I could feel the tension easing from his body, as it grew less rigid and relaxed into the mattress. His legs felt heavy, like dead weight in my hands, as I massaged the backs of his thighs and calves. I heard his breathing slow down and even out, and for a minute, I thought he’d fallen asleep. I slipped out of bed and tiptoed around to his bedside table to get the remote and shut off the TV, but when I crawled back into bed next to him, I saw that his eyes were still open. “Try to sleep,” I whispered, shutting off the light again.

“I can’t,” he muttered back. “I can’t shut off my brain.”

It wasn’t just the pain making him restless, but his own worrisome thoughts. I understood completely. “I know,” I admitted. “I’m the same way when something’s bothering me.” I wasn’t ready to confess that I was worried for him, too, but for once, it seemed like Nick was.

“I’m dreading tomorrow. It’s gonna suck, isn’t it?”

As much as I wanted to make him feel better, I couldn’t give him false hope. “Probably.” I heard him sigh. “But it’ll be worth it, if it cures your cancer, won’t it?”

“*If*.” He practically spat out the word.

“You’ll get through it,” I tried to encourage him. “It won’t be a piece of cake, but it can’t be much worse than doing concerts while you’re on chemo, and you did that. You made it through the tour, and you’ll make it through this.”

“I’d rather still be touring,” he said stonily.

“I know you’re scared,” I added, and he didn’t argue with that. “It’s okay... It’ll be okay...” I slid closer to him, until I could feel his warm breath on my face, and wrapped my arm around him. I was lying on my other arm, with my hand up by my face, and after a few seconds, I felt his hand snake up to grasp it, his fingers entwining with mine. The closeness seemed to bring us both comfort, because that was how I fell asleep – my body curled up against his, our hands clasped together – and when I woke hours later, Nick, too, was sleeping soundly.

I closed my eyes again, blocking out the first hint of daylight outside his bedroom windows. I didn’t want morning to come.

Chapter 65

Nick

“T-minus seven, before my system shuts down... matter fact, I think I’m ‘bout to shut it down right now...” I sang to myself, as I watched the chemo slowly drip into the IV line that connected to my port. It was about as exciting as watching paint dry, or daytime television.

I’d given up on flipping through the channels and handed the remote to Cary, who had turned on one of those baby shows on TLC. She looked over at me and giggled when she realized what I was singing. “You skipped my favorite part!”

“What’s that?”

“*Bang, bang, choo-choo train, baby put that thing on me...*” she sang, grinning.

“Girl, I know you ain’t makin’ fun of our lyrics...”

“Of course not,” she insisted sweetly. “They’re, um... catchy!”

I stuck my tongue out at her.

“You must be feeling okay if you’re still up to singing and making faces at me,” she added.

I shrugged. It was still early.

We’d made it to the hospital on time, thanks to Cary hurrying my ass along, and I was admitted to the hematology unit on the sixth floor. The day had started with a blood draw to check my counts before chemo, and once the labwork came back, they hooked me up with that.

Today's cocktail was laced with a drug I hadn't had before, something called busulfan. "This one's a classic," said the nurse who set up my IV. "It's been used to treat cancer since the 'fifties." I wasn't interested in a history lesson. I didn't really want to hear the list of side effects for it, either, but I guess it was her job to tell me before I gave my consent. Seizures were one of the biggies with this one, so before I could get the chemo, I had to take a pill that was supposed to prevent those. I took one for nausea, too, just in case.

You know it's bad when you need drugs to treat all the problems caused by the drugs that are supposed to treat your cancer. Sometimes I wondered if I'd be better off not taking anything. The whole hippie, holistic route looked pretty tempting right about then. But I gave my consent and put my trust in modern medicine instead. As much as it scared me, I was too afraid not to.

And hey, I gotta hand it to modern medicine – the anti-seizure drug worked. I got through the first dose of chemo without any twitching. I wish I could say the same for the anti-nausea stuff, but just the smell of the lunch tray they brought me at noon was enough to turn my stomach. I spent a good chunk of the afternoon throwing up, or trying not to. Needless to say, I didn't eat my lunch.

At four o'clock, when the *Ellen* show came on, my nurse was back to start my second batch of chemo. She looked at me in surprise when she overhead Ellen saying, "... and if you're a Backstreet Boys fan, you won't want to miss my exclusive interview with Nick Carter, in which he opens up about the reason for the recent cancellation of their summer tour."

"Yep," I said flatly, "that's me, and this is the reason." I flicked the piece of tubing she had just plugged into my port.

She smiled, even though I wasn't really trying to be funny. "I'm sure you'll be back to touring in no time, once those stem cells work their magic."

I rolled my eyes at her back when she walked away. They had told me it would take around a hundred days for my immune system to completely recover from this, which meant I wouldn't be touring again for a long time. Not until after the new year. The cruise was out, too, though we hadn't made any announcements about that yet. There'd been plenty of speculation, though, after the tour was postponed. The fans were freaking out, and I couldn't blame them. I wished I hadn't promised Ellen the exclusive interview, so I could have given them an explanation sooner, but at this point, it didn't matter. Within the hour, the news would be out, and the secret I'd carried around for so long would be shared with the world. I just had to sit back and watch the fallout from the confines of my hospital bed.

It was weird watching myself on TV. The interview had gone by in a blur, and I'd sort of blocked out most of the details, but I did remember being nervous, like I could shit my pants any second. So I was amazed at how calm and composed I seemed in front of the

camera. The stylists on Ellen's show had worked their magic to make me look healthy, even as I announced that I wasn't. I looked like I was ready for a photo shoot, not a stem-cell transplant, with my hair styled and my face all bronzed. I hardly recognized myself. Who was that guy? That couldn't be me.

"...So the official name for what you have is *Pre-cursor T-Cell Lymph-o-blastic Lymphoma*?" Ellen was asking, making a big production out of squinting at her notes on the card in her hand and struggling to sound out the complicated medical terms. "That's quite a mouthful. There's not, like, an easy acronym for that, is there?"

The guy she was interviewing chuckled nervously and rubbed his mouth. Now that looked more like me. "Not that I know of, no."

"Well, there should be. What would it be?" She looked down at the card again. "P.T.L.L.? Ptll..." she mumbled, stringing all the letters together. "Sounds like 'piddle.' So, Nick, you've been diagnosed with Piddle?"

I laughed again, both onscreen and in real life. "Um, yeah, I was diagnosed this past spring."

"And what can you tell us about that? How did you find out?"

"Well, um... I started noticing some symptoms when we were touring overseas – fevers, a nagging cough, some shortness of breath, some chest pain. I was worried, 'cause I was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy a couple of years ago, so I went and saw my cardiologist as soon as we got back to the States. He said my heart was fine, but noticed a weird mass on the X-rays, so he sent me to a different specialist, who made the diagnosis."

"And that was in March?" Ellen asked, and I nodded. "So I'm sure your fans are wondering, why did you wait so long to announce this? I mean, people may not know this, but you were out on the road with the Backstreet Boys, touring, working, for the first half of the summer... all while going through cancer treatments behind the scenes, am I right?"

"That's right."

"So... what made you decide to keep it a secret and keep working, and why are you finally coming clean and postponing the rest of the tour dates now?"

On TV, I cleared my throat and wiped my mouth again, shifting my weight in my chair. "Well, honestly, I kept it a secret so that I *could* keep working. I didn't want to let it affect my whole life and ruin the plans we as a group had made, so I thought I could just tough it out and finish the tour. You know, I've been performing professionally since the age of, like, thirteen, so I'm used to going onstage even when I'm under the weather. I just got my treatments on the road, in between shows, and did the best I could to keep up with our schedule."

“Which is probably pretty grueling, right? I’m sure that wasn’t easy.”

I shook my head, chuckling again. “No. Definitely not.”

“And what kind of treatments are we talking? Chemotherapy?”

“Yeah, chemo. I did six cycles of that, and I just went through a bunch of tests and scans a few weeks ago to see how the cancer responded, and it was successful, so I’m in remission now.”

“That’s terrific news. And you look great, by the way. This is your real hair?” Ellen asked, reaching out to touch my head.

I laughed, ducking my head to let her feel. “Yeah, yeah... I’ve been lucky so far; it hasn’t fallen out.”

“I’m sure your adoring fans are grateful for that. Did you have other side effects, though, from the chemo?”

“Oh yeah... definitely. It was pretty rough.” In the interview, I hadn’t elaborated much, but now I thought back to the mouth sores and diarrhea and constant fatigue, all the fun side effects I had to look forward to again. I’d been nauseous all afternoon, and they had warned me that my hair would probably fall out this time around. I hadn’t bothered to ask Cary for ice; it wasn’t worth it. If I went bald at this point, oh well. I had nothing to hide anymore.

“I’m sure,” Ellen sympathized. “And even though your disease is in remission, you’re not completely done with treatment, correct?”

“Right. I have what’s called a high-grade lymphoma,” I explained, sounding a lot like I actually knew what I was talking about, “which means it’s pretty aggressive and could still relapse and start spreading again, so I’m going to have a stem cell transplant, which will hopefully prevent it from coming back and possibly even cure me. So I’m making arrangements for that right now, and that’s really why we made the decision to postpone the rest of the summer tour dates, so I could get started with that process and get it over with.”

“And what kind of timeframe are you looking at with that? That’s a pretty intense ordeal, isn’t it, a stem cell transplant?”

“Yeah, unfortunately.” I laughed again – I guess I did that a lot when I was nervous, though Ellen made it easy. “Yeah, I’ll probably be in the hospital for a few weeks at the end of August or September for that, and then I’ll finish recovering at home. Hopefully, if all goes as planned, we’ll be able to reschedule those tour dates early next year, but it’s too soon to know for sure right now.”

“Absolutely, and I’m sure your fans understand and just want you to focus on your health, at this point. You’re going to have a lot of people around the world praying for you and wishing you well, and of course, we here on the show wish you the best, too.” Ellen was starting to wrap up the interview. “Nick, thank you so much for taking the time to talk about this,” she said, reaching out to shake my hand. “Good luck with your recovery, and please, keep us posted on how it’s going.”

“Going just swell,” I muttered, looking down at the tube coming out of my chest and the puke basin in my lap.

On TV, the camera had cut back to Ellen in her studio. “That interview was taped back in August, about a month ago, when our show was on hiatus for the summer. We checked in with Nick’s people just this morning, and they confirmed that he is in the hospital right now, getting ready for his stem cell transplant, so we wish him the best with that. Nick, if you’re watching, we’re all anxious to check in with you and see how you’re doing, so if you’re up for calling in or doing a satellite interview from your hospital room, we’d love to have you. After the break, we’ll be back with more special guests and surprises – the good kind, people, I promise, no more bad news – as our VMA wrap-up continues. Stay tuned!”

As the show went to commercials, I looked over at Cary. She gave me a grim smile, her lips pressed tight together. “Well...” she offered.

I sighed. “Shit’s probably hitting the fan right about now. Dare me to check my Twitter?”

She giggled, her smile breaking open. “Could be pretty scary. I bet you’ve got thousands of tweets coming your way already.”

“Yeah... the fans are gonna be flippin’ out.”

“But only because they care about you. You’re going to get all kinds of well wishes and prayers and encouraging thoughts... You really should try to read some of them.”

I have to admit, I was curious. I logged onto Twitter on my iPhone and clicked into my @replies. There were always way too many of them to actually keep up with, but that day, it was insane. I hadn’t even read one of them when a message appeared at the top of the screen to tell me I already had a hundred more new tweets. It would be impossible to read all of them, but I did scroll through a few pages of them. Cary was right; most of them were encouraging messages.

DelphinaCarter @nickcarter Nick I saw the Ellen interview and think you are a strong person to make it this far, it had me in tears. I'm rooting for you to make it :)

MusicAddict90 @nickcarter Nick, we all love you and support you through this horrible trial that you are facing right now. All of us fans are praying for you.

Their heartfelt words made me smile. A few of them even made me laugh.

LenniluvsBrian @nickcarter Nick you've GOT be get well again & be A-Ok!!! Or I'M going after your cancer with my pointy sticks & eliminator ray gun!!! GET WELL!!!!

ForeverRebel @nickcarter Nick, you're so DRATW, I can't believe this is true...ohhh my god...so intense. Please don't die & become a Zombie Double Rainbow!

Then, of course, there were the overemotional fans who tweeted me in all caps and broken English, who I imagined sobbing over their keyboards, screaming at me to feel better through their computer screens. And then there were the ones who were so desperate, they would even use my illness as a way to get close to me.

KujoBites @nickcarter You should hire someone (me) to document your experience for the fans. I'm a professional photographer, journalist & web designer. Pick me!

I rolled my eyes and showed Cary. She smirked and shook her head. “I’m glad you didn’t reveal that you basically hired me to be with you on the road, or I’d probably have hate tweets coming my way from people like that right about.”

“Aww... you sayin’ chicks will still fight over a dude with cancer?”

“You bet they will, when that dude is Nick Carter.”

“Even when I got tubes hangin’ out of me and a puke bucket ready to fill up?” I asked, waving the (empty) basin.

“Even then,” she said, smiling, and leaned in to kiss me.

It was a nice gesture, but it would have been a lot nicer if the smell of her cherry Chapstick hadn’t made my queasy stomach start churning again. All of a sudden, I felt the horrible, burning sensation of vomit rolling up my throat, and in desperation, I pushed her out of the way and brought the puke basin up under my chin, just in time.

“Oh no,” I heard Cary say, but she was right there in an instant, rubbing my back as I leaned over and threw up. There was really nothing in my stomach left to barf up, at that point, so it was mostly just thick, slimy strings of drool and stomach acid. Still, I dry-heaved for a few more minutes, until the urge finally passed. Then I slumped back against my pillows, feeling exhausted and embarrassed.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” I mumbled to Cary, who was already at the sink, rinsing out the basin. I felt terrible for hurling after she’d kissed me. What was she supposed to think?

“No, *I’m* sorry,” she apologized quickly, turning around. When she brought the basin back, I saw that her cheeks were bright red. She looked equally horrified. “I shouldn’t have done that. Are you feeling better?”

No, I thought. My stomach hurt, and my throat burned, and I felt shaky and weak, like I had the flu. But I lied and said, “Yeah, thanks. And don’t be sorry; it ain’t your fault.”

She seemed to accept that, settling back into her chair next to my bed, and we didn’t speak of it again. But I don’t think she ever wore that flavor of Chapstick again, either.

Chapter 66

Cary

“Two down, only...” Nick looked up at the ceiling as he paused to think. “...sixteen more to go,” he finished morosely, sighing as he slumped down in his bed.

It was after six o’clock, and the nurse had just finished disconnecting his second dose of chemo for the day. “Call if you need anything,” she told Nick on her way out. “I’m off soon, but the night nurse will take care of you.”

It was almost time for shift change, I realized. This nurse was going home, and another one would be coming on, and we were still there. It had been a long day. I was used to long days working in a hospital setting. I wasn’t used to long days of just sitting around one. Being the visitor reminded me of going to see my mom in the hospital and, later, the hospice. Those days had been long and boring, too. My dad had limited my visits as much as he could, for my own good, but towards the end, I’d been allowed to see her as long and as often as I wanted. I cherished every last minute I spent with her before she passed, but I sure didn’t miss those days, and sitting at Nick’s bedside brought them back.

Of course, this was different. Nick wasn’t dying. He was doing this to get better, and even though he wasn’t feeling well, he managed to stay in pretty good spirits, probably for my benefit. I tried to do the same for him. “Well hey, you’re one-ninth of the way there, then,” I said, sticking my thumbs up and smiling, as if that fraction actually sounded encouraging. Really, it sounded terrible. The first four days of this conditioning chemotherapy regimen were intense – he was to get chemo four times a day, every six hours, and each dose took two hours to infuse. That meant he only got four hours to recover in between doses. It was going to be a long night, too.

“One-ninth... yippee,” replied Nick, in a complete monotone. I giggled, and he responded with a half-smile. Then he pulled out his phone from under the covers and said, “I guess I should get this over with, while I still can.”

“Get what over with?”

“Twitter.” He wiggled the phone in the air. “Gotta tweet something, don’t I? Let ‘em all know I ain’t planning on kicking the bucket anytime soon.”

I smiled, feeling the fangirl flare up inside me. “Good idea. That’ll mean a lot to them.”

“Take my picture,” he said, thrusting the phone at me. “I wanna document the fact that, two rounds in, I *still* have more hair on my head than AJ and Brian combined.”

I laughed as I took his phone, feeling my spirits lift. I knew he didn’t feel well; he hadn’t been able to keep anything down all day. But the fact that he had kept his sense of humor gave me hope. Laughter really is the best medicine, and a positive attitude goes a long way. If he could keep on smiling, he could get through this. “Smile!” I sang out, as I held the phone up.

“Hold on,” Nick said suddenly, tossing the covers back. “Got an idea.”

He got out of bed, digging his boxers out of his butt as he walked across the room, with the open-backed hospital gown flapping around his legs. I aimed the camera phone after him, snickering to myself. It was tempting to take a picture from that angle to post for the fans, but I wasn’t that cruel. I watched him pick up a stainless steel washbasin the nurse had left behind, filled with warm, soapy water for cleaning off the Betadine she’d used to disinfect the skin around his port. He carried it into the bathroom, the water sloshing up the sides, and closed the door partway. I heard him running water and fumbling around, and after a couple of minutes, he came back out, with the metal bowl upside down on his head.

I started laughing. “What are you-?” I started to ask, then ended up just shaking my head. He was so weird sometimes. I just sat back and watched as he stood, tall and proud, next to his IV stand, wearing the basin for a hat, and saluted. “Is that the pose you want for your picture?” I asked, starting to sort of get what he was going for.

“Yessir,” he replied, still saluting. “I mean, ma’am.”

I laughed and shook my head again. “Okay...” I snapped the photo with his phone and handed it back to him.

“Perfect,” he muttered, grinning as he studied the screen. He took the bowl off his head, climbed back into bed, and started texting furiously, his thumbs clicking away on the keypad. After a few minutes, he handed me back his phone and said, “Check it out.”

I looked down at the screen, which showed Nick's Twitter page. He had tweeted twice. The first one said, *Well I guess you've all heard the news by now. This SCT shizzz sucks dookie balls already but I'm hangin in there. Thanks for your support!* I smiled and read further up the screen. His second tweet said, *Kernel Carter reporting from the trenches. I'm fightin the good fight and I'm gonna win this war so never fear, my troops!* and had a link to his Twitpic. I clicked and giggled again at the picture I'd taken. It wasn't exactly attractive, between the hospital gown and the bowl on his head, but I knew the fans would love and appreciate it.

"Very nice, Kernel Carter," I said. "Though if you wanted to be a kernel, you should have just put popcorn on your head."

He looked at me blankly. "Huh?"

"You spelled 'Colonel' wrong. Like a kernel of popcorn."

"What? Oh." He held out his hand for his phone, and I gave it back to him. "How's it s'posed to be spelled?"

I spelled it out for him. He didn't believe me at first, that C-O-L-O-N-E-L could spell "kernel," but when he showed me the phone again a few minutes later, another tweet had appeared on his page: *Sorry my bad, I meant colonel.*

Smiling, I said, "I'm sure most of your fans aren't really grammar Nazis."

"No, they are," he replied, without missing a beat. "I get called on that kind of shit all the time."

I laughed. As I started to pass the phone back again, it vibrated in my hand and started playing what I quickly recognized as the theme from *Psycho*. Startled, I looked down and saw that it was an incoming call. For just an instant, I forgot it was Nick's phone in my hand, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw the name "Mom" flashing. But of course, it was Nick's mom calling.

"Who is it?" he asked, reaching for the phone. Somehow, I already knew he wouldn't want to answer once he found out. That was why I made the split-second decision to answer for him.

"Hello?" I said timidly. At first, there was no response, and I thought I must not have been quick enough; the call had gone to voicemail.

But then a woman's voice asked sharply, "Who is this? Is Nick with you?"

"He's right here," I replied and passed the phone quickly to Nick, who was shooting daggers at me with his eyes. He flipped me off as he reluctantly took the phone back, but I knew he didn't mean it. Or, at least, I hoped he didn't. He couldn't be too mad at

me; he had to have known he'd have to talk to his parents sooner or later. Knowing how he tended to procrastinate, I was just helping him make it sooner, rather than later.

Nick sighed heavily, then raised the phone to his ear. "Hey, Mom," he said. Even without speaker phone on, I could hear her voice coming out of his phone, rapid and shrill. I couldn't make out exactly what she was saying, but the tone was enough for me to make a pretty good guess. Nick sighed again. "I know, Mom... I'm sorry," he added, raking a hand through his hair.

I felt like an eavesdropper, listening in on his end of what was sure to be an awkward conversation. Standing up, I waited until I'd caught his eye to mouth, *I'll be back*. Then I walked out, leaving him to talk to his mom in private. I couldn't imagine how that was going to go; obviously, she had seen the Ellen interview or found out the news from someone who had. Either way, she'd just heard it for the first time, because as far as I knew, Nick still hadn't told her anything. No matter what kind of reputation Jane Carter had, I couldn't blame her for being upset. No mother should have to find out about her son's cancer on national television.

As I walked the halls of Nick's unit, I tried to remember how my parents had first told me about my mom's illness. I was only three when she was diagnosed, so I know they didn't tell me much, just that Mommy was "sick" and would be spending time in the hospital and taking medicine to make her feel better. It wasn't until I was older that I understood that cancer was different from the flu or the chickenpox.

I do remember being told about her relapse. I was nine and came home from school to find both my parents already home, which was weird. Usually my dad worked later at the factory. But he hadn't been to work at all that day; he'd been at the doctor's office with my mom, going over her test results. They sat me down and explained that the cancer had come back, but that Mom would be doing chemo again to make it go away. It had worked the first time around, so I don't think I was really that scared, at first. I was more disappointed than anything, remembering how her hair had fallen out before, and how she'd spent a lot of time in bed, too tired to play with me. Even though I was old enough to know how serious cancer was, at that point, it didn't even cross my mind that the chemo might not work the second time. I held onto that naïve notion for as long as possible, something my parents encouraged, until my mother made the decision to stop treatment and enter the hospice to die.

I wasn't naïve anymore. Now I knew too much. I knew that even though things had been looking up for Nick, there were no guarantees that the chemo would keep on working, or that this stem cell transplant would lead to a cure. He could still relapse. He could die. It terrified me, to think of that happening. I cared about him so much, and I'd gotten closer to him than I had ever expected to. Our relationship had crossed the lines of nurse-patient and fan-celebrity a long time ago, a fact which made it that much harder to consider the possibility of losing him.

I didn't want to think about it. I had to distract myself, stat, or I would lose it. Out there in the hall, away from Nick, it would be all too easy to have a breakdown and let out all

the feelings I'd been trying to hide in his presence, for the sake of staying upbeat in front of him. The truth was, it was harder than I'd thought it would be to sit around his hospital room and watch him suffer through this new cycle of chemo. Somehow, it hadn't been as bad on the tour bus. Maybe it was just the sight and smell of the hospital that made it really hit home for me.

Suddenly anxious to get off the oncology floor, I took the elevator down to the ground level, where the gift shop and cafeteria were located. My stomach growled at the smell of food, but I didn't get anything. I'd already ordered Nick's and my dinner; it would probably be delivered to the room by the time I got back. He hadn't been able to keep much down, but I was starving. I tried to take my mind off that, too, by wandering around the gift shop. There was a whole wall of beautiful floral arrangements, but I didn't buy any; they would have cheered up Nick's room, but flowers weren't allowed in the stem cell transplant unit. Neither were stuffed animals. There was a decent selection of books, but as I browsed through them, I realized I didn't know what kind of books Nick liked, or if he even liked to read at all. I settled for a *People* magazine and a book of Sudoku puzzles, figuring those might provide an alternative to TV or the internet to help pass the time.

Down the hall from the gift shop, I found a quiet place to sit. I set my bag down next to me on the bench and pulled out my cell phone. As long as Nick was talking to his mom, I thought I'd call my dad. I hoped he was still awake; it was almost eight-thirty back home, and he always fell asleep early. I chanced it and called anyway.

"Hello?" he answered groggily after the third ring, and I knew I'd woken him up. Of course, when I asked, he lied and told me, "Oh no, no, I'm still up, just watching the Sox." I smiled, imagining him snoring in his recliner, with the baseball game on in the background, until his phone had startled him awake.

"Oh, good. Well, I just wanted to call and say hi."

"I'm glad you did, sweetheart. How's everything going out there? I caught some of Nick's interview on the Ellen show today."

I smiled again, knowing my dad would never watch Ellen intentionally. He had tuned in just to watch Nick. "Oh, yeah? We watched it, too. He did a great job. So did Ellen."

"How's he doing?" Dad wanted to know.

"Okay, so far. You know..." My dad did know, all too well. "He's starting to feel a little sick, but he's in pretty good spirits." I wondered if the phone call from his mom would change that.

"Good to hear. Tell him to hang in there."

I smiled at my dad's encouraging tone of voice. "I will."

“How are you holding up?”

I wished he hadn’t asked. I should have seen that question coming, but I wasn’t prepared for the flood of emotions it would bring. All of a sudden, there were tears filling my eyes, and my throat felt clogged as I squeaked, “I’m okay.” I knew I sounded anything but, and of course, my dad could tell. He’s not always the most observant guy, but he knows me better than anyone.

“Aw, sweetheart... it doesn’t sound like it,” he said sympathetically.

That was all it took to trigger the breakdown I’d been trying to hold back. “It’s just hard,” I sobbed into the phone, “watching him go through this.”

“Makes you think of Mom, huh?”

“Yes,” I choked out, but of course, that wasn’t all. He didn’t know how close Nick and I had gotten, how much he really meant to me. “But it’s not just that. I... I love him.”

It was the first time I’d said it out loud, and of course, I’d never said it to Nick. But in that moment, I realized it was true. “Like” just wasn’t a strong enough word to describe my feelings for him. Only love, in one form or another, was powerful enough to explain why I was putting myself in this position again. It wasn’t just my job anymore; I wasn’t getting paid or bribed with an opening act gig. I had volunteered to be there, if you could even call it that. It wasn’t that I *wanted* to be there, but that I *had* to be, for my own sake as well as Nick’s, because I cared about him deeply. Because I *loved* him. And it wasn’t just the kind of love that a fan has for her idol; it went beyond that. The bond Nick and I had was much closer; it bound me to him. Hard as it was to see him sick and in pain and remember my mother the same way, it would be even harder to leave him. I would never do that. I couldn’t.

“I thought so,” my dad said knowingly, and I smiled through my tears; he really was more observant than I gave him credit for. “Nothing’s harder than seeing someone you love hurting. You wish you could take their place.”

Of course, he was speaking from experience. I nodded, though he couldn’t see me. I sure wouldn’t have wanted to go through what Nick was; I just wished he didn’t have to, either. I’d wished the same thing for my mom. No one should have to go through it. No one should have to die from it.

We talked for a few more minutes, and even though I hung up the phone with tears still streaming down my face, I was glad I had called. My dad had comforted me and calmed me down by the end, and it was a relief to have gotten those emotions out of my system. Now all I had to do was dry my tears before I went back up to check on Nick. I stopped in the ladies’ room to splash water on my face before I took the elevator back upstairs. I’m sure it was still fairly obvious I’d been crying, but I didn’t want to stay away any longer.

When I got back to Nick's room, he was off the phone. "Are you mad at me?" I asked hesitantly from the doorway. When he looked up, I saw that his eyes were red-rimmed. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who had been crying.

Nick shook his head. "Nah. I guess I woulda had to talk to her sooner or later," he muttered.

I offered him a sympathetic smile as I came further into the room. "Do I dare ask how it went?"

He just shrugged. "Bout as well as you'd expect," was all he said.

I nodded and didn't push for more details. "I see dinner came," I changed the subject, noticing the tray on his bed table. Everything was still covered and, evidently, untouched.

"Yeah... yours is over there." He pointed to the window seat. "Go ahead... I'm not real hungry."

I was, especially now that I could smell the food again, but I didn't want to eat in front of him while he was nauseous. I wondered if maybe I should have just gotten something in the cafeteria. "You should try to eat something," I urged him gently.

"It'll just come back up."

"Not necessarily. You've been okay the last hour."

"Just wait till the next batch of chemo," he argued.

"You have a few hours till then. Just try. If you don't eat, they'll have to feed you through a tube, and you don't want that." If gentle encouragement wouldn't work, maybe gentle threats would. It was true, though; his body needed nutrients, one way or the other.

"Alright, alright... I'll try," Nick agreed skeptically, peeking under the cover of one of his dishes. I'd ordered dinner for him, after he kept insisting that he wasn't hungry and nothing sounded good. In fact, the food at this hospital was actually very good. It was gourmet all the way, ordered off a menu and custom-made, more like hotel room service than the standard slop people tended to expect of hospital food. I ate every last bite of my stuffed shells and salad, while Nick just picked at his grilled chicken and veggies.

"So what's the plan for tonight?" I asked, when he finally insisted he was done and couldn't eat anymore. "Do you want me to stay?" The hospital allowed for overnight visitors, but we hadn't discussed yet whether or not I would stay the night.

"You don't have to," Nick said. "You should go back to the condo and get a good night's sleep."

But I couldn't fathom the idea of going back to his condo without him and spending the night alone. "I know I don't have to. Do you want me to?" I wanted to stay, but only if he was comfortable with it. I knew he probably needed some time to himself, too.

"Yeah, I mean, if you want to. It's up to you; I don't care." But he did care. I saw it in his eyes and heard it in his voice, the way he tried too hard to play it casual. He didn't want to spend the night alone, either.

I smiled. "I want to, as long as you're okay with it."

"It could be a long night," he warned.

"I know. It will be," I agreed. I knew it, and I was prepared, but that was why I wanted to stay. I couldn't leave him, knowing what a rough night he was in for. "But you shouldn't have to go through it alone."

He opened his mouth and looked like he was about to argue again, but then he shook his head, apparently changing his mind. "Thanks," was all he said instead, offering me a small, crooked smile.

I smiled back. "Of course."

In my mind, that said it all. Of course I would stay, even if it meant giving up comfort and sleep. Of course I would stay, if it meant comforting him and helping him get some sleep. Of course. It was a sacrifice, sure, but if I couldn't trade places with him, if I couldn't spare him the misery, at least I could keep him company. When you love someone, you'll do anything, give up anything, for them. And I was pretty sure I loved Nick Carter.

Chapter 67

Nick

So, to be blunt about it, my first night in the transplant unit basically sucked balls. I felt like shit and would have gladly slept through it, but the nurses coming in and out to check vitals and change IV bags in the middle of the night ruined any chance of that. I don't think Cary got much sleep either. She was a light sleeper to begin with, so whenever I got woken up, she woke up, too. It was a long, restless night for both of us.

I had a lot of time to think while I was lying awake in my hospital bed. I thought about the phone call from my mom, her hysterical words echoing through my mind. She was upset, understandably, about finding out I was sick from the TV and hurt that I hadn't told her myself. Of course, she made it all about her, so that I was the one trying to

console her, instead of the other way around. Talking to her made me feel shittier than I already did, like I was the world's worst son. It didn't make me feel any better to remind myself that she wasn't exactly in the running for World's Best Mom, either. It just made me feel sort of sad. Sad because I'd disconnected myself from my family a long time ago, replacing them with the guys and a string of girlfriends. Sad because, even though she said she wanted to fly out and see me, I didn't really want her to. It was sad, but true: I would rather go through this alone than deal with her bullshit.

But I wasn't alone anymore. It wasn't like the first time, after I was diagnosed, when I'd lain around my hospital room feeling sorry for myself and missing Lauren. I had Cary to keep me company now. It comforted me to look over at the window seat, which folded out into a cot, and see her sleeping there. Being in the hospital still sucked, but at least it wasn't so lonely this time around.

The guys were there for me, too. They came to visit on the second day. I had just finished the blandest breakfast in the world – dry toast and plain oatmeal – when I heard a knock on my door. I looked up, and there was Kevin in the doorway. "You up for some company?" he asked.

"Yeah, dude, come on in," I replied, beckoning him into my room. I was surprised to find that it wasn't just Kevin, but all four – *four?!* – of them. "What are you doin' here, B-Rok?" I asked, grinning, as Brian brought up the rear. "Aren't you supposed to be in Atlanta?"

Brian grinned back. "We thought we'd spend some time in the LA house."

Of course, he'd brought his family out because of me, but I didn't protest. I was glad to see them all. Their visit brightened what was otherwise sure to be another long, boring, miserable day. It worked out well, because with the four of them willing to hang out and keep me company for a few hours, I finally convinced Cary to go back to the condo to shower and change and get some rest before she came back. "Call me if you need anything," she said, bending over to kiss me before she left. "I'll be back later."

I saw Brian and AJ look at each other as she walked out the door. Once she was gone, Brian said, "So... you still usin' her as a cover-up, or is that the real deal now?" He was smiling.

I smirked. "It's the real deal. We're... together, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Well... I mean, we haven't really had much opportunity to, like, date and stuff, with all this shit going on. But she's staying with me and sleeping with me, so... yeah, we're together."

“Good for you,” said Brian, nodding in approval. Apparently he’d changed his tune since the tour, when he thought she was just another gold-digger. “She seems like a real sweet girl.”

I nodded, too. “She is.”

“Getting a little clingy, though, huh?” AJ spoke up. “She didn’t seem too keen on leaving.”

Before I could say anything, Howie came quickly to my – Cary’s – defense. “Oh, like you’d be any different, if Rochelle was in the hospital,” he replied, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, she ain’t clingy. She just can’t get enough of me. I mean, look at this... can you blame her?” I joked, gesturing at myself. I didn’t look much like the Nick Carter who had graced the covers of albums and magazines, tucked into bed with an IV line coming out the neck of my hospital gown. Not exactly sexy...

The guys chuckled. “So what is this you’re getting?” Kevin asked, pointing at the IV.

“Chemo, round five. Only eleven more doses to go.”

The black caterpillars over his eyes scrunched up. “Damn...”

I shrugged. “Yeah... sucks, don’t it?”

“You been feelin’ okay?”

“Not really, but I’m alright for now. I’ll try to warn you before I blow chunks all over you,” I said, grinning in AJ’s direction. I knew that would freak him out. Sure enough, he made a face and took a step back. “Hey, you guys can, like, sit down, you know,” I said, gesturing to the chairs on either side of my bed. Brian and Kevin took those, while Howie and AJ sat back on the window seat. “So...” I looked around at them, eager to change the subject. “What’s been happenin’ on the outside?”

“Been learnin’ lines,” Kevin drawled, scratching at his mustache. “I’m flyin’ out to Kansas tomorrow to film that movie I was telling you about, *The Casserole Club*.”

“Oh yeah...” I remembered him telling us he’d gotten a lead role in an independent film, months ago, on our Fourth of July yachting trip. “That’s cool, man. Have fun.” I smiled, and really, I was happy for him, but on the inside, I was wicked jealous, too. I wished I were flying to Kansas the next day – a wish I’d never wished for before, but hey, anywhere’s better than the hospital. I wished I were filming a movie. I’d been working on a short film of my own with Lauren, before we broke up, but between the break-up and the cancer diagnosis, I’d never finished it. Now I wondered if I’d ever get the chance.

It was equally hard to hear the others guys talk about the things they'd been doing. When Howie said he'd been writing songs for his solo record, I thought about the material I'd been working on for a second solo album of my own, a project that had yet to get off the ground. When AJ updated us on his wedding plans and Brian filled us in on how his big tenth anniversary party had gone, I wondered if I'd ever know what it was like to be that in love, or to make that kind of commitment to a woman.

"Sorry again that I couldn't make it," I told Brian, who waved me off.

"Yeah, it's not like you had anything more important to do," he replied sarcastically, rolling his eyes. Then he smiled at me and added, "Promise you'll make it to our twentieth, though."

"I hope so," I said, and I meant it with all my heart, but deep down, I knew better than to make that promise. Ten years seems like a long way into the future when you're living day by day, check-up to check-up. It had been easier to stay optimistic outside the hospital, but with the chemo taking its toll on me again, I found myself wondering if I'd ever really escape this cancer hell.

"Hey, not to make you feel worse or anything, but have you thought about the cruise at all? The fans have been chirpin' me, asking about it – is it still on, is it off, will Nick be there? I know they're tryin' not to be too pushy, but they've already shelled out all this money for it, and they just wanna know..." Brian trailed off with a shrug, looking apologetic for even bringing it up.

But I understood. "No man, I get it," I said quickly, stopping to think for a second. I really hadn't given the cruise much thought until then, so I was startled to realize it was less than three months away. "Honestly... I think you can count me out for this one," I finally said, hating the words that were coming out of my mouth. I'd been looking forward to the cruise ever since we'd first tossed the idea around. I loved the ocean, loved a good party, loved the idea of being on a big boat filled with women who adored me. But I knew that even if I felt up to it by December, my immune system wouldn't be. The doctors told me it would take one hundred days or more for my immune system to return to normal. Until then, I would be vulnerable to infections that could potentially kill me; the last place I should be was on a cruise ship surrounded by people who wanted to get close to me. At the same time, it killed me to admit it.

Brian looked disappointed, but he nodded. "I figured. One of us should call Jenn and tell her it's off, then," he said, looking back at Howie and AJ. "I know she's been wondering, too; she just hasn't started houndin' us about it yet."

"You don't have to cancel it completely, you know. I mean, it's already scheduled, and people booked months ago... Might as well go ahead and just do it without me this year. Hopefully I'll be up for it next year..."

Brian, AJ, and Howie exchanged looks. AJ was the first to shake his head. "No way, dude. We're not going without you."

"Yeah, and if you don't go, half the fans will probably cancel their bookings anyway," Howie added, grinning.

"We could just make Kev go in his place," Brian joked, then shook his head. "Just kidding..." He smiled sadly at me. "AJ's right; it wouldn't be the same without ya, Frack."

That smile he gave me made a lump rise up in my throat. I swallowed hard, forcing it down, and managed a smile back. "Yeah, I guess it ain't much of a Backstreet party without Nicky C. on the boat. Ah well... just one more thing the fans can blame on me."

Brian laughed. "Don't you know? It's always your fault, Carter."

"Yeah, yeah... I know."

Brian, Howie, and AJ came back day after day, even after Kevin had left LA for his movie shoot. Their visits were like an antidote to the chemo treatments I was getting. While the chemo made me feel like shit, joking around with them made me feel better. Even when I wasn't up to joking or even talking, it was nice to have them around. Plus, it gave Cary a chance to freshen up and take a break from the hospital each day, which I knew she needed, even if she'd never say so.

We settled into sort of a routine, and as the days passed and my treatment schedule lightened up, I started feeling more optimistic about my road to recovery. Then, on the morning before my transplant, I woke up to a sight that sent me spiraling back into a dark depression: a bunch of blonde hairs, scattered across my pillowcase. My own hair, which had come loose from my scalp as I slept. After months of fighting it, fate had finally conquered my good luck: My hair was falling out.

"Fuck... fuck fuckity fuck," I swore under my breath.

I tried to rant quietly, but I guess not quietly enough. Cary suddenly sat up in her window seat bed and looked over at me with concern. "What's the matter?"

"Look at this..." I held up the ball of hair I'd scooped off my pillow. "It finally happened." Just to be sure, I raised my other hand to my head and tugged lightly on a thin lock of hair. It slipped out with hardly any resistance and hung limp between my fingers. I sighed and shook both clumps of hair onto the floor.

"Aww, Nick." Cary gave me a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry..."

I shrugged. "Whatever. It's just hair, I guess." I knew it was just hair, but it really did bug me. My hair had always been such a big part of my appearance; it was like a

trademark. Hell, to some, it was practically my identity. Nick Carter... the blonde Backstreet Boy. I couldn't imagine myself bald. "Guess I shoulda kept using the ice..."

"I doubt it would have helped this time. The drugs and doses you've been getting are just stronger. It was bound to happen sooner or later," Cary said. I think she was trying to reassure me, but it didn't help make me feel any better. I just felt defeated, now that it seemed like the one battle I thought I'd won had been called too soon. For awhile, I'd been all Braveheart about it, thinking, "*You may take my life, but you'll never take... my hair!*" But it turned out, I hadn't beaten anything, not even the baldness. I was a big, bald loser.

Well, I wasn't bald yet, but I was going to be, and Cary helped me decide it might as well be sooner than later. "You know, when my mom's hair started falling out, she ended up just shaving it all off," she told me. "That way, she wouldn't have to deal with losing it a little at a time. Much less mess and stress. It was like a clean break – literally."

I could see her point. There was already hair all over the floor and my pillow. I didn't want to keep finding my hair everywhere, to have to lie in it and feel it coming out every time I touched my head, 'cause that's pretty nasty. I decided Cary's mom had the right idea. "Yeah, alright... we should shave my head."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah... let's do it."

Cary didn't want to be the one to do it, though, so I called AJ and got him to agree to it. He seemed pretty excited for the job; for him, it was sweet revenge for all the cracks I'd made about his receding hairline. Payback's a bitch.

He showed up at my hospital room with a pair of scissors, an electric razor, and one of those cape things they drape over you at the hair salon, to keep the cut hair from getting all over you. In typical AJ fashion, it was even leopard-print. "Where the hell did you get *that*?" I asked him, snorting with laughter at the sight of it.

"Rochelle," he announced gleefully, as he sauntered across the room and spread all his stuff out on my bed, happy as a clam. He was wearing a surgical mask, as all visitors had to when they were around me, now that the week of high-dose chemo had basically destroyed my immune system, but I could tell he was smiling underneath it. "You better get out that iPhone of yours and get your girl over there to film," he added, nodding at Cary. "We're gonna document this shit."

"Fuck you, Bone," I said, but I went along with it. Really, I didn't care; it made it easier to treat the whole thing like a big joke, like I was doing it on a dare or because I'd lost a bet, and not because I was just speeding up the inevitable.

"You film," said AJ, pointing at Cary. "You Tweet," he told me. Then his eyes got all crazy above his mask, as he held up his clippers. "And I'll shave." As soon as Cary

turned the camera phone on him, he started cackling, waving the razor around like Leatherface with his chainsaw.

“Oh God,” I said, grabbing the phone from Cary and bringing it right up close to my face, so my bugged-out eyes would fill the whole screen. “AJ got his hands on a razor. You scared? I’m scared.”

“I’m coming for you, Nicky...” AJ taunted in a sing-song voice, stalking towards me with the razor still buzzing in his hand.

I turned the phone to film him, then handed it back to Cary, who turned it back on me. I heaved a big sigh and said, “I guess it’s now or never. Ain’t no turning back now. Let’s do this.”

Cary recorded the whole thing, as AJ made a big production out of draping the leopard-print cape over the front of me and circling around my chair, snipping bits of my hair off with scissors until it was short enough to completely buzz. We had fun with it. First he gave me a mullet, cutting just the front and buzzing the sides, so it was longer in the back. “SPHYNKTER!” I shouted into the camera, laughing as I remembered how ridiculous I had looked for the “Just Want You to Know” video. Next he completely shaved the sides, until I had a mohawk. He tried to spike it with gel, but instead of standing straight up, the hair kept coming out between his fingers.

“And that, boys and girls, is why we’re doing this,” he said to the camera, holding up one sad spike of my hair. “You ready to go full-on Moby?” he asked me.

“I was thinking more Right Said Fred,” I replied. *“I’m... too sexy for my hair... too sexy for my hair; hair’s going to leave me...”* AJ and Cary laughed. “Wait, wait, hang on,” I said, cracking myself up, too. I pulled up iTunes on my laptop, and within minutes, “I’m Too Sexy” was playing while AJ finished buzzing off my mohawk.

“Lemme feel,” Cary said, coming over to run her hands over my head. She did that for a few minutes, and then she asked AJ, “Are you gonna shave it completely?”

“I came prepared,” he replied, whipping out a bottle of shaving cream. Before I knew it, the stuff was slathered all over my scalp, and AJ was standing over me with a regular old razor.

“Don’t nick me, dude,” I warned him.

“I won’t nick you... Nick.” He laughed, and I groaned. “Hold still,” he said, and I did, while he carefully shaved off the last stubble of my hair. Cary had filled a basin with warm water, and when he was done, she washed off the rest of the shaving cream with a washcloth.

“Smooth as a baby’s bottom,” she joked, running her hand over my head again before she handed me a mirror.

I laughed, but when I looked into the mirror, my smile faded. I hardly recognized myself. The blue eyes staring back at me were the same, but the face around them looked puffy and pale, and my head... I'd never seen it completely without hair before; it was weird. For the first time, I saw myself for what I really was, for what I had become: a cancer patient. I felt sick to my stomach, and this time, I knew it wasn't from chemo.

"Whaddya think, Nick?" asked AJ.

I wanted to be honest and say "I think this sucks," but when I looked up and saw that he was still filming on my phone, I swallowed hard and forced a smile, knowing my reaction was going to be seen by thousands of fans. "I think I know why my parents called me Charlie Brown as a baby. I mean, damn, this is one big, bald head," I joked, rapping my knuckles against the side of my head. It felt really weird, just touching bare skin instead of hair.

AJ laughed. "You should get it tattooed," he said, and the rest of the video was just him and me throwing around different ideas for what I could tattoo across my scalp.

"Tweet me your ideas, and maybe I'll be brave enough to use one of them," I told my camera phone, before I stopped the recording. I uploaded it to Twitvid, and the tweets started pouring in. I read a bunch of them to pass the time and even laughed at some, but they weren't enough to distract me from the sad reality that had become my life.

Get better soon, Nick! the fans tweeted. *We can't wait to see you back onstage!*

But as I read their words of encouragement, I remembered my sickly reflection and wondered when and if I'd ever take the stage again.

Chapter 68

Cary

A stem cell transplant is all about the numbers. Everything – blood composition, fluid volume, body temperature and weight – is counted, measured, and recorded.

Even the days are numbered. The day of the transplant itself is known as "Day 0," and the days leading up to it are counted down in negative numbers: Day -3, Day -2, Day -1, Happy Transplant! After that, they start counting back up again. By Day 30 after his transplant, Nick would hopefully be discharged and on the road to recovery. By Day 100, his immune system should be almost back to normal. But all that would depend on the stem cells he'd get on Day 0.

When I worked in pedes oncology, we told the kids that Day 0 was like their second birthday. From that point on, they'd have two birthdays to celebrate: the day they were born, and the day they got their transplant, which marked the start of the rest of their lives. We made a huge deal out of every patient's "stem cell party," so the whole thing would seem more exciting than scary. So on the day of Nick's transplant, I showed up in his hospital room with birthday hats, cupcakes, and a huge bouquet of "*Happy Birthday!*" balloons. Of course, he looked at me like I was nuts, until I explained about the birthday thing.

"Besides, I thought these would help cheer this place up," I added brightly, tying the balloon strings to his IV stand so that they floated over his bed. Flowers weren't allowed in the transplant wing, but balloons were more fun anyway. "And the cupcakes aren't from a bakery; I made them myself, so they should be okay for you to eat," I added, showing him the rows of cupcakes I'd slaved over the day before. He was on a restricted diet as long as his blood counts were low, so I'd been extra careful to keep my germs out of the cupcakes. "They're just white cake with peppermint frosting, not too rich."

It had been hard trying to coax him into eating the last few days; he hadn't had much of an appetite, and the little he did manage to get down usually came back up again, eventually. I hoped the cupcakes would tempt his taste buds without upsetting his stomach even more. "They look great," he said, smiling up at me. "When the hell did you have time to make those?"

"Yesterday, when I left you with AJ." We had worked out a schedule where at least one of the guys or his sister Angel came to visit for a couple of hours each day, which gave me a chance to run back to his condo to shower and change clothes. Yesterday, I'd baked cupcakes and bought party supplies. I set the Tupperware down on his bedside table and whipped out the package of birthday hats, the same pointy, cone-shaped kind you see at little kids' parties.

"Are you serious?" Nick asked flatly, giving me a look, as I held one up.

"Absolutely!" I sang, and before he could stop me, I snatched the knit skullcap he was wearing off his newly-shaven head and swapped it for one of the hats.

"I look fuckin' ridiculous," he complained, but he let me slip the elastic under his chin to secure it. He did look pretty silly, like an overgrown baby with his bald head. It was still weird seeing him completely without hair. You'd think I'd be used to it, having spent my whole nursing career caring for cancer patients and elderly men, but there was a part of me that had felt like crying as I'd watched AJ shave off Nick's beautiful, blonde hair.

"Aww, no way," I lied and winked, knowing he couldn't see me smile behind the mask I wore to wear to keep my cooties off him. "You're adorable." To make him feel better, I put a hat on, too, and he tweeted a picture of us looking ridiculous together. At least he hadn't lost his sense of humor along with his hair.

While we waited for the transplant team to show up with his stem cells, he kept us both entertained with his iTunes playlist. We were singing, “*It’s the final countdown...*” when the nurse walked in to get started. She set up the equipment and explained the procedure and risks one more time, so Nick would be ready when his doctor arrived.

The word “transplant” makes most people think of a major operation, but really, after all the build-up, a stem cell transplant is pretty anticlimactic, not much different than getting chemo or a blood transfusion. Dr. Schnabeltier hooked up an IV line to Nick’s port, through which to infuse the stem cells, which, once they were thawed, looked basically just like donor blood.

“Hey there, stem cells,” Nick muttered, eyeing the IV bag. “Long time, no see. Glad to have you back.”

I smiled. “Tell them to make themselves at home. The sooner they set up shop and start cranking out blood cells again, the sooner you can get out of here.”

“Yeah... you hear that? What she said,” Nick added, and I laughed.

“How do you feel?” asked the nurse, who was in charge of checking his vitals and monitoring him for signs of a bad reaction.

“Okay...” Nick answered at first, but after a few minutes, he made a face, squirming uncomfortably in his bed. “Ugh... I’m sorta getting sick to my stomach,” he admitted. “I got this nasty taste in my mouth... like-”

“Garlic?” I supplied.

He looked at me in astonishment. “How’d you know?”

I was glad I had a mask on, so he couldn’t see me smile. “Didn’t I tell you I could read minds?” I teased. “No, it’s the preservative they use when they freeze the stem cells. It secretes through the tongue and causes that garlic taste. I can smell it on you.” And I could; he reeked like he’d spent all day working in the kitchen of an Italian restaurant. It wasn’t that bad, really, but I imagined the taste was a lot stronger than the smell.

He wrinkled his nose. “Really?” He exhaled through his mouth and then grimaced. “So I’m gonna have garlic breath all day?”

“Hey, at least you’ll keep the vampires away.”

That got a smile out of him, but he was starting to look pretty green around the gills. The nurse offered him a peppermint to suck on, to get rid of the bad taste, and that helped settle his stomach.

It only took about fifteen minutes for the stem cells to finish running in, and when the doctor disconnected the IV line, Nick said in surprise, “That’s it?”

"That's it," repeated Dr. Schnabeltier in his German accent, his blue eyes crinkling above his mask. "Now you just have to wait for them to start working. It will take a few days; you'll feel worse before you feel better, as your blood counts continue to drop from the chemo. But if all goes well, we should have you out of here in a couple of weeks."

And at first, all did go well. Nick, despite being so stubborn, was a good patient. He did everything the team asked of him, even when it annoyed or embarrassed him. He didn't have the energy to refuse, or maybe he'd just accepted that it was in his best interest. He had always been so private about his condition before, but there was no such thing as privacy on the transplant floor. Nurses came in at all hours to check his vitals and draw his blood for testing. They forced him out of bed and onto a scale morning and night to weigh him, since rapid weight gain was a warning sign of certain complications. For the same reason, they kept track of everything he ate and drank and everything that came out of him, too.

"Can't believe someone gets paid to measure my shit," he grumbled on Day 2, pushing the nurse call button after a trip to the bathroom. "You know how sick that is?" He gave me a sidelong glance. "You should know; you went to school for it."

Clearly, he thought I was insane. "That's right, Nick; that's exactly why I went into nursing, so I could learn how to measure people's stool," I said sarcastically, rolling my eyes at him. "It's not like that's her whole job, but yeah, it's one part of it, and damn right she gets paid – and probably not enough."

He shook his head. "You couldn't pay me enough to do that."

"Well, good thing not everyone feels the same way, or you'd have no one to take care of you." That came out sounding snippier than I'd meant it to. The days of being cooped up in this hospital room together were starting to take their toll on both of us; tempers were running high, and patience was running low. I tolerated Nick's moodiness, knowing it was just because he didn't feel well, but sometimes it got the best of me, too.

He always knew how to charm me, though. "I'd have you," he said, grinning up at me suddenly. "You'd take care of me, wouldn't you?"

His smile was irresistible. My annoyance melted away, like butter in his hot little hands. "Yes," I admitted, feeling myself soften as I smiled back. "I guess I'd have to, huh?"

He gave a nod. "I can always count on you, Cary," he muttered, his words slurring together from fatigue. His blood counts had dropped so much that just the short walk to the bathroom and back completely sapped his strength, and he didn't have the energy to do much else. The physical therapist had brought in an exercise bike for him to pedal when he felt up to it, but until his counts started climbing again, he was limited to the deep breathing and leg exercises she had shown him how to do in bed. We were all waiting for that day, the day when his bloodwork would show that the stem cells had

engrafted in his bone marrow and started making new blood cells. Until then, he needed transfusions and shots of growth factor just to function.

The nurse finally showed up, and I pointed her to the bathroom. When I looked back at Nick, his eyes were closed, and I thought he'd fallen asleep. Then, without opening them, he said, "You don't have to stick around, you know. You should go out... go shopping or something... go to the beach... get some fresh air and sun for me."

"I'm fine," I said quickly. "I wouldn't have any fun at the beach by myself, and if I went shopping out here, I might never come back."

He chuckled. "I don't know why you do come back every day. If I were you, I'd make a break for it the first chance I got."

I swallowed. The answer to that was easy in my head, but much harder to say out loud. It wasn't the way I wanted to tell him I loved him, so instead I said, "Because I care about you, Nick."

Eyes still closed, he smiled and stretched out his hand. I took it, lacing my fingers through his. As I looked down at our hands, I could plainly see what this was doing to both of us. Mine was thin and white as a ghost; I obviously hadn't seen much of the sun lately. His was swollen and discolored, a reaction to the chemo that had poisoned his body. My nails, which I usually kept well-manicured, had been chewed down to nubs, and most of the red polish had chipped off. In the last week, his had grown out, almost past his fingertips, since nail clippers weren't allowed, due to the risk of bleeding and infection. *Maybe I'll give us both manicures tomorrow*, I thought, smiling to myself. I could file his nails for him and repaint my own. At least it would be something to do.

But I didn't get the chance. Nick woke from his nap that afternoon complaining that he was cold, but when I brought over an extra blanket, I saw that he was sweating profusely. Even the sheets were damp. His whole body was shivering, but I even before I put my hand on his sweaty forehead, I could feel the heat radiating off his skin. My heart leaped into my throat, and I smacked the nurse call button.

"What'sa matter?" Nick croaked.

"You're burning up!" I exclaimed.

"Heh... I'm burning up... and up," he sang to himself. He tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace with his teeth chattering.

"This is serious, Nick. How do you feel? Are you in any pain?" As I pelted him with questions, I kept looking at the door, anxious for the nurse to get there and annoyed with her for taking so long and angry at myself for not catching this sooner. Nick had his temperature taken every four hours, and the last time it had been checked, around noon, it had been normal. But I'd been sitting in the room with him for the last three hours, just reading my book while he slept, and hadn't even bothered to feel his

forehead. Even though I wasn't on duty, wasn't his nurse anymore, I felt terrible for dropping the ball.

"Just cold..." Nick mumbled, closing his eyes as he burrowed further down into his blankets. But he was practically panting, his breathing rapid and shallow, and when I dug his arm out from under the covers and took his pulse, it was too fast for someone who had just woken up from a deep sleep.

When the nurse came in, I was ready for her. "He's spiked a fever," I said, right off the bat. "Resps are twenty, heart rate's ninety."

She looked at me, looked at Nick, and got out the thermometer. Sure enough, his temperature measured in at 101.9. "I'll call the doctor," she said, and got right on the phone.

Things moved quickly after that. I stood out of the way and watched, as the room filled with people in white coats and scrubs, sterile masks and gloves. They swarmed around Nick's bed, checking vital signs, hooking him up to various monitors and drips, collecting blood and urine samples to test for bacteria. In no time at all, they'd converted his hospital room into a private ICU.

"We won't know anything definite until we get the cultures back from the lab," the attending physician told me, and of course, I knew that. But like all of them, I sensed the seriousness of the situation. Fever meant infection, and infection, in someone whose immune system was almost nonexistent, could mean death. I knew Nick was in good hands, but if this medical team couldn't get the infection under control, only the hands of God would be able to save him.

Sitting by his bed, as night fell around us, I bowed my head and said a prayer. For a minute or so, I was comforted. But when I looked up and caught sight of the monitors over Nick's head, I felt an overwhelming sense of dread deep in the pit of my stomach.

The numbers didn't lie: Nick was in bad shape.

Chapter 69

Cary

Unbeknownst to me, there was a heat wave in Southern California the same week the fever was raging in Nick's body. "I saw on the news it was a hundred and thirteen degrees out there today!" my dad said when he called to check on me. "They said it's a record for Los Angeles. You staying cool?"

“Yeah, Dad.” I’d hardly felt the heat. For the past five days, I had spent almost all of my time in the air-conditioned hospital, sitting at Nick’s bedside. “What’s it like back home?” I asked automatically, for conversation’s sake. I couldn’t remember the last normal conversation I’d had.

“Beautiful. Sixties and sunny. Perfect fall weather.”

“I’m jealous,” I said, but there was no real feeling behind it. I didn’t care about the weather. I didn’t care about anything, except Nick. I was just jealous that my dad’s biggest concern was the heat, while I was living with the fear that the only other man in my life was going to die.

At that point, I hadn’t shared that fear with my dad or anyone, really. It was a feeling that festered inside me, like the infection that had overtaken Nick. Around the guys, I stayed as upbeat as possible, finding something positive to report each time they came to visit. I avoided talking to anyone else, afraid of leaking information about Nick’s condition to the wrong people. The Backstreet Boys had issued a statement, but no one on the outside really knew how bad it was. I hadn’t wanted to dump it all on my dad, knowing it would just bring back bad memories for him, but when he asked, “How’s Nick?” I couldn’t help it. I broke down into tears.

“He’s really sick,” I said shakily, and little by little, I managed to get the whole story out. I’m not sure how much he was actually able to understand, between my huge, shuddering breaths and constant sniffling, but he listened as I told him everything – how Nick had been fine after the transplant, until he suddenly spiked a fever, how the doctors still weren’t sure of the source of his infection, how they’d been pumping him full of antibiotics that hadn’t seemed to make much of a difference, and how scared I was that he wasn’t going to get better. “And I feel like it’s my fault,” I sobbed. “I pushed him into this... I told him to do the transplant... if he hadn’t, he’d be fine right now.”

“You don’t know that, sweetheart,” said my dad, and if he were in the same room as me, I knew he’d be standing next to me, his arm around my shoulders, shaking some sense into me as he hugged me to his side. I wished he were actually there, wished I wasn’t having this conversation over the phone, wished I wasn’t going through this alone. “If he didn’t have the transplant, the cancer might’ve come back.”

“He was in remission.”

“But we both know remission doesn’t always last,” my dad said quietly. Of course, he was thinking of my mom. I’d been thinking of her, too, when I’d talked Nick into going ahead with the stem cell transplant, when I thought the worst thing that could happen to him was a relapse. “Did he ask your advice?”

“Yes.”

“And did you give him the best advice you could?”

“Yes, but-”

“You knew the transplant had its risks. Did he know about the risks?”

I sniffled. “Yes.”

“And he made the choice to go for it anyway, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then I don’t want you beating yourself up over this, okay, honey? I’m sure Nick wouldn’t want you to feel guilty either. You didn’t force him to do anything against his will, and you can’t change what’s happened to him. All you can do now is stay positive and pray for him to get better.”

He said he would pray for Nick, too, which meant a lot, seeing as how my dad hadn’t set foot inside a church since my mom’s funeral. Close as we were, we didn’t have deep, emotional conversations very often, but it comforted me to hear his voice and his words of reassurance. I knew it wasn’t really my fault that Nick was so sick, but I also still felt that if I hadn’t recommended the transplant, he wouldn’t have gone through with it, and he’d be better off at this point.

After I got done talking to my dad, I set my phone down and turned my attention back to Nick. It was almost hard to look at him. The change in him over the past few days was startling; he hardly looked like himself anymore. It was crazy to think that when I’d first met him, when he was carrying around a tumor in his chest and a chemo pump under his clothes, he had looked completely normal – better than normal, actually – and only now, with his disease in remission, did he look like a cancer patient, bald and swollen. His body had ballooned from fluid retention; his face looked puffy and oddly misshapen. A rash had broken out on his skin, which was pale from the lack of red blood cells, yet darkened in some places from a reaction to the chemo. Just in the last day or so, his complexion had taken on a faint yellowish cast, and I think it was the jaundice that bothered me the most, because it reminded me of my mother.

I would never forget the way my mom looked during her last few weeks of life. Her skin had been so yellow, she reminded me of the characters from the new cartoon I’d been watching, *The Simpsons*. Her cancer had metastasized to her liver; she died of liver failure.

It scared me to look into Nick’s swollen, slightly jaundiced face. Multi-organ failure. That was what he’d be facing, if his team of doctors didn’t get the sepsis under control. The infection, wherever it had come from, had gotten into his bloodstream, and with no white blood cells to fight it off, it had spread quickly throughout his body. His liver enzymes were testing higher than normal. The doctors were concerned about his kidneys shutting down. Fluid had built up inside his lungs and around his heart; he was on oxygen to help his breathing and a diuretic to get rid of the extra fluid. A crash cart

sat in the corner of the room, in case his heart started going haywire again, and if his breathing got any worse, he would need to be intubated.

I thought back to the day I'd sat with him in his lawyer's office in Nashville, when he'd signed the advance directive. He had given Kevin power of attorney, but as Nick had been in and out of consciousness, mostly out, Kevin and the guys had turned to me to make the treatment decisions for him. I was only the second alternate, but even though they knew Nick better, I knew more about medicine, and they seemed to think I was the best person to call the shots. It was a lot of pressure already, but I dreaded having to decide whether or not to put him on a ventilator or resuscitate him if his heart stopped. Nick had initialed the box saying he didn't want his life prolonged, if there was no chance of a meaningful recovery, but I knew he could recover, if the doctors could just keep his body functioning long enough to stop the infection. I just prayed it wouldn't come to that.

Eager to distract myself from imagining the worst, I turned on the TV in the room. I kept the volume low – not that it would bother Nick; he was too out of it to notice – and only half-listened to the evening news. When I wasn't spacing out, I caught snippets of segments on the heat wave, gas prices, and new fall TV shows, and it suddenly occurred to me how much my life had changed in the past year. There was a time when I would have been interested in the fall TV lineup, when I cared about gas prices, when I enjoyed complaining about the weather with my co-workers. Now none of those things seemed remotely newsworthy.

Back home, the nursing home would be decorated with colorful, autumn leaves. Kids would be settling into their new classes at school. In my dad's world, baseball season would soon be ending, and football season was just getting started. But in my new world out in California, this strange land of endless sun, nothing seemed to change. My days of sitting around the hospital stretched together, long and monotonous, until I could barely tell them apart anymore. I lost track of the countdown. How many days since the transplant? Six? Seven? Could it have been a full week since Nick had gotten back his stem cells, the ones that were supposed to cure him?

I knew he couldn't linger in this state of limbo forever. Sooner or later, for better or worse, something had to change.

The change I'd been waiting for came two days later, Day 9 on the transplant calendar. It was as hot as ever outside, but inside the transplant unit at Ronald Reagan Medical Center, Nick's fever finally broke.

I was asleep when the night nurse came in for the four a.m. temperature check. Before dozing off, I'd lain awake on the window seat bed, staring at the shadows cast by the eerie glow of the monitors in the dim light, listening to the sound of Nick's ragged breathing, and wondering how much longer this nightly ritual would continue. I had

prayed in my head every night, but that night, I did something different: I spoke to my mother.

I didn't talk out loud, and of course, she didn't say anything back. I just squeezed my eyes shut and clasped my hands tight and thought, *Mom, if you're up there somewhere... if you can hear me... I need your help. Nick needs your help. If you could just put in a good word, or something... anything... please....?* Eventually, my thoughts trailed off, as I realized how ridiculous they would sound, if anyone could hear them. I wanted to believe there was a God and a Heaven where my mom's soul had gone, like I'd been told as a child, but did I really think praying to my dead mother was going to make any difference in Nick's condition? It was a childlike wish, and when I opened my eyes and found tears there, I felt like the same child who had lain awake like this, night after night, before crying herself to sleep.

I didn't cry myself to sleep this time, but eventually, I did drift off, and when I woke up, the nurse was standing by Nick's bed, charting his latest set of vitals. "Any change?" I asked, lifting my head from my pillow.

She jumped, startled, and turned around. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. Good news – his temperature's down."

I sat up all the way. "Really?"

She wiggled the thermometer in her hand. "99 on the nose."

I had to let that sink in for a few seconds. For a whole week, Nick's temperature had stayed over 101 degrees, even at night. 99 was normal – or close enough! I jumped out of bed and looked carefully at the monitors tracking everything else – his heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen levels. The numbers looked more or less the same as they had last time I'd checked, but his fever had broken, and that was a good sign, the best news I'd heard all week.

Nick wasn't out of the woods yet, but it was definitely a turning point. When I awoke the next time, it was light outside, and his eyes were open. "Cary?" he croaked, looking over at me.

I scrambled out of bed and was at his side in an instant. "Hey," I said softly, resting my hand on his forehead. For the first time in a week, it felt cool and dry. I ran my hand up and over the top of his head, so soft and smooth, like an infant's. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired... What time is it?"

"I dunno... morning."

"Of what day?" he asked, looking confused. I couldn't blame him; he'd been so out of it for the last week.

“Day 9. Don’t ask me what day of the week... Wednesday, I think, but I’ve sort of lost track, too.”

He wrinkled his nose, squinting up at me. “Day 9? Was I really out that long?”

For the first time in a week, I laughed. “You’ve been pretty out of it, yeah.”

“Damn...” His eyes darted around, apparently noticing all the new medical equipment that surrounded him for the first time. “What the hell happened to me?”

I let out another nervous laugh. “You really wanna know?”

“Well, yeah...?”

“How much time do you have?”

A faint smile crossed his dry, cracked lips. “All the time in the world, baby.”

Weak and sick as he was, he still managed to be charming. Smiling back, I sat down in the chair next to his bed. I maneuvered my hand through the tangle of tubes and wires to find his and, gripping it tightly, started to tell him just what a hellish week it had been.

Chapter 70

Nick

I don’t remember much from Days 3 through 8 of my transplant.

You know when you drink too much, so much that you black out, and then you wake up the next morning not knowing where the hell you are, or what the hell you did the night before, or why the hell you feel so bad? Yeah... it was like that for me on Day 9, only the hangover lasted a lot longer.

I only have vague memories from the days in between, mostly images and sounds. Cary’s face. The guys’ voices. Other people I didn’t know touching me and talking to me. The rest is kind of a blur. I just remember being incredibly tired, more exhausted than I’d ever felt in my entire life, like I could sleep forever. All I wanted to do was sleep.

Only after I woke up, when Cary explained everything, did I realize how close I’d come to literally sleeping forever – as in, dying. It freaked me out. I’d always known that the cancer could kill me and that the transplant could be risky, too, but I’d never had such a

close call before. I was glad to be alive and eager to get better and get out of the hospital so I could start really living again.

Before they would discharge me, though, there were three things I had to prove I could do: eat on my own and keep it down, drink on my own and stay hydrated, and of course, make my own blood cells.

Sounds easy enough, right? Turns out, not so much.

I hadn't eaten or drunk anything for a week; instead, I'd been getting nutrients and fluids completely through IVs. My mouth was full of sores from the chemo, which might have caused the infection and were still causing me a lot of pain. It hurt to put anything in my mouth, even water. For a few days, all I could do was suck on ice chips, until the mucositis cleared up. Then, finally, I started eating and drinking again. Lots of protein shakes. Lots of soft, bland foods. Nothing too spicy, sour, or sweet. Eating became more of a chore than a pleasure, something I did because I had to, not because I wanted to. But I did it.

I had no control over my blood counts, so it was just a matter of waiting until they started coming up again, a sure sign that the stem cells were working. They tested my blood every day and kept track of the numbers. Finally, on Day 16, they started to climb. *My immune system's back, alright!* I posted on Twitter, to satisfy the fans who'd been freaking out since hearing the news that I'd had complications. *There gonna kick me outta this joint soon.*

It took a few more days for that to happen, but I could feel myself getting stronger. I was still really tired most of the time, but I was able to get out of bed and walk further than the bathroom without feeling like I was about to collapse. I did slow laps around the transplant ward and rode the exercise bike in my room for short bursts at a time. I had no stamina, and my legs were shaky and weak from not using them. It would be awhile before I was back to dancing on stage; that was for sure.

But twenty days after my stem cell transplant, my doctors decided I was strong enough to be discharged from the hospital. *I'm gettin out today*, I tweeted, while Cary and I waited for them to finish the discharge paperwork. *Goin home to rest up and I'll be back on stage again before you know it!*

This turned out to be a mistake. By the time we made it down to the lobby, a small crowd had gathered outside the entrance. How they knew which hospital I was at, I'll never know for sure. Maybe the guys had been spotted coming to visit me. Maybe it was just a lucky guess. In any case, the fans had found me, and they were armed with stuffed animals and signs they'd made to show their support.

Looking out the glass doors at them, I started getting nervous. I hadn't thought to ask a bodyguard to come escort me out; besides the nurse who had pushed me down in a wheelchair, I just had Cary. Luckily, the hospital security was on it. I guess the place gets its fair share of celebrities, some a lot more A-list than me, so they were prepared.

“You want me to get rid of these girls?” asked the guy guarding the door. “Or would you rather go out a back exit?”

I considered both options, as I scoped out the situation. There weren’t that many girls out there, maybe a couple dozen, and they weren’t doing anything crazy, not screaming or pushing or anything. They seemed pretty calm. I couldn’t imagine any of them wanting to hurt me, not when they’d come to a hospital to support me.

“No,” I answered finally, “I’m good. Just don’t let ‘em jump my wheelchair while she’s pushing me out.”

The guy chuckled. “You got it.”

“Could you also tell them they need to stand back?” Cary added. “And no touching... or stuffed animals. He can’t be exposed to germs.”

“Yeah, you don’t happen to have, like, a giant plastic bubble you could roll me out in, do you?” I joked. I already felt like the Bubble Boy, behind the surgical mask I was wearing. I’d been told to wear it out in public until my immune system had recovered, so I wouldn’t get sick again. I hated it already.

The guard laughed again. “Sorry, man, no can do.” But he did go outside to talk to the fans about keeping their distance.

We waited inside while the valet brought my car around. Then Cary asked, “You ready?”

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

She went out first, carrying both our overnight bags and a box of all the extra stuff I’d accumulated, from get well cards to new prescription drugs. The nurse pushed me behind her in the wheelchair. I hadn’t even cleared the door when I heard the chorus of voices calling my name, shouting things like, “Nick! Hi, Nick! How are you feeling, Nick? Are you feeling better, Nick? We love you, Nick!” Blinded by the bright sunlight, I squinted and tried to smile, before I remembered they wouldn’t be able to tell with the mask covering half my face.

“Thanks, guys,” I mumbled, feeling self-conscious, as the nurse wheeled me past. “Sorry, I can’t,” I added, as girls reached out their hands, ignoring the security guard’s warning. I felt bad ignoring them and the stuffed animals they were thrusting at me, but what else was I supposed to do. I just kept saying, “Thanks... thanks for the support.”

When I got to the car, Cary opened the door and helped me out of the wheelchair and into the passenger seat. I felt like an old man, needing to be helped that way, but I was still pretty weak. I thanked the nurse, waved out the window to the fans, and then we were on our way.

It was weird sitting in the passenger seat while Cary drove my car home. I looked out the window at the familiar sights of Los Angeles and felt like I'd been living in a cave, instead of a hospital. It was amazing to see the sun, up close and personal instead of through a single window on the sixth floor, and feel its warmth on my skin for the first time in a month. It seemed brighter than usual and extra hot. I'd been told I would be sensitive to sunlight for awhile, until the effects of the chemo wore off.

I was like a vampire, with my sensitivity to sunlight, my need for blood, and my tendency to sleep all day and wake up in the middle of the night. I was definitely pale enough, and I even had the scar on my neck to prove it. Maybe we could do a little roleplaying when we got home, I thought, me and Cary. I eyed her bare neck; it looked good enough to nibble and suck on.

But by the time we finally made it up to my condo, I was too exhausted to do anything but collapse into bed. My body still felt so weak, and my bones ached. It had only been a short walk from the car to the elevator and down the hall to my door, but I might as well have just run a marathon. It felt good to lie down in my own bed.

Cary hustled around my bedroom, making sure I was comfortable. "Is the air conditioning on too high?" she asked, after she'd tucked me in. "Do you need another blanket?"

"No, I'm good."

"Do you want the shades down?" she asked, stopping at one of the windows, her fingers toying with the cord for the blackout shades.

"No, leave 'em up. I wanna be able to see outside." When I was sitting up in bed, I could see the ocean view from my windows. It was as close as I'd get to the beach for awhile.

"Okay. How 'bout I bring you some water? Do you want anything else? Are you hungry at all?"

"No, just water's fine."

She got me a bottle of water and then asked, "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Cary," I laughed, "Damn, girl, chill out. I'm fine."

She smiled sheepishly. "Okay," she said, seeming to relax a little. "Do you want me to go and let you rest, or...?"

"No, you can stay, if you want," I replied, then added quickly, "but don't feel like you have to or anything. You know me; I'll probably just fall asleep..." If I was being honest with myself, I wanted her to stay – it was boring just lying around in bed, without someone to talk to – but I didn't want her to feel obligated. She'd already spent a month

sitting around – and sleeping in – my hospital room. She was probably getting as sick of me as I was of feeling sick; I wouldn’t have blamed her for leaving.

But she stayed. “Like I have anything better to do than watch you fall asleep,” she teased, smiling at me.

I don’t know what I ever did to deserve that kind of dedication. Maybe the guys were right, and Cary was just clingy. Maybe if I were well, I wouldn’t have wanted her around so much. But being sick changes you; it changes everything. Suddenly, I didn’t want to be alone anymore. “Well, c’mere then,” I said, patting the covers next to me. “Get on up here, girl.”

She hesitated, then climbed into bed with me. I slipped my arm around her and pulled her close to my side. It felt good to be able to hold her like that, without any barriers – no masks, no gloves, no tubes or wires in the way. I wished we could strip everything away and get even closer, but I didn’t have the energy to do anything else but lie there.

“I missed being close to you like this,” Cary said, matching my thoughts. “I hope I’m not contaminating you now...”

“You’re not.” I could still smell the hospital on her, but underneath the antiseptic stench was the scent of her shampoo, fruity and sweet. I buried my face in her thick hair for a few seconds, breathing in. “Anyway,” I added, lifting my head again, “my new immune system better get used to your cooties quick, ‘cause we ain’t wearin’ those masks around each other anymore.”

“We’ll have to if your counts drop again. Or if I get a cold or something,” she pointed out.

“Nope. Ain’t happening. Know why?”

“Why?”

I looked over at her; she was smiling. I smiled, too. “Cause then we couldn’t do *this*,” I said and kissed her fully on the mouth.

“I don’t know if making out is allowed, twenty days post-transplant,” said Cary breathlessly, once we broke apart. But her cheeks were glowing, and her eyes were shining; she’d obviously enjoyed it as much as I had.

“Yeah, I doubt Dr. Schnaz would approve. But it’s okay. We’ll just call it exposure therapy.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, grinning. “Anything we can do to help your immune system recover faster, right?”

“You bet. Kissing’s good medicine.”

“Hm... maybe we should do a clinical trial on that theory,” she said playfully, leaning in close to me again.

As her lips found their way back to mine, I realized she’d already proven me right: I felt more alive than I had for a whole month.

Chapter 71

Cary

When Nick came home from the hospital, we quickly settled back into our old routine. I became the caretaker again, as I’d been when I had first come to stay at his condo. I cooked, cleaned, and kept him company while he recuperated. I didn’t complain.

“How’s Nick doing?” my dad would ask, when he called to check on me once a week, always on Tuesday. Tuesday nights used to be sacred for my dad and me; they were our chance to catch up each week, when I came over for dinner and *American Idol* or whatever else happened to be on. I could tell by his weekly phone calls that he missed that tradition as much as I did.

“Oh, you know... he’s getting better every day, but... it’s a slow process,” I would answer truthfully and then change the subject the first chance I got, asking him how Hambelina was or what the weather had been like. I missed all of it – him, Hammy, even the weather. The leaves had changed there, he told me; it was getting colder. Fall had definitely arrived in Illinois. But in California, the trees were still green, and it was as hot as ever – not that I spent much time outside.

The truth was, I barely left Nick’s place. He wasn’t supposed to be left alone or be around large crowds of people, so except for his weekly appointments at the oncology clinic, he stayed pretty well confined to the condo, and I stayed with him. The guys and Angel took turns coming over to visit a few times a week, which gave me the chance to go grocery shopping and run errands, but other than that, I didn’t get out much. Cabin fever was starting to affect both of us. Nick was moody, depressed. I was restless and homesick.

Around Nick, I hid these feelings behind a happy face. I didn’t want him to feel like a burden or think I resented him, for neither was true. I loved him, and I didn’t mind taking care of him and his gorgeous condo. I was still grateful for the opportunity he’d given me over the summer, and I was glad to know him and to be with him. Ever since his infection scare in the hospital, I’d tried to cherish every mundane moment I spent with him... and only in the moments in between, when I was by myself, did I let my guard down.

It was always worst after talking to my dad or one of my friends from back home. My dad told me funny stories about Hambolina that made me miss her so much, I even considered asking Nick if I could bring her to LA, before I came to my senses and realized that, with his suppressed immune system, a new pet – a pet pig, for that matter – was the last thing he should have around the house. My best friend, Jessica, kept me up to date on what was going on with her and our other friends. She announced that she was expecting her second child, due in May, and that her sister Kim had gotten engaged. “They don’t have a date set yet,” she said, “but they’re hoping for sometime in June of next year.”

“Wow, that’s soon.”

“Tell me about it! How am I supposed to squeeze into a stupid bridesmaid dress a month after having a baby?!” Jess screeched. “I wonder how celebrity moms lose their baby weight so quick – I mean, Heidi Klum pops out a kid, like, every other season of *Project Runway*, and you never see her looking fat after the fact. She just magically shrinks back to model skinny!”

“I’m sure she’s got a good personal trainer.”

“There has to be something more to it than that,” said Jess dismissively. “Hey, while you’re out there in LA, why don’t you make it your mission to find out the weight-loss secrets of the stars and then share them with me? Does Nick know Heidi Klum?”

I laughed. “I don’t think so. Sorry, Jess, I don’t know any celebrity moms, unless you count the Backstreet Boys’ wives.”

“Well, they’re some of the ‘beautiful people’ too, right? I bet they didn’t have any trouble taking off baby weight. Ask them what their secret is!”

“Okay, Jess,” I said, still laughing. “I’ll get right on that.”

I ended the call with a smile on my face, but once I’d put my phone down, it quickly faded away. I was happy for Jess and her family, but all the talk of marriage and babies just reminded me that I had neither. I felt strangely empty, hollow inside. Just two years ago, I’d thought I would be married at this point in my life. My own parents had married young; my mother was just twenty on her wedding day, twenty-one when she had me. I was already twenty-nine, only a year younger than she was when she died, and I could hear my biological clock ticking. I wanted to be a wife and mother, but instead, I was... what, exactly? A girlfriend? I liked to think so, but I wasn’t totally sure Nick thought of me that way. Sometimes he treated me like a girlfriend, but at other times, I might as well have been his hired help, the live-in nurse and housekeeper.

I couldn’t blame him; it wasn’t his fault. It was just that we’d never really defined our relationship. It had certainly evolved from the awkward, early days of fan and celebrity, nurse and patient, but were we really a couple now, or just friends with benefits? Not that the “benefits” were worth much these days: we hadn’t had sex since before Nick

checked into the hospital. He claimed he was too tired; I didn't question him. We made out occasionally, but even that never lasted long before Nick's fatigue caught up to him. We still shared his bed, but in the same way that an old married couple who has long lost the passion still sleeps side by side out of habit. We were comfortable with each other, maybe too much so. It was like we had settled into this odd sort of arrangement, and now we were stuck.

I was still sure that I loved Nick unconditionally, but he'd never given me any indication that he felt the same about me. We'd never even come close to using the L-word around each other, and I knew better than to probe too much into his feelings or press him about commitment. How could I ask him if we had a future together, when his own future was so uncertain? I knew he wasn't thinking about marriage or children; he wasn't looking that far ahead. Nick was living one day at a time, still counting up from Day 0, just trying to make it to Day 100 and beyond, when he could put this whole stem cell transplant ordeal behind him.

"This sucks," he said, out of the blue, on Day 50.

"That bad already? You could give it a chance, you know; we're only twenty minutes in," I replied, grinning over at him. I had known, when I added it to his Netflix queue, that he would probably hate *Gone With the Wind*, but I'd been desperate for a good, long, romantic movie to help fill the endless time we spent lazing around in his condo. "You might like it," I'd told him anyway. "It's not just a love story; it's a Civil War epic, too." I'd been wanting to watch it since Halloween, a week before, when, in the course of a conversation about favorite costumes, I'd told him about going as Scarlett O'Hara one year and how my grandma and I had sewn the dress together – modeled after her curtain dress, of course. He had mentioned he'd never seen the movie before, so, of course, I had to rent it. I knew he'd never make it through the whole thing, but I had hoped he would last till the end of the war, at least.

"No, it's not the movie," he said, to my surprise. "It's just... this." He gestured vaguely at himself, slumped on the couch. "I've only been up for a few hours, and I already can't wait to go back to bed again. I hate this... I hate feeling this way. I just thought that... by now... I'd be feeling better."

I paused the DVD, so I could give him my full attention. "You will, Nick. It's just the fatigue getting to you."

"It's kicking my ass," he sulked.

"I know," I sympathized. "It's normal, though. I know that's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth. It's just part of the recovery process. Eventually it'll pass."

"Not soon enough," he grumbled. "I'm just sick and tired of... of feeling sick and tired."

I felt so sorry for him, I didn't even smile at his play on words. "I know," I said again. "You'll start to feel better as you get stronger. It's happening already; it just takes time. Soon you'll notice a difference."

I said what I hoped were the right things, but really, I didn't know. I'd never seen anyone through this many days post-transplant; I was only going on what I'd heard and read. I couldn't know how bad he really felt, having never been there myself. I could only sympathize while he complained.

"Go lie down if you want to," I added, smiling so he'd know I wouldn't mind. "We can finish this another time. Maybe you'll feel better after a nap."

It was the same day after day; Nick moped around the condo for a few hours at a time, watching TV or movies, playing video games or messing around on his laptop, and spent the rest of his time lying in bed. He'd been out of the hospital a month, but I knew that post-transplant fatigue could last a long longer than that. Still, sometimes I worried it wasn't just fatigue, but depression that was dragging him down.

"You can keep watching," he muttered, waving a hand limply at the TV as he hauled himself up from the couch. "I don't really care."

He staggered off to his bedroom, and I heard the door close behind him, shutting me out. With a sigh, I turned back to the TV and pushed play, but it was hard to pay attention; my mind was back in the bedroom with Nick. What could I do for him? How could I help get him out of this funk?

I was still pondering these questions, still not paying one bit of attention to the movie, when a knock on the door pulled me out of my thoughts. I jumped, startled, then scurried to the door to answer it before it woke up Nick. I had no idea how long it had been since he'd gone to lie down; I'd lost all sense of time.

I unlocked the door, opened it, and stepped back to see who was there. I figured it would be Angel or one of the guys or Nick's other friends. Security in the high-rise was pretty good, so I wasn't expecting a fan or paparazzi or anyone like that. I also wasn't expecting *her*.

It took me a few seconds to recognize the brunette standing in the hall, having never met her in person before, but I'd seen enough pictures to figure out who she was. She looked equally surprised to see me, instead of Nick, but she recovered quickly and offered a tentative smile. "Hi," she said, in a voice that was soft and girlish, not low and husky like I'd imagined. "You're Cary, right? I'm—"

"I know who you are," I replied quickly, smiling up at her in what I hoped was a friendly way. It was hard not to be intimidated by her; she was at least a head taller than me, as tall as Nick, statuesque and stylishly-dressed.

She flashed another brief smile that didn't quite reach her blue eyes. "I was hoping I could see Nick," she said, shifting her weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. Her tan, shapely legs seemed to go on for miles between the tops of her flats and the hem of her shorts. "I mean, if he's... if he's not..."

"He actually just went to take a nap," I said, honestly, "but let me check and see if he's still awake." I left her waiting just inside the door and crept back to Nick's bedroom, hoping to find him sound asleep. My heart was pounding hard as I very slowly turned the knob and eased his door open. The blackout shades were drawn, making the room dim, but I could see the lump of his body lying still under the covers, and at first, I was relieved.

Then the lump stirred, and he lifted his head from his pillow. "What's up?" he mumbled, squinting blearily at me.

I swallowed hard. "You have a visitor, if you're up for it," I said. "It's Lauren."

He sat up amazingly quickly and grabbed his beanie off the bedside table. "For real?" he asked, pulling it down over his bald head.

I nodded calmly, while my insides squirmed. "I can tell her you're still asleep, if you want," I offered hopefully. "Or I can just say you're not up to having visitors, if you don't want to see her."

He seemed to consider these options for a moment, but then shook his head. "No, it's okay. You can send her in."

"Okay," I said. There was no use trying to talk him out of it; I'd known from the second he grabbed the hat that he was going to see her. *And why shouldn't he?* I scolded myself, as I trudged back out to get Lauren. *He dated her for two years; they have a history. So what if they broke up; it doesn't mean they can't still be friends. He's been sick, and she's probably been worried about him, and she just wants to make sure he's okay.*

Lauren looked up hopefully when I came back into the entryway. I smiled at her. "He's awake. You can go back if you want. First door on your—"

"I know which one it is. Thanks." She offered a flicker of a smile back as she walked past me. I turned and watched her disappear around the corner.

Soon I could hear their low voices murmuring from Nick's bedroom. I supposed it was a good sign that they'd left the door open. It was tempting to sneak around the corner and listen in on their conversation, but of course, I would never do that. I forced myself to go back into the living room and keep watching my movie, though it was even harder to pay attention than it had been before Lauren showed up.

I stared at the screen, watching Scarlett try to steal Ashley away from Melanie, but my mind was still back in Nick's bedroom, wondering what he might be saying to his ex-girlfriend.

Chapter 72

Nick

I'd been out of the hospital a month, and I still felt like shit. Recovering from a stem cell transplant is like having the flu, a flu that lasts for weeks on end. I was tired all the time. My body ached. I ran low-grade fevers, usually for no reason at all, but which I had to watch and worry about, in case they meant another infection. I had no appetite, so I kept losing weight, even though all I did was lie around. I slept a lot.

I had gone to take a nap and was just starting to drift off when I heard the door knock that day. I ignored it; Cary could answer it. It was probably one of the guys; they'd been coming over a lot lately, so she could get out for awhile. They hung out with me while she was gone, so I wouldn't be alone. If it was Brian or AJ, we'd probably play video games or watch something on TV. When Kevin or Howie came, we usually just talked. Sometimes the conversations were mostly one-sided; if I was really tired, they would just sit in my room with me while I dozed. I was pretty lame company.

Lying there with my eyes closed, I tried to think of whose turn it would be. Brian and his family had gone back to Georgia, so it couldn't be him. I thought Howie had been over the day before, or had it been two days ago? I couldn't remember for sure; the days seemed to blur together, and my brain felt fuzzy. So it was probably AJ or Kevin, or maybe Angel. She'd been coming to visit, too, checking up on me so she could tell the rest of the family how I was doing. They called or texted occasionally, but besides Angel, I hadn't seen any of them since I'd flown the rest of my siblings in to break the news.

I heard Cary open the front door, but I couldn't tell who was there. I hoped it was Kevin; he would let me sleep without needing to carry on a conversation. AJ always needed to be entertained; it was too awkward for him, otherwise, just sitting with me. He would never admit it, but I could see it in his eyes, when he wasn't hiding them behind his sunglasses.

Light filtered through my eyelids as it leaked into my room. I opened my eyes and looked up to see Cary standing in the doorway. "What's up?" I muttered.

"You have a visitor, if you're up for it. It's Lauren."

My heart skipped a beat. *Lauren?* I scrambled up into a sitting position and reached automatically for my beanie, which I'd taken off to sleep. I put it back on, fully aware of

how freaky I looked without hair. “For real?” I asked, running my hand over the top of my head. The hat hugged it like a security blanket, soft and warm.

Cary nodded. “I can tell her you’re still asleep, if you want. Or I can just say you’re not up to having visitors, if you don’t want to see her.”

I thought about it. It must have taken Lauren a lot of nerve to show up here, after dumping me back in January. She was probably feeling bad about it, now that she knew I was sick. Facing her was going to be awkward, but it would be worse if I didn’t. I hadn’t seen her in months, not since I’d gotten my diagnosis, but I couldn’t avoid her forever. “No, it’s okay,” I finally replied. “You can send her in.”

While Cary went to get Lauren, I sat up in bed. I smoothed the wrinkles out of my t-shirt. I tugged my hat further down over my forehead. I fiddled with the covers. When I heard footsteps approaching my room, I looked up.

“Hey, Nick...” Lauren smiled shyly at me from the doorway.

My heart skipped another beat. My stomach dropped. I swallowed the hard lump that had swelled up in my throat and croaked, “Hey... come on in.”

Without even thinking about it, I patted a spot on my bed, but Lauren sank into the chair next to it instead. She sat stiffly, with her legs tight together and her hands folded in her lap. I could tell she was uncomfortable.

“How are you?” I asked first, to break the ice.

“Oh, pretty good... How are *you* doing?”

I snorted. “Never better.”

Sometimes I can’t help being kind of an asshole.

I watched her eyes drop and her face get red, and for a few seconds, I delighted in making her even more uncomfortable. Then I said, “Nah, I’m... alright, I guess. Getting better, anyway.”

Lauren glanced up. “Good,” she said. “I’m glad. I... I’ve been worried about you, ever since I heard. I wanted to visit you in the hospital, but I didn’t know if... I wasn’t sure if you could have visitors or anything.”

I was sure that wasn’t the only reason she hadn’t visited, but I didn’t hold it against her. “Yeah, I’m not supposed to be around a lot of people. My immune system’s still pretty weak.”

She nodded, looking down at her hands again. I watched her twist them around in her lap for a few seconds, as we fell back into awkward silence. I could tell she didn’t know

what to say next, and neither did I. What are you supposed to say to the girl who dumped you right before you got cancer and then came crawling back when she found out you were sick? I was trying not to be bitter about it, not to feel sorry for myself, but it was tough. Part of me wanted to make her feel bad. The other part of me, the part of me that was still in love with her, searched for something to say that would make the situation less awkward.

I settled for changing the subject. "So," I said, trying to sound casual, "You dating anyone these days?"

I don't think the question did much to ease the tension. If anything, it probably made her feel *more* awkward when she had to answer, "Sort of, yeah... I've been seeing this guy, Derrick, for a few months. He's a bodybuilder."

I nodded. She'd met him through one of her fitness competitions, no doubt. He was probably in better shape than I'd ever be, with or without cancer.

"How about you and Cary?" she asked. "You guys are a couple, right?"

"Yeah... She's cool," I said.

Lauren smiled. "She seems nice. I'm glad you're not going through this alone."

I thought back to the first couple of months after my diagnosis, when I'd hid it from everyone. Then I smiled back at Lauren. "Yeah, me too."

A few seconds passed in silence. Neither of us spoke. I was messing with the edge of my sheet again when, finally, I heard Lauren say, "So... are you still bald under there?"

I looked up to see her grinning, and weirdly enough, though that question might have rattled me coming from anyone else, it actually relaxed me. It was her smile... not the polite smile she'd been forcing onto her face, but the teasing grin I loved. It reminded me of how things used to be, how comfortable we used to be around each other, and how much fun we'd had together.

I smirked. "See for yourself."

She stood up, reached over, and swiped the hat off my head. My hair hadn't started growing back yet; I was still as bald as a baby's butt underneath it. "Wow," said Lauren in a low voice, running her hand over the top of my head. "It's really smooth."

"Wait till the hair starts coming back in; then it'll feel like your prickly cactus legs."

"Hey now!" she squealed, giggling. "For your information, I shaved this morning." And before I knew it, she'd flung one of her legs up onto my mattress, so I could feel how soft and smooth it was. Lauren had killer legs; I swallowed hard, remembering all the times I'd sat with them in my lap, rubbing her calves while we watched TV. But she seemed to

realize she'd crossed an invisible line, because she pulled her leg down quickly, before I was tempted to touch it. "You have a nice-shaped head, you know," she said suddenly, bringing us back to the subject of my hair, or lack thereof.

"Thanks." I let her rub my head for a few more seconds, before I jammed the hat back on. I felt exposed, almost naked without it. "I don't think it's a look I'll keep, though. When my hair comes back, I'm gonna let it grow to my shoulders."

"Nice," she giggled, returning to her chair. Then, suddenly, her face turned serious again. "So, does that mean... I mean, are you done with your treatments, then?" she asked.

"Basically. The tough stuff, anyway. I'm still on maintenance chemo for two more years, but after everything else, that's nothing, just a bunch of pills, really. The side effects aren't bad, not like this." I gestured at my head.

She nodded, back to the polite smile. "That's good. So... the chemo and everything worked?"

"Yeah, I'm in remission. Just gotta stay that way until I'm recovered from this stupid stem cell transplant."

"Awesome... I'm really glad to hear it, Nick. I hope you have a speedy recovery." Before I could laugh in her face and tell her how long and slow it had been so far, she abruptly stood up. "I should get going, so you can finish your nap. Thanks for letting me visit; it was really good to see you."

"You too," I echoed hollowly, not sure what else to say.

She smiled and leaned in, pulling off my beanie again. Before I could protest, she bent down and kissed me, right on the top of my head. "Take care, Nick," she whispered. Then she dropped the hat into my lap, turned, and walked out.

I watched her leave, but she didn't look back. I knew then, somehow, that it was the last time I'd see her. I heard Cary let her out, and I waited, expecting Cary to run straight back to my room to find out what Lauren had wanted.

But she didn't. Sweeping orchestra music was coming from the living room, so she must have still been watching *Gone With the Wind*. I lay back down, listening to it with my eyes closed. Even with Lauren on my mind, it only took me a few minutes to fall asleep.

I don't know how long I slept, but when I woke up, *Gone With the Wind* was still going. I wandered out to the living room, where I could hear the characters arguing with each other on the TV, and found Cary stretched out on the couch, sound asleep. Her mouth was hanging half-open, a little string of drool connecting it to the couch cushion she had

tucked under one arm. I smiled at her, glad to know I wasn't the only one who couldn't make it through a four-hour movie.

I left her snoozing and went into my music room, which doubled as an office. I sat down at my desk, opened one of its drawers, and pulled out my songwriting notebook. I hadn't looked at it in months, but with my thoughts still on Lauren, I opened it up and started turning the pages, skimming over the song lyrics I'd scribbled and scratched out. Some of them were still pretty bad, but I'd come a long way as a songwriter since *Now or Never*. Some of them were actually pretty good.

I stopped on one page in particular, a song I'd written about Lauren, during a break between tours. I read the lyrics carefully, remembering how relaxed and at peace with the world I'd felt when I had written them.

*I climbed the highest mountain, was on top of the world,
Then it came crashing down.*

*And all the fame and fortune turned to dust and dirt,
Couldn't turn it back around.*

*Many days felt helpless,
Many nights full of sadness,
Maybe it's meant to be...*

The words still struck a chord in me, and soon I was singing them to myself. "*I got nothing... nothing left to lose. I got freedom... but most of all, you. We could be anything we want, just let go in each other's arms, no more lonely nights in dirty hotel rooms. We got love, and we got time, just remain on each other's minds. We could leave it all behind and start anew, as long as I got you.*"

But it was painful to sing those words, which held the memory of everything I *had* lost in the last year, from freedom and time to the woman I'd loved enough to put in a song. I trailed off and started to turn the page, until a soft voice said, "Don't stop."

I jumped, startled, and looked up. Cary was leaning in the doorway, a smile on her face. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you. I just heard you singing, and... well, I couldn't help but listen in." She offered a sheepish shrug, then beamed at me. "But Nick, that was beautiful! The lyrics were so sweet, what I could hear of them, anyway. Will you let me read them?" She stepped into the room, looking hopeful.

"Yeah, sure, I guess," I said, handing her the open notebook. I watched her closely as she read. Her whole face was pink and shining, a smile still playing on her lips as they mouthed my lyrics, and with a jolt to the stomach, that was when it hit me: *Oh shit... She thinks the song's about her.*

Sure enough, when she looked up, she was beaming at me. “I love it,” she gushed, handing the notebook back. “Will you sing it again? I’d love to hear how the whole thing goes.”

“Um... well, to be honest...” What was I supposed to say? “...I’d rather have you hear it when it’s all done and recorded and everything,” I lied lamely.

I expected her to be disappointed, but instead, her eyes lit up. “Are you thinking of recording soon?”

I shifted in my chair. “I dunno... maybe?” That was an honest answer. The truth was, I hadn’t thought about singing in weeks, but suddenly, sitting there surrounded by my equipment, with my songbook in my lap and Cary all set to cheer me on, it didn’t seem like a bad idea. Maybe I should start working on my solo album again, as long as I was stuck here with nothing better to do. I could write while I was lying in bed, play around with my instruments when I was up and about, maybe even hit the recording studio when I felt up to it.

“You should,” said Cary encouragingly. “You need a project, something to take your mind off the misery. It’d be good for you. I mean, maybe you just hid it better before, but it seemed like you were happier when we were on tour, even on the worst chemo days.”

She was right about that. I had been happier then. I couldn’t imagine being on tour now, trying to travel and perform when I felt as drained as I did, but somehow, I had managed it then. It hadn’t been easy, but I’d made it possible. It was just mind over matter. On tour was where I had wanted to be, and performing had given me something to live for, a reason to push through the pain and fight the fatigue. I couldn’t let it beat me down anymore. I had to find some way to get past this, even if it meant just working in short spurts at first, until I built up my stamina again.

I smiled up at her. “Maybe I will. God knows I’ve got enough material down in here to get started with,” I added, patting the notebook.

“Anything you’re willing to share?”

“Uh...” I turned the page and saw the lyrics to a song called “Falling Down,” which I’d written after breaking up with Lauren. I quickly flipped back a couple of pages, landing on a snippet of another song I’d started and never finished. It was more generic, more upbeat. It would do. “Yeah,” I said, “there’s this one... It’s not finished, though; I’ve only got one verse and a chorus.”

“That’s okay. I’d love to hear what it sounds like so far,” she replied eagerly.

“Okay... gimme a sec.” Even though this was a love song, I had always imagined it as an uptempo, with a driving drumbeat. I sat down at my drumset and put my foot on the bass drum pedal, kicking out a steady eight-count. “*Here I go... uh-oh,*” I sang along to

that, bobbing my head in time with the beat. “*Can’t get you out of my head. Blowing up... your phone... just to hear you breathing. You run away, run away... but that’s okay. Girl, we can play, make believe in this fantasy. I’ll be the king that you need, treat you like a queen. You’ll be my everything. But I won’t stop... until... you’re... mine. So just let go... and hold... on... tight. ‘Cause I’m falling in love again... I’m falling in love again... I’m falling in love again... so don’t stop, baby, ‘cause I’m falling in love again...*”

I stopped drumming abruptly and looked up. “That’s all I got,” I said, shrugging.

Cary clapped her hands, looking delighted. “I love it! It’s so cute!”

I didn’t know if “cute” was really what I’d been going for, but I appreciated her enthusiasm anyway. “Thanks. Any ideas for a second verse?”

She blinked. “Really? You’re asking me?”

I laughed. “Don’t act so surprised. You’re a musician, aren’t you? You write songs. Maybe you can help me write this one.” Secretly, I thought, *That’ll make up for “Nothing Left to Lose.”*

Cary blushed. “Well... I guess I could try,” she said doubtfully. “I don’t think I can come up with something right now, in front of you, though. Can I borrow your notebook so I have the lyrics you’ve got so far?”

“I’ll copy them for you,” I offered quickly, sticking the page in my scanner before she could stop me. I printed her out a copy and turned her loose in the music room, while I took my notebook and guitar back to my bedroom. For the next hour, while I poured over the notebook and played my guitar, I could hear the muffled strains of her singing, tinkering on the keyboard or strumming her ukulele to accompany herself.

I didn’t really expect much to come out of it, but after an hour or so, I heard her holler, “Hey, Nick!”

“What’s up?” I replied, poking my head back into the music room.

“Oh good, you’re still up!” She beamed at me. “I wrote a verse! I know it’s not perfect or anything; I’m not even sure if you’ll like it,” she added quickly, “but see what you think.”

She held out a piece of paper, but I shook my head and said, “Oh no... it’s no good if I just read the words.” I grinned at her. “I heard you in here singing. C’mon, let’s hear it.”

Cary blushed again furiously, but finally, she nodded. “Well, alright... Don’t judge me too harshly, though.”

“Just sing the damn song!” I growled. She grinned.

“Alright, alright... here goes.” She picked up her ukulele and started strumming, to set both her key and tempo. Then, in her soft, sweet voice, she sang a different set of lyrics to the same melody I’d sung for her earlier. *“Uh-oh... Now I know it’s really happening. Staring at... his face... wondering what he’s dreaming...”*

I felt myself smiling. The song sounded totally different in her voice, set to a ukulele instead of a drumbeat, but I liked it.

“I stay awake, stay awake... all night... ‘cause I’m afraid he won’t be there in the daylight. I’m so amazed, but I gotta play my cards right. Don’t wanna make the wrong move. But I won’t stop... until... you’re... mine...”

As she launched back into the chorus I’d written, I added my voice to hers. *“So just let go... and hold... on... tight...”*

“Cause I’m falling in love again...” we sang together, and I winked as she grinned at me. *“I’m falling in love again... I’m falling in love again... so don’t stop, baby, ‘cause I’m falling in love again.”*

“I love it,” I said, the instant she stopped strumming. “It fits perfectly. I mean, once you change the ‘his’ and ‘he’ to ‘her’ and ‘she.’”

She giggled. “Oh yeah... of course! I just sang it that way so-”

“-so I wouldn’t tease you about having lesbian fantasies?” I cut in, smirking at her. “Smart decision.”

She laughed again, her face pink and glowing. It was nice to know that, even now, I could still make her blush. I was glad; she was always prettiest when she looked that way.

“C’mere,” I said, reaching for her hand and pulling her to me. “You know I’m gonna have to give you writing credits on my solo album now,” I said, as I wrapped my arms around her waist.

“So you’re really serious about doing it?” she asked, smiling up at me.

I nodded. “I think so. You’re right... I need a project.”

She hugged me tightly. “Good. I miss that Nick.”

“Me too,” I agreed, resting my chin on the top of her head. As I stood there, inhaling the scent of her shampoo, it occurred to me that I’d never been able to do that with Lauren – those killer legs of hers were just too long. Cary’s compact little body fit perfectly in my arms, while her words echoed in my head. *That Nick...*

I hadn't felt like "that Nick" in a long time. But if anything could bring me back to my old self and make me forget I'd ever had cancer, music could. It was the reason I'd toured, and it was the motivation I needed to get going on the solo record I'd all but given up on. Music was my life, and I was ready to get that life back.

"You wanna keep playing, or are you ready for dinner?" asked Cary, pulling away. Before I could answer, her stomach growled loudly, letting me know which option she was hoping I'd choose.

I laughed along with her. "Dinner, definitely." But the hunger in my belly didn't have much to do with food.

"What do you feel like?" she asked, taking my hand and towing me into the kitchen.

The question was the same every night, and so was my answer: "I don't care. Whatever you feel like making." I never had much of an appetite, but she always put forth the effort to feed me, so I forced myself to eat.

"Hm... maybe I'll do a homemade pizza. How does that sound? And I think I slept through half of *Gone With the Wind*, so if you wanna try watching it again tonight, I'm game. Whatever you wanna do."

I chuckled. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Chapter 73

Cary

"I'm not the other guy... Don't ever wanna lie... to you, baby..."

Taking my eyes off the road for just a second, I couldn't help but glance over at the man sitting next to me in the passenger seat, singing along to his own song. I grinned. It was better than stereo, hearing Nick's voice blasting out of my speakers and also singing live in person, right into my right ear.

"Girl, it should be you and me tonight, so don't leave me waiting... oh-ohhh... I'm not the other guy..."

He sounded like classic Nick – just a little bit nasally, with the rock growl he liked to force into his voice – and he was starting to act more like the old Nick again, too.

It was amazing, the difference music could make. Not even I could have predicted the impact it would have on him. In just two weeks, he had made quite the turnaround. He

had stopped lying aimlessly around the condo all day and started writing and rehearsing songs whenever he felt up to it. He'd reached out to some songwriter friends he knew in the business, and they had responded with enthusiasm, eager to help with his solo record. Whether they were genuinely that excited or just felt sorry for him, I didn't know, but in any case, Nick had spent the previous week working with Matthew Gerrard, who had written "Help Me" for his first album, and a couple of others. The fatigue kept him from working more than a few hours a day, but even in that short time, I was impressed with how productive they had been. Nick had burned a CD with a few demos he'd recorded, and we had been listening to it off and on the whole way to Illinois.

"Would you take... my heart? Would you take all my love if I gave it?" Nick sang along to the second verse of a track called "Not the Other Guy." "*There's no place... too far. I would always get to you..."*

Thanksgiving was in two days, and I had all but insisted on spending it at home. "If you were planning on doing something with your family or one of the guys, that's fine," I'd told Nick, "but I really want to go home and see my dad for the holidays. If you're up for making the trip, I'd love for you to come, too, but don't feel like you have to."

Nick had gotten this panic-stricken look on his face and said, "Uh... and what if I already invited the whole Carter clan out here and told my mom you were cooking Thanksgiving dinner?" But he couldn't keep a straight face for longer than few seconds; as soon as he saw the look on mine, he started cracking up and flashed me a shit-eating grin. "Just kidding. I did get invited to Florida, but I haven't been to a Carter family Thanksgiving in years – why start now? I'll go home with you, if you'll have me."

"Sure, lemme just check with my old man," I'd teased him back, secretly elated to be able to bring him home for the holidays.

"I'll be there... when you call," I joined in the singing, letting my voice blend with Nick's as I sped past empty fields and clumps of trees that had already lost their leaves. "*Take the weight of the world off your shoulders..."*

"Girl, you've found the one, who won't ever run; no, I'm never gonna stop 'til you know..." Nick sang on. It was too bad he couldn't have come here a month ago, to see how pretty fall in the Midwest could be.

Since Nick hated flying and hated the thought of wearing his mask on a plane full of people even more, we had decided to drive to Illinois. Sure, it had taken us four days, instead of the four hours it would have taken to fly, but we had avoided the crowded airports and cramped planes in favor of the open road.

Nick said that, not counting touring, he hadn't been on a real road trip in a long time. "We don't get to do all the touristy stuff, unless we're in a city more than one night. Usually there's no time, between press obligations and soundcheck parties and all that. You saw how it was."

I had seen how it was, and even though I knew traveling the country in a luxurious tour bus was far better than riding in a car, I did my best to make it a fun adventure for him. We paced ourselves so that we only drove about eight hours a day, which was really all Nick could handle. We took turns driving, but a lot of the time, he would doze off while I drove. The car was kept well-stocked with snacks, since Nick wasn't supposed to eat in restaurants yet, and we only booked hotel rooms that had a kitchen, so we could prepare our own meals. We stopped near Flagstaff the first night, spent the second night in Albuquerque, and stayed just outside Oklahoma City on the third night. Along the way, we took detours to visit random roadside attractions, like the Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas, the World's Largest Pop Bottle in Arcadia, Oklahoma, and a giant talking bust of George Washington Carver in Diamond, Missouri. We took plenty of silly pictures that I couldn't wait to show my dad when he asked about the drive.

By the fourth day of our trip, most of the fun had worn off, but we'd finally made it to Illinois and were getting close to my hometown. I remembered bringing Nick there during the tour and smiled when I thought of how far we'd come since then.

We made it just in time for Tuesday night dinner at my dad's. I shivered as I stepped out of the car in his driveway; I'd been adding layers of clothing at every stop, as the temperature dropped. Central Illinois felt a lot different from Southern California this time of year.

As usual, my dad had the porch light on, and I saw the curtain twitch in the front window, a sure sign he'd been watching for us. Sure enough, by the time we reached the porch, he was already opening the front door to greet us. "Hi, sweetheart! Come in, come in, out of the cold." He waited until I'd cleared the threshold to pull me into a rib-crushing hug. When he finally released me, he reached past me and said, "Nick."

Nick took his outstretched hand and shook it. "Frank," he replied, smiling. "Good to see you again."

"You too. How are you doing?" asked Dad, looking him over. He knew better than to say so, but I could tell he was shocked by the change in Nick's appearance since he'd last seen him back in July. Nick had lost more weight, to the point where it no longer looked healthy; the muscle and definition he'd worked so hard to achieve had wasted away, and his clothes hung loosely on him. His face, no longer puffy, just looked gaunt and pale. The knit cap pulled low over his head hid his baldness, but even his perfect eyebrows had thinned down to hardly anything.

Nick still smiled and answered, "Doing better, thanks."

"How was your trip? You guys must be tired."

"We are," I spoke for both of us. "We won't stay too late tonight."

"Well, come in and make yourselves comfortable, get warm." Dad ushered us into the living room. "I made chili – your mom's old recipe. Don't know if it'll taste as good, but I gave it my best shot."

I smiled; my dad wasn't much of a cook, so it was cute that he had tried. Usually when I came over for dinner, I cooked for him, or we ordered takeout, but I'd warned him that Nick couldn't eat anything from a restaurant or deli yet because of the risk of germs. I could tell from the effort he'd put into preparing a homecooked meal that Nick met with his approval. "Well, it sure smells good," I said.

"Smells great," Nick added, sniffing.

My dad swelled with pride. "Well, come and get some. It's all ready to go; I've just been keeping it warm on the stove."

"I will in a minute. I wanna say hi to Hammy first." As I turned the corner into the hallway, I could hear the banging of cupboards and the clink of bowls, but I listened for oinking sounds as I called out, "Hambe-li-na! Where's Mama's baby?"

I waited in the hall, and after a minute or so, my little pig came, not scampering into my arms as usual, but nosing her way cautiously out of my dad's bedroom. I felt a pang of sorrow as I knelt down to reassure her, holding my hand out for her to sniff. "It's me, Hammy girl," I murmured. "Mama's home."

Hambelina grunted softly, her snout working overtime as it took in my scent, but finally, she nuzzled against my hand. Smiling, I scooped her up, planting a kiss right on her snout. "There's my baby," I cooed, cradling her in my arms. "There's my Hambelina."

I heard a snort that did not come from my pet pig and turned to see Nick standing behind me, smirking at the scene in front of him. "Don't even try to make fun of me," I warned him, smirking back. "I happen to know what a pet-lover you are, too, Mister."

He held up his hands in defense and backed away. "I wasn't gonna say anything." He still looked pretty amused, though.

"Smart boy." I lowered Hambelina to the floor and said, "C'mon, let's go get some chili."

We ate dinner around the kitchen table, spoons scraping the bottom of our bowls as Nick and I gave the highlights of our trips, the sights we'd seen and stops we'd made along the way. My dad talked about what had been happening in Decatur – not much – and told us funny stories about the neighbors and people he worked with. His circle of friends was small, and I had been just as much of a homebody, until *American Idol* changed my life. It hadn't shot me to stardom, as it had Chris Daughtry and Jennifer Hudson, also eliminated far before the finale. It hadn't landed me a record deal, like Lee DeWyze, the winner of my season, who had released his first album a week ago, or Crystal Bowersox, the runner-up, who would release hers in December. But I couldn't

forget that, if not for *American Idol*, I wouldn't have Nick Carter at my family's dinner table... or in my bed.

That was where we headed as soon as we got back to my apartment – to bed, together. No messing around with air mattresses this time... but no messing around with each other, either; we were too tired. It felt amazing to slip between the sheets of my own bed for the first time in four months. I was so stiff and drained from driving all day that I could only imagine how exhausted Nick had to be. He had seemed lively enough in front of my dad, but this, I quickly realized, was just his old act. He put on a brave face for the benefit of others, but now that it was just the two of us, the show was over. Nick stretched out next to me and was snoring within minutes.

I lay awake for awhile, watching him sleep. Sometimes it was still hard to believe that he was real, that this was real and not a dream I'd been living in for the last few months. If it was a dream, I didn't want to wake up. Despite all the worry and stress of the stem cell transplant, I loved every minute I spent with Nick, and my biggest fear, short of him getting sick again, was that he didn't feel the same way about me. What if, when he was all recovered and didn't need me anymore, he decided to send me packing? A part of me would be relieved to come back here, to the place I called home, where I had family and friends, but if that happened, I would be leaving my heart in California with Nick. Against my better judgment, I'd fallen in love with him, yet I was afraid to let him know, afraid of scaring him away.

If only he knew that the lyrics I'd written for him, the words that he'd said fit so perfectly within his song, were straight from my heart, every last one of them true. *I stay awake, stay awake all night, 'cause I'm afraid you won't be there in the daylight. I'm so amazed, but I gotta play my cards right. Don't wanna make the wrong move...*

I got up early the next morning to go grocery shopping, leaving Nick asleep in my bed with a note on his chest. I half-expected to find him in the exact same position when I came back, so it was a pleasant surprise to see him up, dressed in a pair of sweats, and waiting to help me haul in the groceries.

"Holy shit, girl!" he exclaimed, when he got a look inside the trunk of my car. "You got enough food to feed an army. Who else ya invitin' to this Thanksgiving dinner?"

I smiled and started handing him bags. "I told you, it'll be just you, me, and my dad, and yes, we'll have a lot of food, but that's a good thing. Who doesn't love Thanksgiving leftovers?"

"Good point," said Nick, as he turned to carry the bags into the apartment.

Since my dad had no other living relatives, he and I always spent Thanksgiving with my mom's side of the family. When my grandparents were alive, they'd hosted all the holidays at their house, but since then, my mom's three brothers rotated hosting duties.

This year, it was Uncle Jim's turn to have Thanksgiving at his place up in Wisconsin, but we wouldn't be there. With Nick in the picture and his immune system still recovering, I thought a small, quiet Thanksgiving sounded better, so we were staying home and having dinner at my Dad's house, just the three of us.

I had never attempted to cook a whole Thanksgiving dinner by myself before, but in a year full of so many other "firsts" for me, I thought, *Why not?* So I spread all my newly-bought ingredients out on the counter, opened a box filled with my grandmother's recipes, tied a frilly apron around my waist, and got to work. It felt great to be back in my own kitchen, after being gone for so long. I spent most of the day there, washing and chopping vegetables, boiling cranberries, and assembling various dishes and desserts. The next day, Thanksgiving, I went over to my dad's house at the crack of dawn to put the turkey in the oven. There, I fixed the stuffing, peeled and mashed the potatoes, baked the rolls, and cooked the casseroles I'd put together the day before, all while Nick and my dad watched the parade and football in the living room.

By the time we sat down to dinner together, I was exhausted, but exhilarated. Our Thanksgiving table was beautiful; all of the food looked good and smelled even better. I had pulled it off. But what made me even happier was sitting between the two most important men in my life, my dad and Nick Carter, and realizing how lucky I was to have them both. "I think we should say a blessing," I suggested.

Nick nodded, but didn't say anything. My dad cleared his throat and said, "You wanna say it, Car?"

I had figured it would be my job, knowing my dad wasn't big on religion, and neither was Nick. "Sure," I agreed, and we all bowed our heads. Praying out loud was something I hadn't done since I was a little girl, but I gathered my thoughts and gave it my best shot. "Lord, we thank you for the food on our table and each of the people sitting around it. Thank you for bringing Nick into our lives and for the opportunities we've had this year, to travel and meet new people. Thank you for the medical professionals and treatments that have allowed all of us to be in good health today, and please help us to stay that way. Thank you, Lord... Amen."

"Amen," echoed the men, both under their breath. My dad added, "That was nice, sweetheart," and Nick found my hand under the table and gave it a squeeze.

I smiled at both of them. "Thanks. Let's eat."

We started passing dishes and filling our plates, and it wasn't long before our plates were empty again and our stomachs full. I cleaned up the kitchen while Nick and my dad wandered off to let their food digest, and when I popped my head in to check on them later, I found them both sound asleep, Dad in his recliner and Nick stretched out on the couch. I smiled, shaking my head.

My grandmother would have been annoyed; I could still hear her voice scolding my grandpa for not taking all the turkey off the bone, while my cousins and I hustled around

the kitchen, scooping leftovers into Tupperware and tin foil for everyone to take home. I knew now just how much work she put in all those years and exactly how exhausted she must have been by the time dinner was over.

But even though I was tired, I couldn't be cranky. I was too full, not just with turkey and stuffing, but with relief and happiness. After all of the hard times I'd gone through with Nick, the worst seemed to be behind us, and soon, I hoped, we would be able to move forward. And I was thankful.

Later, after naps and helpings of pumpkin pie, we helped my dad put up his Christmas tree, the same artificial one he picked out with my mom for their first Christmas as newlyweds. Thirty years later, it still looked as good as it did in a photo of them sitting in front of it, that same Christmas.

The photo was part of an ornament, a little silver frame engraved with the words, *Our First Christmas Together* and the year, 1980. Before I hung it on one of the high branches, I held it in my hand, just staring at that picture. My mom's hair was long and feathered, as it had been at her wedding; it swept over the shoulders of her turtleneck sweater and framed her smiling face. She and my dad both looked so happy. How could they have known that they would only have ten more years together?

Their frozen smiles fell into shadow as someone tall came to stand behind me. "Is that your parents?" Nick asked, leaning over my shoulder. Wordlessly, I turned and handed him the ornament. He smiled as he looked at it, a little sadly. I understood.

No matter where our relationship went, we would never have the same kind of carefree happiness, I realized, as I watched the colorful Christmas lights reflecting off his pale face and shiny head. We would always have the same worries and fear that my parents had dealt with later in their marriage, after my mom got sick.

But if my dad had known, when he posed for that picture, that he would face losing his young wife in the future, would he have done anything differently? Would he have regretted marrying her or even meeting her in the first place? I didn't think so. The fact that my dad had never remarried, never even dated after my mom died, told me how much he had loved her. He would have stayed with her, even if it meant knowingly sacrificing his heart.

I felt sure of that, just as I felt sure that, no matter what the future had in store for us, I would stand by Nick, for as long as he still wanted me to. I just wasn't sure how long that might be.

Chapter 74

Nick

I guess everyone gets a little reflective on New Year's Eve. They think about the ups and downs of the past year. They make resolutions for the new year.

After the year I'd had, my biggest resolution was just to stay alive.

It had been a long, hard year. It was crazy to think that in just twelve months, I'd split up with my girlfriend, gotten cancer, wrapped up a world tour, gone through a stem cell transplant, and ended up with a new girlfriend. After all that, no wonder I was exhausted. My life was an emotional rollercoaster, but I wasn't ready to get off the ride just yet. I wanted to keep going, keep living, for as long as I could. That was the only reason I'd put myself through stem cell hell, to jack up my odds of survival.

I had a lot to live for. There was a lot I wanted to do in the new year. Release my solo album. Finish the tour. Record with the Boys. More than anything, I wanted to feel like my old self again. I wanted my old life back.

Things were getting better. I was feeling better – not a hundred percent, but at least halfway there. After spending Thanksgiving with Cary's dad in Illinois, she and I had driven down to my house in Tennessee and stayed there for most of December. We flew back to LA once, a week before Christmas, for my three-month check-up with the transplant doctor. After an intense round of testing, the same old shit I'd gone through to get my original diagnosis, I got the good news I'd been hoping for: the tests were all clear, and I was still cancer-free. It was the best Christmas present I could have asked for.

After the appointment, Cary and I returned to Tennessee and drove north again for Christmas, stopping in Kentucky to visit Brian and Kevin's family on our way up to Illinois. It was just like old times – spending Christmas with the guys and my girlfriend's family, instead of my own. I couldn't complain, though. My life was looking up, and I was looking forward to a new and better year.

We stayed in on New Year's Eve. We had gone out to a nice dinner two nights earlier, to celebrate a hundred days post-transplant, the point at which my immune system was supposed to be recovered enough to eat in restaurants again and go out in public without a mask. But I was still pretty tired a lot of the time, so a New Year's party was not in my plans. We kept things low-key instead: TV, take-out food, and a bottle of champagne were all we needed to ring in 2011 at home.

A warm front had rolled through, and even though it had rained for three days, the weather in Tennessee was balmy for December. It was still sixty degrees a couple of hours before midnight, so Cary and I took a break from watching Ryan Seacrest and went out onto the front porch. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and sat side by side in a pair of wooden rocking chairs, enjoying the fresh air.

We had been rocking away in silence for a few minutes, when Cary suddenly said, “What are we doing, Nick?”

I looked over at her, surprised by the question. “I dunno. Are you bored? We can go back in, if you want.”

“No, I didn’t mean literally, like, what we’re doing right this minute. I meant with our relationship. What are we doing? Where are we going with this?”

I got it that time, but I didn’t answer right away. Her question caught me off-guard; it reminded me of the kind of conversations Lauren kept wanting to have in the weeks before she dumped me. I understood now what I hadn’t then: Cary was looking for some kind of commitment from me, a sign that our relationship was going *somewhere*, that we might have a future together.

The trouble was, I was afraid of commitment. I didn’t know where our relationship was headed any more than she did, and my own future was still uncertain enough that it didn’t seem fair to predict or plan for a future together. “I don’t know,” I finally replied, being totally honest. “I’m still living my life one day at a time, Cary. I have no idea what’s in store for me tomorrow, let alone further down the road. Where do *you* see us going?” I turned the question back around on her, figuring it was my only way out. I knew I couldn’t give her the answer she wanted to hear.

“I don’t know either, Nick; that’s why I asked,” she asked, sounding slightly annoyed with me. “I mean, I get the living day-to-day thing, and I understand why you don’t want to plan too far ahead. But I just thought, now that the transplant is behind you and you know you’re still in remission, maybe you’d be ready to start moving forward again... and that maybe we’d move forward together.”

I frowned, wondering what she was asking of me. We were already living together and sleeping together. What was the next step? Marriage? Was that what she wanted from me, a marriage proposal? An engagement ring? I didn’t believe in marriage, and even if I did, I wasn’t anywhere near ready to take that plunge, with her or anyone. That was the reason Lauren and I had called it quits, and we’d been together a lot longer than Cary and I had. I tried to think of how I could explain that to her without pissing her off or hurting her feelings.

While I was still contemplating this, she added quietly, “It’s just, you’re not the only one whose life has been put on hold. Mine has, too. I left my job, my family, my home, *everything*, to come to California and be with you. I mean, I was happy to do it; I don’t want you to think I’m complaining. You didn’t have a choice; I did. I don’t regret any of it, but... I guess I’m just starting to question things a bit.”

“Like what?” I asked, because I wasn’t sure what else to say.

"Like, when you go back... am I coming with you? Do you *want* me to come with you? You don't *need* me anymore. You're doing fine; you don't need a nurse or a babysitter. A housekeeper, maybe," she laughed, "but I'd like to think I'm more to you than that."

"Of course you are," I replied quickly, reaching out to grab her hand. "You're... I..." I fumbled for words, finding it difficult to express what she meant to me.

It was complicated, the relationship we'd formed over the last few months. She'd gone from a stranger to a companion, a friend to a girlfriend, but somehow, that title of "girlfriend" had never really seemed to fit her. Maybe it was because we'd skipped right past the whole awkward dating part and gone straight to living together. Maybe it was because, although I liked her, I couldn't say for sure that I loved her, and that made us less than lovers and more like fuck-buddies. Fuck-buddies who lived together and shared the same bed every night. I could see why she was confused. It was confusing to me, too.

"...I don't know what we're doing any more than you do, Cary," I said finally. "I just know that I like you, and you've made the last few months bearable for me. I know it can't have been much fun for you; I haven't been much of a boyfriend. But now that I'm starting to get my life back, I feel like things are gonna be better. I think we can make it work, if you want to."

"Do you want to?"

Looking back, I should have said no. I could have cut her loose, right then and there, and freed her from being tied down to me. I'd been a burden on her, and she would have been better off without me. She could have gone back to her own life, to the career she'd had and the family she missed so much, and not had to deal with my baggage anymore.

But I was selfish. Maybe I wasn't in love with Cary, but I did like her. She was pretty and sweet, and she had a way of making me feel better, not just physically, but emotionally, too. I didn't feel so alone when I was with her. I didn't get as scared, because I knew that no matter what happened to me, she would be there and know what to do. I trusted her, and she made me feel safe and taken care of. She was there when I wanted her, and she left me alone when I didn't. She understood, and she never complained that I was using her. Being with her was comfortable; it was easy. It would have been harder to send her home and go back to dealing with everything on my own. I didn't want to be alone anymore.

So I said, "Yeah... I do."

And she smiled, looking relieved, and said, "Okay. Then I'll come with you."

She squeezed my hand, and I felt relieved, too, that I'd managed to talk myself out of an awkward conversation without saying something that would hurt her. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was hurt her; she didn't deserve that.

What she did deserve was someone better than me. She deserved a man who would love her and marry her and give her the kind of life she was meant to have – not a life spent on the road or stuck in the hospital, but a normal life with a husband and kids and a house with a white picket fence. I knew that was life she'd pictured herself having, before she met me.

Cary was a total mother hen, the type of girl who was born to have a family. She'd make the perfect wife for some lucky guy, but I just didn't know if I was that guy. Playing house with her all this time, letting her act like my wife, was a lot different than actually putting a ring on her finger, taking vows, and making a lifetime commitment out of it. Of course, after you've had cancer, the word "lifetime" doesn't seem so long, but still, I wasn't ready to settle down and start planning for a family and a future I might not have. I just wanted to finish my solo album, get back out on the road, and put cancer behind me.

"Things are gonna be different, though," Cary was saying, and I snapped back to our conversation, realizing I'd let my mind wander. "I can't keep hanging around your condo all day, doing nothing. It was fine while you were recovering and needed someone to be there, but now that you're better, you're going to be working again, and I'll need something to do, too. So I'm going to look for a job. I can't keep mooching off you, and I can't afford to keep paying my rent without an income."

It had never even crossed my mind that she was still paying rent on the apartment she was never at, thanks to me, but now it seemed obvious that she'd have to, since most of her stuff was still there. "Hey, if you'd cashed that check I gave you, you wouldn't have this problem," I joked, then added, "Seriously, though, don't worry about the money; I'll pay your rent. It's the least I can do, after everything you've done for me."

"No, no, that's not what I want," she said quickly. "I need to earn my own money. My lease is going to be up soon, anyway, so maybe I just won't re-sign... I could get my own place in LA, or..."

She trailed off, and I knew she waiting to hear what I would suggest. I smiled. "Yeah, it'd be stupid to re-sign it if you're coming back to Cali with me. You know you've always got a place to stay. You and your pig."

Even though it was dark, I could see her whole face light up. "Really, are you sure? You'd even let me bring Hambelina?"

"Sure, why not? I've been wanting another dog, but I guess a pig's close enough, right?"

We both laughed.

"I'm serious about the job, though," Cary said. "I still want to get one. Maybe just something part-time or with flexible hours, but I have to be doing something."

I nodded. "That'd be cool. Whatever you wanna do."

She didn't say anything else, and neither did I. We just sat there, rocking, holding hands and enjoying the silence, until she finally admitted, "I'm getting kinda cold. Aren't you cold?"

I shrugged. "I guess. Let's go back in and get ready for that ball to drop."

We relocated to the couch in the living room, where I pulled her into my lap and wrapped my blanket around us both. "Maybe this'll warm you up," I said, before kissing her. If I was going to spend New Year's Eve at home, I at least wanted to ring in the new year by getting laid. We made out on the couch for awhile, then worked our way into the bedroom. This was where we'd slept together for the first time, I remembered, as I undressed and climbed into bed after her.

She looked beautiful, lying there in my bed, with her dark hair fanned out over the pillow, her hands folded modestly over her breasts. I felt gross by comparison, pale and mostly hairless, like a naked mole rat. For some reason, she still seemed to want me. "C'mere," she whispered, throwing her arms around my neck and pulling me down on top of her. "And take off that hat in bed." She snatched the knit cap off the top of my head and tossed it over the side of the bed.

"Careful, you might mistake me for one of your nursing home patients," I teased, grinning down at her. In a wobbly old man's voice, I wheezed, "Excuse me, missy, but I'm ready for my Viagra now. Will you bring me some with a glass of prune juice, please?"

"Ew, Nick!" she giggled, pushing me off her. "Way to kill the mood."

"Aww, c'mon, you know you love your cute old men." I snuggled up to her side, nuzzling her with my bald head.

"Not in that way. And you don't look like an old man. You look more like a cute little boy with a buzz cut." She giggled again and stroked my head with her hand. The hair was starting to grow back there, and it wasn't coarse and stubbly like facial hair, but surprisingly soft and fuzzy, like down feathers.

"Ah, so you like sleeping with little boys instead?"

"No!" she shrieked. "Keep it up, and I won't be sleeping with you at all."

"Yes you will." I tilted my head back and smirked. "You can't resist me."

She sighed. "You're right... I can't." She rolled over and wrapped me up in her arms, kissing me deeply. "We'd better hurry," she murmured against my lips. "It's almost midnight."

“Nick be nimble, Nick be quick,” I replied, reaching over to grope for the bedside table drawer where I kept my stash of condoms.

Ryan Seacrest was still yammering away on the TV behind me, as I climbed on top of her again, but I don’t think either of us paid attention to a word he said. We were too busy enjoying the festivities in my bed. But I didn’t have the stamina I used to, and by the time they started counting down to midnight on TV, we were lying side by side under the covers again, watching the giant ball drop.

“Happy New Year,” Cary said, as confetti rained down on the crowd singing “Auld Lang Syne” in Times Square.

“Happy New Year,” I repeated, leaning over to kiss her, so we could be like all the couples kissing for the camera. I would never be as carefree as they seemed, but at least I was cancer-free. The new year was off to a good start.

“We should have a toast. I’ll go get the champagne.” Cary rolled out of bed, wrapped herself in a robe, and padded out to the kitchen. I stretched out on my back and folded my hands behind my head, listening to the fridge open and shut and the clink of glasses.

I had never been so glad to put a year behind me. 2010 had been the hardest year of my life. I was hoping 2011 would be easier. “To a new and better year,” I toasted, raising the glass of champagne Cary handed me when she climbed back into bed.

“To health and happiness in 2011,” she added, raising her glass, too. We clinked them together, then drank.

Health and happiness... I couldn’t ask for anything more.

Chapter 75

Cary

2010 had been a big year for me, but 2011 was shaping up to be even bigger.

In January, I followed Nick’s advice and terminated the lease on my apartment. My dad wasn’t thrilled about me “officially” moving in with Nick, but he let me store my furniture and appliances in the spare bedroom at his house, and I packed everything else – including Hambelina – into Nick’s Escalade for the drive back to California.

In February, after applying for my California nurse practitioner’s license, I landed a job at an outpatient geriatrics clinic in Los Angeles. It was a full-time position, but the hours were good, no nights or weekends, so I still had plenty of time to spend with Nick.

He had gone back to work, too, finishing his solo album. He had written and recorded some songs in Nashville with Dan Muckala and Jason Ingram, and once we got back to LA, he hooked up with Matthew Gerrard again, along with another songwriter, TD Mischke. He worked with them every day, while I worked at the clinic, and played me demos when we were home together at night. Each new song he shared was better than the one before it, and I couldn't have been more impressed or proud of him.

Some of his songs were deep, emotional, and obviously personal, like "Falling Down," while others were more light-hearted and fun, like "I'm Taking Off," which he'd decided to use for the name of the album as well. It fit, but I noticed that none of his new material, even the most personal stuff, seemed to address the health crisis he'd faced, and I found that strange. "Have you considered doing a song about what you went through last year... you know, being sick and everything?" I asked him one night.

"No," he said, scowling. "I thought about it, but I figure, that's what people will expect me to do, and I want this album to go way beyond their expectations. I don't want it to be all about having cancer, and I don't want people to buy it out of charity, because they feel sorry for me, or because they're just morbidly curious about what I went through. That's personal, you know? It's private. I'm better off sticking to songs about shit that everyone can relate to, like relationships and stuff. I'd rather be known as a Backstreet Boy who sings love songs than that boyband guy who got cancer."

I could understand that, but still, I wondered if this was just yet another sign of his denial. He'd hidden his illness for so long, tried so hard to live his life like normal and pretend nothing was wrong while he was sick, and now that he was better, he wanted to forget the whole thing, pretend it had never happened. I couldn't blame him for that, except that it *had* happened, and surely, it had changed him in ways that didn't show on the outside.

Around me, he acted the same as he always had. Sometimes he was funny, flirty and charming; at other times, he was quiet, closed-off and distant. I didn't know if the mood swings were a side effect of his lingering fatigue or the medications he still took daily, or if that was simply his personality. I realized I'd never known him before he got sick, so I couldn't say if cancer had made him that way or not. I couldn't expect him to be like his stage persona all the time, though, even when he was well.

We'd been back in LA for a month when Valentine's Day rolled around. I didn't set my expectations too high for that, either, not sure what Nick would feel up to doing, or if he'd feel like doing anything at all. Secretly, though, I hoped he'd at least take me out on a date. We'd had plenty of quiet dinners at home; I wanted to do something different, something special. But whenever I made a suggestion or dropped a hint, he blew me off. Either he was planning something big and secret, or nothing at all.

When I woke up on the morning of February fourteenth, all the signs pointed to big and secret. A single, long-stemmed red rose in a crystal vase was sitting on the bedside table, and Nick was mysteriously missing from the bed. Before I could summon the

energy to drag myself out of it, he came into the bedroom, still in nothing but his boxers, carrying a tray filled with breakfast.

"You've made me breakfast in bed plenty of times... figured it was a good day to return the favor," he said, pecking me on the cheek as he set the tray down in front of me.
"Happy Valentine's Day."

"You're sweet... thank you!" I was delighted; no guy had ever cooked me breakfast in bed before. Nick was right – that was the kind of thing I did for other people. It was nice to be on the other side of the tray for once. Nick had gotten up early and cooked up a storm – either that, or he'd had it catered. I didn't ask, just sampled the bacon, eggs, and raspberry cream cheese muffin and told him how good everything tasted. "Get in here and help me eat all this," I commanded him, patting the empty spot on his side of the bed. He scrambled in, and we ate breakfast in bed together. It was even harder to get up and get ready for work after that, but at least I left with a smile on my face.

He had more roses delivered to me at work, which earned me plenty of attention from my new co-workers. "Ooh, you are one lucky girl," said the receptionist, who knew exactly who the flowers were from.

"Don't let my wife hear that you got flowers. Might give her ideas," grumbled my supervisor, a physician who was practically geriatric himself and wouldn't have known who Nick Carter was even if he'd delivered them in person. "I haven't bought her flowers in thirty years. It's guys like him who put guys like me to shame."

I laughed. "Well, maybe you should pick up a bouquet on your way home this afternoon," I suggested brightly. "It'd be a nice surprise for Valentine's Day."

"Oh yeah... she'd be surprised, alright," he muttered and shuffled off to see his next patient.

"Don't mind him," said Amanda, the receptionist, rolling her eyes. "It's good to know chivalry isn't completely dead. *Some* guys still remember how to be romantic. So..." She grinned at me, raising her eyebrows. "You think you'll get a private serenade or something tonight? Will he show you the shape of his heart?"

I giggled again and shook my head, feeling my face heat up. "I have no clue what we're doing tonight."

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure you'll enjoy every minute of it. Like I said... lucky girl."

I did feel like a lucky girl, as I drove back to Nick's place that afternoon. I felt even luckier when I saw what was waiting for me there.

"Check the bed," Nick said, waving me on into his bedroom, after I'd kissed him and thanked him for the roses. Curious, I wandered into his room and found a long, white box lying across the foot of the bed. I opened it, folded back layers of tissue paper, and

gasped at the sight of gorgeous gown made of burgundy silk. I took it carefully out of the box, the satiny material sliding between my fingers, and was holding it up when Nick walked in. “Like it?” he asked, and I turned to see him leaning against the doorframe, a smirk on his face.

“It’s beautiful! But where am I going to wear something like this?” I loved dresses, but this wasn’t just a dress; it was an evening gown, way fancier than anything I had in my closet.

“Out for dinner and dancing with me tonight,” Nick replied, his smirk broadening into a full-fledged smile. “I know this place downtown; it’s like a vintage nightclub, with a live orchestra and ballroom dancing and stuff. Sounded like something you’d enjoy.”

I could have melted on the spot. Of course, he knew how I loved vintage fashion and big band music, but I still never would have expected him to do something like this. I was giddy as I got dressed for our date that night. The gown fit me perfectly; it had a high-necked halter top that showed off my shoulders, a plunging, open back, and a floor-length skirt that hugged my curves and flared out at the bottom. I felt glamorous in it, like a silver screen starlet.

“How on earth did you get this to fit me just right?” I asked Nick when he came in to change clothes, poking my head out of the bathroom. “Who helped you?”

“Rochelle,” he admitted, with a sheepish grin. “She loves all that vintage stuff, too; I figured she’d be the best person to ask. She picked out the dress; I let her snoop through your closet while you were at work to figure out your size.”

“Well, she did a great job.”

“I know. She got you this, too,” he said, and he handed me a shoebox. Inside were a pair of black gloves, matching heels, and a small, beaded purse.

“Wow,” I said, holding up one of the gloves. It was long, the kind of glove that would go all the way up to my elbow when I put it on. “And people really dress up like this to go to this nightclub?”

“So I’m told. I’ve, uh, never actually been there before, myself.”

I smiled. “Let me guess – that was Rochelle’s suggestion, too, huh?”

He just grinned.

“So what are *you* wearing, then?”

He wiggled his eyebrows, which were finally starting to grow back in. “Wait and see.”

I could take a hint. “Okay...” I sighed and went back into the bathroom. I styled my hair in old-fashioned finger waves and applied my makeup, finishing it off with my favorite red lipstick.

It took me a long time to get the hair just right, and soon I heard Nick calling, “Hey, Cary, you ‘bout ready? We have dinner reservations at eight. We should probably go soon; I bet traffic’s gonna be bad.”

“Almost ready!” I gave my hair one last spritz of hairspray, put on the new shoes and long gloves, and picked up the beaded bag, stopping in front of the full-length mirror long enough to strike a few red carpet poses and admire my hardly-recognizable reflection before I went to find Nick.

He was waiting for me in the living room, all dressed up and ready to go. For a few seconds, I had to just stop and stare. He was wearing an ivory, double-breasted dinner jacket with black pants, black shoes, and a black bow tie. I had never seen him look so suave, or so sexy. His hair was an inch long now and darker than it had been before he’d lost it, and he had a faint mustache coming in over his upper lip. He didn’t look like a cancer patient anymore, just a guy with a short haircut, and on that night, he could have been Clark Gable, and I, Vivien Leigh.

“God, you look... amazing,” he said, licking his lips as his eyes gave me the onceover.

I blushed. “So do you.”

“You ready to go?” Grinning, he offered me his elbow, like a true gentleman. I took it, my heart fluttering with excitement, and we strolled out of the condo together.

Walking into the Cicada Club was like walking into one of my dreams. I felt like I’d traveled back in time, or been sucked into a scene from one of the classic old Hollywood movies I loved. The nightclub was housed on the ground floor of an art deco-style, historical high-rise, and the inside was even more impressive than the exterior of the building. The club was decorated in dark wood with gold accents, lit by chandeliers overhead and candles on all of the tables, and had a dance floor laid out in front of a small stage, where a jazz orchestra was setting up to play. When the live swing music started, the dance floor filled up with couples, all of them dressed up in either modern suits and evening gowns or vintage formalwear like ours.

I couldn’t wait to get out there and dance, but before that, Nick and I sat down to an elegant, four-course meal that included smoked salmon, crab ravioli, filet mignon, and chocolate mousse for dessert. I drank quite a bit of wine with dinner, and by the end, I was feeling pretty giggly. “Come on!” I pleaded, tugging on Nick’s arm. “Let’s go dance!”

He looked less than enthusiastic, but I’d already figured out this was my night and knew I’d get my way. Sure enough, he joined me on the dance floor – grudgingly, it was true,

but I didn't care. "I thought you didn't dance!" he shouted over the big band music, as I pulled him into an empty space on the floor.

Smirking, I leaned in and replied into his ear, "I seem to remember you telling me once that if you got enough drinks in me, you'd get me to dance. Well, here we are!"

"Yeah, well, I don't know how to dance like this," he complained, as he placed his hands awkwardly on my hips.

"It's okay; I don't either, really. I can show you the basics, and we'll just have to make up the rest." I removed his left hand from my waist, raised it into the air, and placed my right hand in it. I put my left hand on his right shoulder and pulled him a little closer to me. At first, we just sort of rocked back and forth, feeling out the rhythm of the music. Then I said, "Okay now, if you wanna try a real swing step, it goes something like this... We do sort of a shuffle this way..." I led, dragging him with me. "...and then do a rock step back with your other foot – my left, your right. Then we just go back the other way..."

For a guy who could pull off such complicated choreography in his concerts, Nick was kind of a klutz at swing dancing. "You know, I bet your brother would be a lot better at this. Maybe *you* should do *Dancing With the Stars* so you can learn a few moves," I teased him, before we gave up trying to do any sort of real dance steps and just made up our own. He twirled me under his arm and dipped me backwards until I was light-headed and dizzy, my head spinning from vertigo and too much wine. I was having a blast, but it was still a relief when he suggested that we take a break.

"You doing okay?" I asked, when we sat back down at our table to catch our breath.

Nick swallowed a sip of water. "I'm good. Just hot." He'd already removed his jacket and tie; now he unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

You are hot, I thought, watching him with a little smirk, but I didn't say it.

"You havin' fun?" he asked, looking over at me.

"Are you kidding? You knew I'd love this, and you were right!" I sighed, looking around dreamily. "We should come here every week."

"Ha... you better let me get back in shape first. You're gonna throw my back out with all that dancing."

"Ha-ha, okay, old man."

"You wish." He grinned, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

"Shut up; no I don't. There's no one I'd rather be here with than you, and you know it."

“Aww... you love me.” Still grinning, he scooted his chair closer to mine and threw his arm around my shoulders, hugging me to his side. I could smell his sweat and feel his damp pit stain against my bare skin, but I couldn’t deny it. He may have just been kidding around, but I wasn’t.

“I love you,” I whispered later, when we were lying in bed together, both of us streaked with sweat, our dress clothes on the floor.

He rolled over, propping himself up on one elbow, and smirked down at me for a few seconds. Then he wrapped me up in his arms again and kissed me so deeply, my brain went fuzzy. It wasn’t until later, after he’d dropped off to sleep and left me lying awake, that I realized he’d never said it back.

Chapter 76

Nick

Six months after my stem cell transplant, I was finally starting to look and feel more like my old self again.

The stem cells had done their job, replacing the cells that were wiped out by the chemo, so that my blood counts were back to normal, and my immune system was working again. I had no more restrictions on what I could eat or where I could go, and I had the energy to do the things I wanted to, as long as I paced myself.

Along with working on my album, I’d been working on my body, trying to get back into the kind of shape I’d been in before I got cancer. I ate healthy, went to the gym when I felt up to it, and tried to take care of myself. It was a long, slow process, but I could feel myself getting stronger every day, as I built up the muscle tone I’d lost lying around in the hospital. My hair had started growing back, and I was feeling more confident about way I looked.

In mid-March, I posed for a photo shoot for my solo album’s cover art. We kept the pictures simple: me in front of a white background, looking into the camera; me on the beach, looking serious and reflective; me in my knit cap, looking... I don’t know, like a guy who’s been through something traumatic and lived to tell the tale, I guess. That was how I was starting to think of myself: as a survivor.

I was actually looking forward to going to Cary’s Relay for Life again in the summer, so that I could wear one of those purple shirts with pride. Maybe I wouldn’t shout it from the rooftops, but I wouldn’t hide it anymore, either. I’d had cancer, and I’d survived it.

So far.

The thing about cancer is, it's not that simple or straight forward. It's not like a race, where there's a certain route to run and an end in sight. There's no finish line, unless you count death. You can put the disease behind you, but even then, you still keep running and hope it doesn't catch up. Everyone's journey is different; for some, it's a sprint, and for others, it turns out to be a marathon. Sometimes it's uphill, sometimes it's down, and sometimes, even when everything seems to be going smoothly, you run into hurdles that you've got to get over. And through it all, you're tired and out of breath, your body aches, and sometimes, you just feel like giving up, like falling down and dying, right there in the middle of the road.

I didn't want to die, but some days, it was still hard just to get out of bed in the morning. The fatigue wasn't as bad, but I still got tired easily, and sometimes I woke up with a splitting headache, feeling like I'd hardly slept. Most of the bone pain I'd suffered through after the transplant had gone away, but my back had been bothering me for over a month. I figured I'd pulled something and liked to blame it on Cary trying to get me to swing dance on Valentine's Day, but she claimed I was just pushing myself too hard in the gym and got on my case about taking it easy.

"Is your back still sore?" she asked that morning, when I hobbled into the kitchen for breakfast, rubbing my lower back.

I yawned and reached for the ceiling, trying to stretch out my spine and loosen up the muscles back there. I was always stiff and sore in the morning, but once I got going, the kinks usually worked themselves out. "Yeah, a little. I'm fine, though."

She pursed her lips together, giving me the kind of look that told me she thought I should get it checked out, but I didn't think it was a big deal. I had gone to a chiropractor at the beginning of the month, and he hadn't seemed too concerned, either. He couldn't find anything that felt out of place and, like Cary, told me I'd probably just strained a muscle in my efforts to get back in shape. He'd poked and popped my back, but the visit hadn't really helped much.

Sometimes I wondered if these aches and pains weren't side effects from cancer treatments or working out too much, but just the natural signs of getting older. After all, I'd turned thirty-one in January; I was still young, but I wasn't a kid anymore. My body had been through hell in the last year, and I didn't blame it for taking longer to recover than it used to.

"Just make sure you ask Dr. Subramanien about it when you see her today, okay? Please? For me?" Cary gave me a pleading look, which I returned with a big, cheesy grin.

"You got it, babe. I'll be sure to mention it."

"Good. Thank you." She smiled back, but she still looked like she might not believe me. I would ask, though; I wasn't stupid.

I was going in to the outpatient clinic for my six-month follow-up, which meant another round of tests like I'd had back in December, to make sure my cancer was still in remission. I'd gotten a clean bill of health back then, so I wasn't worried, but I knew it wouldn't be wise to hide any complaints that might be signs of a problem. Still, I was pretty sure Cary was just being neurotic. The back pain couldn't be from cancer; I'd had completely different symptoms before my diagnosis, and I wasn't experiencing any of those things now – no cough or shortness of breath, no fevers or night sweats, and no chest pain. I felt better than I had in months.

Still, I grunted in pain as I bent over to grab an orange out of the fridge, and Cary noticed. "You've got to get this taken care of," she said softly, coming up behind me and placing her hand on the small of my back. While I stood at the counter, peeling my orange, she stayed behind me and massaged my back, kneading up and down along my spine with the heels of her hands. It sort of hurt, but it felt good, too, like she was working out all the tension.

"Mm..." I groaned, closing my eyes. "You're amazing, you know that?" I turned around and took her in my arms, kissing her. I didn't know how I'd ever survived on my own without her, especially when I was sick. Even though she was working now, she still cooked dinner every night, kept the condo clean, and kept me satisfied in bed. She was like the perfect wife, without the marriage certificate, and I loved her that way.

I knew she loved me, too. She'd told me so, once, on Valentine's Day, and not again since then, but I didn't need her to say it, and I didn't feel pressed to say the words to her. Our relationship had never been "by the book," so why should we have to define it? We were happy together, and that was what mattered.

"Hm... well... I should probably go be amazing at work," Cary said, craning her neck to check the clock on the microwave behind me. "I'm sorry I can't come with you today..."

"It's no big deal. I've been through this before on my own; I know the drill." If I was being honest, I wished she was coming to the appointment with me; it was going to be a long, boring day, most of it spent waiting, and it would have been nice to have her around to help pass the time and take my mind off the tests I had to have done, some of which were going to suck. But I understood: she hadn't been working long at her new job and wouldn't feel right asking for a day off yet.

"Well, call me if anything comes up, if you need me or anything."

I nodded, but I knew I wouldn't have any reason to call her. "Everything'll be fine," I assured her, as she picked up her pink medical bag and headed out the door. Once she had left for work, I finished my breakfast and went back to the bedroom to get dressed for my fun-filled day of medical testing.

When I got to the cancer clinic, a nurse took me right back. “You’ve put on some weight since your last visit!” she exclaimed when she got me on the scale. She made it sound like a huge accomplishment. It was nice to be praised for gaining weight, instead of criticized for it.

“All solid muscle,” I replied with a smirk, flexing my bicep for her.

She laughed and led me back to an exam room, where she took my vitals and gave me a gown to put on. “Dr. Subramanien will be in to see you in a few minutes,” she promised and then left me alone to change.

Dr. Submarine didn’t keep me waiting long. When she walked into the room, I noticed she was wearing a bright yellow blouse under her white coat, and I thought, *Yellow Submarine*. I laughed inside at my own joke and struggled to keep a straight face when she said hello and asked how I was doing.

“I’m good,” I said. “Been feeling a lot better lately. I’ve gotten back to work; I’m releasing a solo album soon, my first one in over eight years.”

“That’s nice. Congratulations,” she replied, sort of absently. “Can you lie back, please?”

I stretched out on the exam table and shut up while she stuck her stethoscope down the front of my gown to listen to my heart and lungs. I should have known she’d be all business.

“Any problems with your port?”

“No. Hey, when can I get that thing taken out? I mean, I don’t need it anymore, right?” It would come in handy for the blood draw that I knew was coming, but it was pretty useless otherwise; I hadn’t gotten chemo through the port in six months.

Dr. Submarine gave me a knowing smile. “Let’s see how your tests turn out, and if everything looks clear, we can set up an appointment to remove it.”

“Awesome.” The port really hadn’t been that big of a deal, but it would still be a relief to get rid of it. I would always have a little scar on my chest from it, but at least I wouldn’t have a weird lump under my skin anymore.

“Have you had any symptoms or side effects you’re concerned about?” Dr. Submarine asked, as she poked and prodded me, feeling for swollen lymph nodes, I guess.

“No...” I started to say, then remembered my promise to Cary that morning. “Well, except for my back. I’ve been having this pain in my lower back, but I think I just pulled a muscle or something. I’ve been working out a lot, trying to get back into shape.”

“Why don’t you sit up, and I’ll take a look?”

I sat up again, shivering a little as her hands opened the back of the gown and touched my bare skin. “I saw a chiropractor a few weeks ago, but he didn’t help much,” I added, as she felt up and down my spine.

“Well, I haven’t felt anything out of the ordinary, but I’ll order a bone scan along with your usual work-up. It may show us the cause of your back pain.”

I didn’t ask what she thought that cause could be, but in the back of my mind, it occurred to me that a bone scan didn’t sound like a diagnostic test for a muscle strain.

As I was shuttled around the clinic for all the scans and procedures on the agenda that day, I realized it had been just about a year since I’d gone through all this stuff for the first time. It was crazy to think that, a year ago, I’d come to this clinic without a cancer diagnosis, without a clue of what to expect, and with the feeling that I didn’t belong there. Everyone else was so old, I remembered thinking. Old people got cancer. Sometimes little kids got it, too. But not guys my age, not thirty-year-olds who were in the best shape of their life.

And now, in a weird way, I felt old. World-weary. Wise. I’d seen and done it all before, and I knew what was coming this time. I didn’t get claustrophobic during the CT or PET scans. I didn’t flinch for the spinal tap or the bone marrow biopsy. The blood draw was a cinch, and the bone scan wasn’t bad either. The tests had become routine, old hat to an experienced patient like me, and nothing to stress out about.

Checking into the hospital for all this diagnostic stuff a year ago had been like walking into a dark tunnel, completely blind. It had taken time for my eyes to adjust. But by now, I was almost through the tunnel, and I could see the light at the end, and I knew that if I just kept heading in the right direction, I’d make it out alive. I just might not be the same person I’d been going in.

I left the clinic that afternoon without seeing Dr. Submarine again, but her nurse told me she would call in a few days with my test results. As far as I was concerned, no news was good news, so that was fine with me.

When I got home, Cary was in the kitchen, cooking dinner. “Hi!” she said, putting down her spatula and hurrying over. She gave me a kiss on the lips and a tender hug, careful not to hurt my back. She must have known it would be more tender than usual, after getting bone marrow and spinal fluid sucked out for testing. “How’d it go today?”

I shrugged. “It was fine. Same old shit.”

“Did you talk to Dr. Subramanien?”

“About my back? Yeah, I told her. She said she didn’t feel anything out of place, but she made me get a bone scan...” I frowned, remembering the question I hadn’t felt like

asking Dr. Submarine. “What does that check for, exactly, a bone scan? Could it show cancer?”

Cary bit down on her bottom lip. “It could...” she said slowly. “I mean, cancer can spread to the bones, and the scan would show if it had. But there are lots of other things that could be causing your back to hurt. It could just be a lasting side effect of the transplant, or it could be something as simple as a pulled muscle or a slipped disc from working out, like you thought. It’s probably nothing, but I’m glad you told her so she could order the test and make sure.”

I nodded, but her confirmation that a bone scan could be used to detect cancer had planted the first seeds of doubt in my mind.

“Why don’t you go lie down for awhile before dinner?” Cary suggested. “I’m making homemade pizza; I thought we could eat in the living room tonight, so you can stretch out on the couch.”

“Yeah, okay...”

I wandered back to my bedroom and lay facedown on the bed, burying my head in my pillow. It felt good to be lying flat; I had a headache again, probably from the spinal tap. At least I didn’t have anywhere to be that night; I could take it easy and would feel better by morning. It wasn’t like all those times on the tour, when I’d had to lie flat in my bunk on the bus or on a bed in some strange hotel room after Cary had injected chemo into my spine. How I’d made it through all that, I had no idea. I couldn’t imagine doing it now, or ever again.

I closed my eyes and was just started to doze off when I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. I boosted myself up onto my elbows, grimacing at the pain in my back, and rolled over to dig out my phone. I squinted down at the caller ID, a little disoriented, and my stomach lurched as I saw the words *UCLA Santa Monica* flashing under the number for the cancer clinic that I had programmed into my phone. I pressed the button to answer the call and sat up, raising the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Hello, Nick? This is Dr. Subramanien,” came my doctor’s soft, accented voice.

“Hey, what’s up, Doc?” I replied, as casually as I could, but this time, I wasn’t laughing inside. My heart was pounding. Why was she calling me now, when the nurse had said it would take a few days?

“I’ve gotten back some of your test results, and I’d like to meet with you in person to go over them. Are you able to come back to the clinic this evening, or would you rather we set up an appointment for tomorrow?”

I swallowed hard. “Tonight? But...” I looked over at the clock by my bed; it was way past five. “...isn’t the clinic closed by now?”

“Yes, but I’m still here in my office. I’ll wait for you, if you’d like to come in now.”

Maybe she always works after hours, I tried to reassure myself, but it didn’t work. She had stayed late for me. That could only mean one thing...

“It’s important,” she added gently.

“O-kay. Um, I’m on my way.”

I threw down the phone. My mind was racing, and my heart was beating even faster. I sat there on the edge of my bed for a few seconds, taking slow, shuddering breaths and trying to collect my thoughts. They all led to the same conclusion.

...I was about to get bad news.

Chapter 77

Cary

I’ve been in the medical profession since I was twenty-two. I’ve worked for doctors. I know how they operate. I know they never call on the same day with good news. I know they never deliver bad news over the phone.

Good news can wait until morning, you see. Good news can be given on the phone. It’s the bad news you get urgent phone calls at night for, bad news that requires meeting face to face.

So when Nick came out of his bedroom, white-faced and shaking, and told me his doctor had just called and wanted to see him back in her office as soon as possible, I knew something was wrong.

Nick knew it, too.

Neither of us spoke as we got ready to leave. I turned off the oven, leaving a pizza half-baked on the center rack. Nick put his shoes back on and wordlessly handed me his keys. I drove us to the oncology clinic.

We were halfway there before Nick finally said, “So what do you think it could be? A relapse?”

That was my worst fear – and, also, exactly what I thought it had to be. What else but a recurrence of his cancer could be bad enough that she wouldn’t tell him over the phone? I explored the other possibilities in my mind, looking for one I could latch onto. “I don’t

know... Maybe your scans were inconclusive; maybe there was a mistake made in the lab; maybe she just needs to run one of the tests again.”

“Why wouldn’t she have just told me that? We could have scheduled an appointment over the phone.”

“Well, maybe... maybe your blood counts are down and you need a transfusion, or... or she wants to change one of your prescriptions or... something...” I was grasping at straws, and it was obvious.

“Yeah, maybe...” Nick muttered. I could tell he didn’t believe the bullshit coming out of my mouth any more than I did.

I shut up after that, and we rode the rest of the way to the clinic in silence.

We got a parking spot close to the entrance, since the deck was almost empty. It was after hours, I realized, and most of the medical practices housed in this building were probably closed. My footsteps echoed through the vast, concrete space as I got out of the car and walked around to Nick’s side. He grunted in pain as he struggled out of the passenger seat. I offered him my hand and helped pull him into a standing position, then slid my arm around his waist and left it there as we slowly made our way into the office building. He walked slightly hunched over, like an old man, and I knew that his back had to be killing him, from the spinal tap and the bone marrow biopsy and, possibly, something more serious. This just reaffirmed my suspicions: Dr. Subramanien wouldn’t make him come back here, after the painful procedures she’d already put him through that day, unless it was serious.

She met us in the waiting room of the fifth floor clinic. All of the chairs were empty, and the receptionist had gone home for the evening. It was just us. “Nick, thank you for coming in,” she said, touching his shoulder lightly, nodding at me in greeting. Neither gesture hid the grim look on her face. “I apologize for bringing you back here this evening, but I didn’t want to discuss this over the phone.”

Nick didn’t waste any time with a greeting. “What is it?” he asked.

The doctor pressed her thin lips together, then beckoned to us. “Let’s go into my office to talk.” She led us back to her office, which was much smaller than the conference room where we’d met to discuss Nick’s options for the stem cell transplant. “Please, have a seat.” She motioned to the two chairs facing her desk, while she walked around to sit behind it. Nick and I sat down.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but it’s not good news,” she began, and even though I’d known it wouldn’t be, hearing the words was still like a kick to the stomach. “The lab analysis on the fluid sample obtained during your lumbar puncture today shows cancer cells in your cerebrospinal fluid.”

“So it’s back,” Nick said, in a low, dead sort of voice. “It’s spread.”

Dr. Subramanien nodded. “I’m afraid so. It’s not uncommon for your form of lymphoma to relapse in the central nervous system, and as of right now, it appears to be isolated to the spinal fluid. I put a rush on your other test results after seeing the CSF analysis. The CT and PET scans show no signs of solid tumors in the brain, spinal cord, or other organs, and your bone marrow looks clear.”

I let out my breath slowly, thinking, *So it hasn’t spread everywhere. Maybe it’s not so bad, then...*

But her next words destroyed this delusion. “Unfortunately, cancer in the spinal fluid is difficult to treat. Your best option is a combination of chemotherapy and radiation to the whole brain and spinal cord.”

“More chemo.” The flat tone of disgust Nick used gave me an anxious feeling I couldn’t quite explain.

“We would give you methotrexate—”

“The same drug I had before?” Nick interrupted, glaring across the desk at her. “The drug that didn’t work?”

“-injected directly into the spinal fluid,” Dr. Subramanien continued smoothly, only to be cut off by Nick again.

“Which means more spinal taps, right?” He slumped lower in his chair, looking defeated, and I felt his pain, felt absolutely sick at the thought of putting him through that again.

“That’s one way of administering the intrathecal chemo, yes. Another option is an Ommaya reservoir, which is a type of catheter that’s implanted under the scalp, so that the drug can be delivered into the cerebrospinal fluid inside one of the ventricles in your brain.”

I saw Nick blink. His face had been very white, but all of a sudden, it started getting red. “My brain?” he repeated, his nostrils flaring. “You wanna put a tube in my *brain* now? It’s not enough that I had one sticking out the side of my neck, or that I still have this thing in my chest—” He put his hand over the portacath. “-but now you’re talking about one in my *head*? ”

I could tell he was starting to lose it, and I reached out and laid a hand on his arm, saying, “Nick...”

He shook my hand off without looking at me, his eyes still fixed on Dr. Subramanien in a death-stare. Very calmly, she replied, “It would just look like a small lump on the top of your head, not much different from your portacath.”

Nick ran his hand over the top of his head, his fingers raking through the new growth of hair, and stared down at the desktop. Dr. Subramanien seemed to sense his frustration and stopped talking, allowing him the time to think in silence. I knew how overwhelmed he must feel, from the devastating news and the treatment options to consider. Neither of us wanted to be in this situation, dealing with this disease again, facing what we both thought we'd put behind us. But, of course, it was his illness, his body, and while the doctor could give suggestions, and I could offer support, Nick would have to be the one to make the decisions.

"No," he said suddenly, looking up.

"No what?" I asked, before I could help myself.

He still refused to look at me. "No more chemo," he mumbled, dropping his eyes again. "No more spinal taps... no more tubes sticking out of me. I don't wanna deal with any of that shit again. I'm done."

My stomach lurched, like I was about to throw up, and my heart started beating faster. "What are you saying, Nick? You can't just give up... You've got to try to treat this!"

"*Try?*" He snorted derisively, glancing at me briefly before looking away again. "Why? She said herself it was hard to treat!" he cried, flinging a hand towards the doctor.

"But... what about radiation?" I looked desperately at Dr. Subramanien, silently begging her to step in and talk some sense into him.

"Radiation without chemotherapy isn't as effective with this kind of metastasis," she said quietly. "Craniospinal radiation also has potentially serious side effects – fatigue, headaches, nausea, hair loss, and the risk of cognitive impairment or secondary tumors. As a palliative measure, it can help relieve symptoms associated with cancer in the spine, but it's not likely to get rid of the cancer completely on its own."

"How likely is it that the chemo will get rid of the cancer completely?" asked Nick in a low voice, still staring down at the desk. "I mean, realistically... what are my odds of beating this?"

"You must understand that every case is different," Dr. Subramanien explained, "and odds are only a predictor, not a guarantee."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. So what are they?"

I had done the research; I knew the odds weren't in his favor. But it still shocked me to hear Dr. Subramanien say, "I'm afraid that, even with treatment, your prognosis is rather poor at this stage. In clinical studies, adults with your type of lymphoma who have relapsed in the central nervous system have a one-year survival rate of about twenty-five percent."

I sucked in a huge breath and held it, feeling it rattle around in my lungs as I struggled to keep my composure. Beside me, Nick was silent and still, as he absorbed the same information. Twenty-five percent... a one in four chance that he would make it even another year.

"And if I decide not to do treatment?" Nick's voice had returned to an emotionless monotone; he spoke as if he were already dead. "How long do I have then?"

Dr. Subramanien shook her head. "There's really no way to know that; I can't put a time limit on—"

"Please, I need to know!" Nick insisted, his voice rising sharply. He leaned forward, looking directly at the doctor again. "How long?"

She pressed her lips together and folded her hands on the desk top. "On average... six months."

Nick nodded once and lowered his head. I wondered what on earth was going through it. My own thoughts were racing too fast to even put into words; it was like the rug had just been swept out from under me, and I was struggling to find my balance. I felt nothing but total devastation in the wake of the conversation I'd just witnessed.

I don't really remember what else was said in the doctor's office that evening. My brain was still reeling with shock over it all: Dr. Subramanian's grim diagnosis... Nick's impassive acceptance of it... his refusal to pursue the treatment options she'd offered...

I do know that she wrote him two prescriptions, one for a painkiller, the other, a steroid, to help control swelling and other symptoms he'd have down the road. But I couldn't bear to look that far ahead yet, to even think about what was going to happen to him. Nick and I walked out of the office hand in hand, but neither of us spoke, and I drove us back to his condo in a trance.

In the days that followed, I researched treatment options, read studies, looked into clinical trials, even called oncologists I knew back home to ask for second opinions. But even though I searched high and low for some magic muffin that would cure Nick's cancer, I didn't find anything much different from what Dr. Subramanien had already told us, and Nick shot down every one of my suggestions.

"I read this study that mentioned allogeneic stem cell transplants as an option for people who have relapsed after an autologous one," I mentioned to him one day. "That might work; I mean, Leslie's a match, and her baby is due any day now, right, so once she recovers from having the baby, she could still donate..."

But Nick just shook his head, stubborn as ever. "No. No way in hell am I putting myself through that again. The first one was bad enough."

"You'd rather die?"

“I’d rather enjoy what’s left of my life. I don’t wanna spent the rest of my time lying in a hospital, puking my guts out, and feeling like total shit. If I’ve only got six months either way, I might as well make the most of them.”

“But Nick, you don’t *know* that; Dr. Subramanien even said so; she said every case is different...”

No matter what I said to try and change it, Nick’s mind was made up, and he couldn’t be convinced otherwise. And so, I found myself facing the hard reality he had already started to accept.

Nick was going to die, and there was nothing I could do to save him.

Chapter 78

Nick

I can’t even begin to describe what goes through your mind when you hear the words, “*You’re dying.*” Really, I’m not even sure Dr. Submarine actually used those words. That might have just been the voice in my head.

But I knew. Somehow, I knew, even before she gave me the odds. It was the look on her face, the tone of her voice, when she told me the cancer was back. Of course she wanted to treat it, but that was only because she was a doctor; it was her job. She didn’t really think I could beat it, though. Neither did I.

It’s weird, but after the initial shock and devastation and anger, after I exploded in her office and shouted that I didn’t want any more chemo, I felt this calming sense of relief. It was like a huge weight had been lifted off my chest, and I could finally breathe again. No more poison being pumped into my body... No more tubes implanted in places they didn’t belong... No more treatments making me feel sicker than the cancer itself would. I was free of it all. I was done. I would make the most of the next six months, or however long I had left, I would live the rest of my life to the fullest, and then, I would die.

And oddly enough, I was okay with that.

I don’t mean to make it sound like acceptance came easy. Before it came denial, anger, depression, and all the other emotions that go along with grief. I cycled through them worse than a crazy chick on the rag; I was up, then down. One minute I was calm, and the next, fighting panic.

The night I found out, I went to bed early and lay in the dark with Cary for a long time. We didn't try to talk; we just held each other. After awhile, when she must have thought I was asleep, she got up and left the room. I found out later that she stayed up all night, researching other treatment options on the internet. Alone for the first time, I finally let the tears come. I cried myself to sleep. She never knew.

I stayed in bed the whole next day, my blackout shades drawn, sunk in a deep depression. What was the point of getting up, of getting dressed, of going through the motions? I was just going to die anyway. Cary brought me food, tried to get me to eat, but I had no appetite. She sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to talk to me, but I wasn't ready to talk about it yet, either. Eventually, she gave up and left me alone. I know she was trying to deal with it on her own, too. It couldn't have been easy for her to accept that I was dying, any more than it was for me.

On the third day, I woke up and was blinded by bright light the second I opened my eyes. Cary must have put up the blackout shades; the afternoon sun was streaming through my windows. I squinted, rubbing my eyes as I slowly sat up. I wanted to get out of bed and pull the shades again, but I didn't have the energy, so I just sat there, staring out the window. The sky was blue, and so was the water sparkling beneath it.

A lump clogged my throat as I gazed out at the ocean. I hadn't been to the beach in forever. When I was recovering from the stem cell transplant, the last thing I'd felt like doing was slathering my bald head with sunscreen and strolling out in my swim trunks, only to scare off all the beachgoers with my pasty white, hairless body and attract the paparazzi to plaster sickly photos of me all over the tabloids. I didn't have any desire to do so now, either, but I thought, *It's a beautiful day outside, and I'm spending it inside this room. It might be one of the last days I have left, and I'm wasting it.*

That epiphany didn't get me as far as the beach, but it at least got me out of bed. It occurred to me that if I was going to spend the last six months of my life lying around, feeling sorry for myself, I might as well have agreed to try the treatments; it wasn't like I would have anything to lose. But I didn't want it to be like that. My days were numbered, and I knew I had to make each of them count, starting with that one. I didn't know how many more good days I'd have.

My back was still sore, which I knew now was from the cancer cells floating around in my spinal column, screwing with the nerve endings in there, but other than that, I felt fine, physically. I just knew it wouldn't last. I shuffled out to the living room and found Cary sitting on the couch with her laptop. She quickly minimized the webpage she'd been looking at, but not before I recognized it as a medical site. She'd been researching again.

That was when she brought up the possibility of a second stem cell transplant, which I flat-out refused.

After she dropped that subject, she asked, "When are you going to tell other people? Like the guys? And your family?" She looked worried, like she thought I'd try to hide it

from everyone again. I guess I couldn't blame her for thinking that. My track record was against me.

But I knew I couldn't keep this from the people who cared about me most. Hiding my illness in the first place had been hard on me, but failing to mention that I was dying would be downright cruel to them. They deserved the truth, so they had time to deal with it, the same as me.

Brian was back in Atlanta, but I called AJ, Howie, and Kevin that afternoon and invited the three of them over for dinner and drinks. Cary cooked, and I kept our glasses filled, figuring it would help to mellow everyone out before I broke the news. It felt a little like the Last Supper... and as that thought crossed my mind, I wondered, was this how it was going to be from now on? Was I going to constantly dwell on every "last" thing I did? I wasn't even religious, yet I was making religious references in my mind. Was I going to "find Jesus" in my dying days? Brian would appreciate that. I wished I could believe as strongly as he did in things like God and Heaven; at least, then, death wouldn't feel so final... or so fucking scary.

I was afraid, but I knew I was going to have to face my fear, just as I had to face telling the guys I was dying. There was no time for denial.

"I got something to tell you guys," I said after dinner, when it was just the four of us sitting out on my balcony. Cary had excused herself to the bathroom and gone inside, but I had a feeling she wouldn't come back out. It reminded me of when she'd left me alone in that hotel room to tell the guys about my cancer on my own. Maybe she thought that this, too, was a conversation better kept between us. Or maybe she just couldn't stand to hear it again.

"What is it, Nick?" Kevin asked. He sounded casual enough, but the way his eyes seemed to stare right through me made me wonder if he knew, deep down, that something was wrong. I'd tried to act normal at dinner, but I didn't think I'd done a very good job at pulling it off.

I swallowed hard, trying to summon the strength I needed to say the words out loud. I couldn't look at them as I muttered, "My cancer's back. It relapsed in my spinal fluid. Even with chemo and radiation, my odds of surviving are only twenty-five percent, so I'm not gonna do any more treatment. I'm gonna die. Probably in about six months."

It was bluntest I'd ever been about my condition, but I knew if I didn't spit it all out at once, it would be harder to get out at all. Now that the truth was out there, I just had to deal with their reactions to it.

Howie gasped out loud. Kevin's head fell into his hand. And AJ just stared... first at me, then out at the ocean. I could see tears starting in the corners of his eyes, until he slammed his sunglasses down onto the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry," I added.

Howie was looking at me in disbelief, his forehead creased, his eyes wide. “There’s nothing else the doctors can do?” he asked in a whisper.

I shook my head. “Nothing I want. I don’t wanna get more chemo through a fucking tube in my head... and I don’t want my brains nuked with radiation. I don’t want another stem cell transplant, either. Not for a fucking twenty-five percent chance of survival.”

“But Nicky... twenty-five percent... that’s still a chance.”

I smiled sadly at Howie. “Yeah, but come on, Howie. Let’s be realistic here. You know how this is gonna turn out. Your dad went the same way.” Lung cancer, lymphoma, it didn’t matter. Once it spread to the nervous system, you were pretty much screwed. I’d figured that out by now.

His eyes filled with tears, but he didn’t have anything to say back to that. He knew. He knew I was right.

Kevin spoke quietly, without looking up. “Have you gotten a second opinion?”

“Sort of. Cary called a few people, cancer doctors she used to work with. They all said the same thing.”

“But they don’t know your case. You can’t get a good second opinion through a long-distance phone call. You need to physically *go see* another specialist. What about the Mayo Clinic, where Brian had his heart surgery done? They’re always on the cutting edge of things – maybe there’s a new drug you could try, or-”

“Kev, no,” I interrupted him. “Sorry, but no. I told you, I don’t want any more drugs. I don’t wanna be someone’s lab rat. I’m done with all that shit. I just wanna enjoy what life I have left and die in peace.”

When Kevin finally looked up at me, his nose was red, and his eyes were bright. I could tell he was trying hard not to cry, and it made me want to cry, too. I looked from him back to Howie. Both of them had lost their dads to cancer. Now they were going to lose their little brother, too. It killed me to know I would be causing them that kind of pain – no pun intended.

My eyes shifted to AJ next. He hadn’t said a thing yet, but at least he hadn’t run off, either, like he had back at the hotel. His jaw was clenched, but otherwise, his face was blank, his eyes hidden behind his shades. “You alright, J?” I asked quietly.

His head snapped towards me. “No, I’m not alright. What the fuck makes you think I would be alright?”

I shrugged. “At least you’re not the one dying, man.”

“No... you are. And you think I’m *alright* with that?”

“It was just a joke.”

“It’s not funny.

“I know.” I raked my fingers through my hair. It almost felt normal again, like I’d just cut it short on purpose. At least I’d be buried with a full head of hair. Or maybe I wanted to be cremated... I wasn’t sure. I’d never given it enough thought to decide one way or the other. I realized I’d have to, now.

AJ looked off into the distance again, and for a solid minute or so, no one spoke. In the silence, I could hear crickets chirping from the ground, cars driving down on the streets, and waves crashing against the coastline. It was like my senses were heightened, and I was noticing things I’d never noticed before, all the little things in the world I’d always taken for granted. It made me appreciate the moment, sitting there on the balcony with my three brothers. It also made me realize how much I was going to miss moments like that... moments I’d never taken the time to appreciate before.

In some ways, I felt like the unluckiest guy in the world, only thirty-one years old and dying of cancer. But in other ways, I realized I was one of the luckiest. What an extraordinary life I’d lived in my three decades on Earth. I’d been raised by two different families, my biological one and my Backstreet brothers, and I’d been loved and admired by far more people than I even knew. I’d had a full and successful career, reached a level of wealth and fame most people only dream of achieving. I’d lived in four states and set foot on six continents; I’d traveled all around the world. I’d made my living doing something I loved, and I’d been living my dream since the age of thirteen. There were still things I hadn’t done, things I wanted to do, but I didn’t feel like I’d missed out on much that life has to offer. I’d touched people’s lives, and I hadn’t wasted my own. Realizing all of this brought me comfort and clarity, and all of a sudden, I knew one thing I wanted to do before my time was up.

“So I’ve been thinking...” I said, even though the thought had just occurred to me. The silence between us broken, the guys all sat up and looked my way. “I want us to do one last tour as a group, while we still can. You know, we never got to finish the *This is Us* tour last summer ‘cause of my transplant-”

“Don’t worry about that now, Nicky,” Howie interrupted, and Kevin asked, “Do you really think that’s a good idea right now?”

“If we don’t do it now, we’ll never get another chance,” I said flatly, glaring at them both. “I’m not talking a whole tour, anyway. It could be more of a mini one... like the ‘100 Hours’ thing we did for *Black & Blue*.” I was just making this up as I went along, but the more I talked, the better it sounded. “We could go all around the world – one big concert on each continent or something. The fans could decide the set list for each

show, through a vote on the fan club, because it would be for them as much as for us. It would be like one last hurrah... and a chance for me to say goodbye.”

That was when my throat closed up, and I had to stop talking. Luckily, AJ jumped in. “I think it sounds like a kick-ass idea. I say if Nick’s up for it and wants to do this, then let’s do it,” he said, looking around at the others.

I swallowed hard, tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. I swiped them away with my knuckles and cleared my throat. “If we’re gonna do it, it needs to be all of us, though. All five.” I looked right at Kevin.

He didn’t even hesitate, just nodded once and said, “You got it, Little Man.”

Little Man... God, he hadn’t called me that since I was a kid.

That was what broke me. The tears started in my eyes again, and this time, I couldn’t wipe them away fast enough. Kevin got up and came over, tears leaking from his eyes, too, and pulled me into a hug. And I realized, as he held onto me, that what I would miss more than anything else, more than music and sunlight and the ocean, were the people in my life, the people I loved more than life itself.

Chapter 79

Cary

The night Nick told the guys, I stayed inside with Hambelina, waiting for it to be over. I was glad he had called them over, but I couldn’t stand to sit out there and hear him tell them he was dying. It had been hard enough for me to hear the news in the first place. I couldn’t imagine how they would take it.

The four of them sat out on the balcony for a long time. When they finally came back in, Kevin’s eyes were red-rimmed, and AJ’s were hidden behind a pair of sunglasses, even though it was dark outside. Only Howie seemed to have held it together, and he stopped to thank me for the dinner I’d made before the three of them left.

Nick hadn’t come back inside with them, and I waited a few minutes to see if he would, thinking maybe he just needed the time alone to collect himself. When he didn’t come in, I grabbed a couple of cold beers from the fridge and walked out onto the balcony. Nick was sitting in a deck chair, staring out at the dark ocean. “Thanks,” he said, when I placed one of the bottles in his hand. As he took a swig, I remembered the deal I’d made with him the previous summer, that I wouldn’t tell the guys he was sick as long as he laid off the alcohol and caffeine. But it didn’t matter now. Booze wasn’t going to kill him, not when he was dying of cancer already.

I sat down next to him and took a sip from my own bottle. “How did it go?”

He shrugged. “Bout like you’d expect. AJ didn’t take it well. Howie was in denial. Kevin got on my ass about getting a second opinion-”

“-Which we still could,” I interjected, still hoping he’d reconsider.

Nick shook his head and said simultaneously, “-but they came around. They’re on my side.”

I smiled tightly, the muscles around my mouth straining to do so. “Sure they are. And what about Brian? Are you going to call him, or...?”

“Kev’s going to. I... I know I probably should, but he offered, and...” Nick put a hand on his forehead and dragged it slowly down his face, rubbing at his eyes. “...I just don’t know how many more times I can do this. Hearing it myself was bad enough. But telling everyone else?”

“I understand,” I said quickly, because hadn’t I thought the same thing? “I think it’s fine. Brian will understand. Maybe it’s better he hears it from Kevin. Then he can react however he’s going to react without worrying about upsetting you.”

Nick let out a humorless laugh and took another swig of his beer. “Funny thing is, he’ll probably take it better than any of them.”

I frowned at that. “Nick, he’s your best friend...”

“No, I know. I don’t mean ‘cause he cares about me any less. It’s just, he’s so... religious, you know? I just think that might make it easier for him. To him, I won’t really be ‘gone’ gone. I’ll just have... gone on. Gone up, I guess. If I’m lucky.”

I understood, then, what he was getting at. I decided not to tell him that believing in Heaven hadn’t made my mother’s death any easier for me to accept. The reality was that losing Nick was going to be just as hard on Brian as it would be on the other guys, or on anyone, myself included, who loved him the way we did.

But it was time we all started facing that reality.

“What’s it gonna be like?”

His question caught me by surprise, as it cut through the silence. “What do you mean?” I asked. “Dying?”

“Yeah... not, like, the actual moment, but leading up to it. What’s gonna happen to me?”

We had left Dr. Subramanian's office that night without her explaining all the gory details to him, and I had a feeling he wouldn't want to go back. But he needed to know what to expect in the coming months, and I supposed it was up to me to tell him.

I set down my drink and took a deep breath, holding it in my lungs as I gathered my thoughts. "Well... you'll probably be in more pain, the longer the cancer cells circulate in your spinal fluid, because they'll start affecting the nerves. You'll get headaches... and pain in your neck and back... but that's why Dr. Subramanian prescribed the painkiller, so you can control it, and if that's not strong enough, you can get something stronger." I paused, taking another breath. "You might lose some sensation in parts of your body, depending on what nerves are affected. Your muscles will feel weaker... and you won't have as much control over your body."

"So I'll be paralyzed?" he asked, in that same tone of disgust he'd used in Dr. Subramanian's office. He pushed what was left of his beer aside, too.

I swallowed hard and tried to summon the strength I needed to answer. "Possibly... at some point. It might be something that comes and goes at first. You could lose feeling on one side of your body, like someone who's had a stroke... or lose the use of your legs, like a paraplegic. You'll probably have good days and bad... but as it progresses, you'll lose the ability to walk... and to control other... functions..."

I trailed off, because even without looking at him, I could sense how much I must be horrifying him, embarrassing him. In the dark, I could almost pretend I was talking to another patient of mine, some poor elderly stroke victim being shipped off to a nursing home, perhaps. I could pretend, as long as I didn't look at him, as long as I blocked his face and name from my mind and forced myself to forget it was him.

It didn't really work, though. Try as I might to forget, I knew this wasn't just some old guy at the clinic. This was Nick, my Nick, who was too young to have to hear this information, to have to deal with these problems... but had to, because they were his reality, an almost certain part of his immediate future. He had to know what he was facing; I couldn't let him walk this road blind and alone.

"So what then? What happens when I can't get out of bed anymore, when I can't even go to the fucking bathroom on my own or... Christ," he groaned, burying his face in his hands. "I might as well just put a fucking bullet in my brain, while I still can."

"Don't say that!" I said sharply. "That's why we're having this conversation, so we can figure it out. You have some decisions to make. When... when my mom was dying, she went into a hospice. I think she and my dad thought it'd be easier on me than having our house start looking like a hospital. But home care would probably be a better option for you. Money's not an issue; you could hire a full-time nurse to be here..."

"What about you?" he blurted.

"I... Well, of course I'll be here, too, if you want me to."

“It’s not like I want anyone else.”

There was a pause, while I considered what he meant by that. Did he want me to be with him because I *was* a nurse, who had taken care of him before, or did he want me because I was his girlfriend? Then I asked myself, *Does it matter?*

Nurse, friend, girlfriend... When it came to our relationship, those titles had never been clearly defined. Always, the lines had been blurred. Why should it be any different now? I’d been acting like a wife to him for the last nine months – living with him, sleeping with him, cooking, cleaning, and caring for him – and if he were my husband, I would be there to take care of him without hesitation. So what if we weren’t committed to each other that way? No matter how he saw me, I was in love with him, and I knew I could never turn my back on him, unless he forced me to walk away.

“Then I’ll be here,” I repeated, offering him a watery smile.

“I love you, Cary,” he murmured in reply, and the words stabbed at my heart. They were the words I’d been waiting and hoping to hear for months, yet I couldn’t even be happy to hear him say them.

Why didn’t you say that a month ago, when I said it to you? I thought. Why did you wait until now, when you’re dying, when we only have a little time left?

And, though I hated myself for doubting him, I couldn’t help but wonder what it was he really felt: love... or gratitude? Were these the honest words of a man who was really in love and meant every one of them, or were they the desperate words of a man who was afraid of dying alone?

I couldn’t blame him for being afraid, though, or for wanting a familiar face to watch over him. I had been a stranger when I’d first come into his life, but he had opened his home and his heart to me. It could have backfired on him; a different stranger might have tried to take advantage of his vulnerability and exploited him. But I didn’t. He’d trusted me to take care of him, to keep his secret, and I had. He knew he could count on me, he was comfortable with me, and I could understand why he wouldn’t want to put his trust in someone else at this stage.

Really, there was no point. I had the background to know what he needed and the skills to take care of him. The only thing I questioned was, did I have the strength? Could I really shoulder the double burden of watching the man I loved deteriorate, while managing the symptoms of his decline?

But then, did I really have much of a choice?

“I love you, too, Nick.”

My heart had already made up my mind for me.

Chapter 80

Nick

I've never been much of a morning person. Sure, I've gotten up at the crack of dawn too many times to count, for early flights and morning show interviews, but I've spent just as many mornings in bed, sleeping off late nights out partying. It sounds cliché, but as I watched the sky lighten over the golf course, its color changing from purplish-blue to pinkish-orange, I couldn't help but think, *I wish I had watched more sunrises.*

Ever since the day I'd decided not to waste the rest of my life lying around, I'd been getting up early and staying up late, trying to stretch out every last hour as long as I could. Sometimes it wasn't easy, because I wore out pretty quickly, and it was only going to get harder as my body got weaker. But I was still determined to make the most out of the time I had left.

Playing golf with my best friend seemed like a good way to spend the day.

Brian and his family had flown in to LA the day before, a couple of weeks after Kevin called to tell him I was dying. I was glad he hadn't rushed out here right away, like I only had days to live. The two weeks at home had given him a chance to deal with everything on his own first, and now that we were together, he seemed to be handling it the best out of anyone, just like I'd told Cary he would.

He had called, wanting to get together as soon as possible. Golf had been my suggestion; I knew he loved the game, and he had turned me onto it in recent years, too. It was a sport I still felt up to playing, and it was something we could do together, just the two of us. I wasn't ready to deal with Leighanne and Baylee just yet. Brian picked me up at the crack of dawn – I wasn't supposed to drive anymore; apparently, seizures were a risk now – and we set off for the course.

I didn't want the whole day to be about me dying, but after we'd run out of small talk, I knew we couldn't keep tiptoeing around the elephant in the room. We had to acknowledge it, put it out there and get it over with, and then hopefully we could move on without it being awkward.

"So what have you told Baylee?" I asked, as we rode to the first hole in a golf cart. This was a change; usually we just walked the course, but I knew Brian had seen me struggling just to get my clubs out of the back of his SUV, and I'd let him rent the cart without complaint. As much as I hated to admit it, I could feel myself getting weaker.

"The truth, more or less." I saw Brian's jaw tighten and couldn't imagine how tough that conversation had to have been. It had been bad enough talking to the guys about it, but

telling a little kid? I didn't envy him that job. "He knows that you're sick again and that you're not gonna get better this time. He knows we're in LA to spend more time with you while we can."

I nodded. "We should do something fun. Give him some happy memories, you know?"

Brian looked over at me and smiled, but it didn't hide the sadness in his eyes. "That'd be great."

I felt bad about leaving Baylee behind. Brian's kid was like my nephew, and he'd thought of me as another uncle his whole life. I'd been more of an uncle to him than I ever would be to my real niece, and that bummed me out. "Did I tell you I got to meet Alyssa over Skype the other day?" I asked, changing the subject. It's weird how, in the aftermath of devastating news, wonderful things can still happen. My sister Leslie had given birth on the first of April, a date that couldn't have been more fitting for our family, since it meant my niece, Alyssa Jane, was an April Fool's baby. I hoped she would carry on the Carter legacy of practical jokes and pranks for me.

"Did you? That's awesome. Who does she look like?"

"Leslie says she looks more like Mike. But I think I see a little Carter in her."

I'd never given much thought to having kids of my own; it just wasn't something I saw myself doing for a long time. But watching my sister with her newborn made me wonder what it would have been like to create a life that way, to be a father to my own little Mini-Me, like Brian was to Baylee, and raise him and bring him onstage and sing songs with him and shoot hoops with him and play video games with him – or her. I didn't have any regrets about not settling down and starting a family sooner; it would have just made this whole thing harder, knowing I'd be leaving a wife and children behind. But still, I sort of wished I could have experienced those things with my own kid, and it made me sad to realize I'd never have a son or daughter who looked like me.

Brian, Kevin, and Howie were lucky, and so was Leslie. At least I could count on my siblings to keep the Carter line going. They'd probably pop out a whole bunch more babies, nieces and nephews I would never know.

"Any plans to meet her in person?" Brian's question broke into my thoughts.

"Yeah, they're planning a trip to Florida next week, so I thought I'd fly down there and see the whole family." *Probably for the last time*, I added inwardly.

It had been hard telling my family the news, almost as hard as the guys. I had told Angel in person and Leslie over the phone and let them tell everyone else. Angel called Aaron and Dad; Leslie took care of BJ and Mom. I just had to deal with the tearful, awkward phone calls from them all that followed. But all that was over now, and I was both looking forward to and dreading going home to Tampa for one last visit.

"Good. That'll be nice," Brian said, but we both knew it wouldn't be. It would probably be like any other Carter clan get-together: dramatic and dysfunctional, with a little death on the side this time. "Cary going with you?"

"Nah, just me and Angel. Cary's gonna go home for a few days, spend Easter with her dad. They're real close, and I know she probably needs a break from me and all this bullshit."

Brian nodded. He slowed the cart to a stop as we reached the first hole and cut the engine, but didn't get out. "How's she handling it?" he asked, glancing over at me again.

I shrugged. "I think she's taking it harder than she lets on. She wants to fix everything, and she can't this time." *Not for a lack of trying, though*, I thought, remembering her frantic research into clinical trials and alternative treatments. Cary had given up on that now and instead did everything she could to keep me happy and comfortable. She cooked a combination of my favorite foods and healthy meals that I guess she hoped would keep my body going for as long as possible. She brought me ice packs and heating pads and gave me massages when my back was hurting. She did her best to keep me entertained, making suggestions for things that I could do to stay busy. She kept herself busy, too, working at her clinic while one of the guys came over or took me out for the day. We were both handling it, as well as anyone could.

Brian nodded again. "It's gotta be hard for her. She lost her mom to cancer, didn't she?"

"Yeah... when she was a kid." I squirmed a little on the seat, realizing I was going to make her relive it. "I hate that I'm putting her through that again," I added.

"So does that mean she's gonna stay with you, until...?"

"Until the end? Until death does us part?" I gave a humorless laugh. "Yeah. That's the plan, anyway."

"And is that what you both want?"

I frowned, wondering why he was asking so many questions. What was he trying to get at? "Well, I know I don't wanna get stuck back in the hospital. She's the one who thought home care would be a good idea, and I agree; I'd rather die at home, where I can see the ocean and the people I love, than in a hospital room, surrounded by medical equipment and strangers who don't give a damn about me."

"That makes sense," Brian said quietly. "Is that what she wants, too? She wants to take care of you?"

I suddenly felt sick, in a way that had nothing to do with the cancer eating my spine. "Are you trying to say I'm being a burden on her or something? Because... alright, I know I am, but it's not like I can help it! What do you want me to do, send her home?

Tell her she doesn't have to stick around to see me die?" When Brian didn't say anything, I added, "She can leave whenever she wants, but I know she won't. She loves me."

"What about you? Do you love her?"

The question rattled me more than I'd thought it would. "I... I dunno," I admitted. "I mean, I *like* her..."

"But you don't know if you love her," Brian finished.

I shrugged. It made me feel shitty to admit that, even to myself. It was basically like admitting that I'd been using Cary all along, which was what I thought Brian was trying to get at. I felt guilty, but how was I supposed to know it would turn out like this? I thought I'd given her a pretty fair deal originally, but I hadn't held my up end of the bargain. Instead of helping her further her singing career, I'd made her move all the way across the country just to watch me die. It wasn't fair at all.

Even so, I asked, "Does it matter?"

Brian gave me the same kind of look he had the first time Paris showed up at the recording studio. "It matters to her."

Golfing wasn't very much fun. Eventually we quit talking and started playing, but we only got through nine holes. By the end of the ninth, I was way too wiped to do the other half of the course, so we headed back and had lunch at the clubhouse before Brian drove me home.

Cary wouldn't get off work for another few hours, and I wasn't supposed to be left alone – seizure thing again – so Brian stayed. "You wanna lie down for awhile?" he asked, after he'd helped me upstairs to the condo.

I was too tired to pretend I wasn't. "Yeah... that sounds good."

He walked me back to my bedroom and waited for me to get settled in bed. "You want me to sit in here with you for awhile, or should I just let you sleep?"

"You can stay. Talk to me." I stifled a yawn, snuggling deeper under the covers. "Sorry in advance if I fall asleep in the middle of conversation. I promise you're not as boring to listen to as your cousin."

Brian laughed. "Good to know. What should I talk about?"

"Tell me Baylee stories... or how about Leighanne's bag line; that's always fascinating..."

“Ha, ha.” He didn’t miss my sarcasm. “Baylee did a musical last month. Community theater. And he’s gonna be playing Little League this spring.”

“Chip off the ol’ block, huh?” I smiled. Inside, I felt that pang of... not jealousy, exactly, more like regret, that I’d never know what it was like to have a kid to play catch with and watch in musicals. I wished my life had turned out more like Brian’s. Settled.

Predictable. Long. But I wouldn’t trade any part of my life, even the mistakes. They’d made me who I was. I could never be like Brian; I could never be anyone but myself. It just would have been cool to know how my life might have turned out, if I hadn’t gotten sick. Maybe I would have gotten married someday, and had kids of my own. Maybe I could have had that kind of life, if cancer hadn’t taken it from me. Sometimes it was hard not to be bitter.

But I was so tired... I didn’t have the strength to get angry. I just lay there and listened to Brian babble on and on about his kid’s baseball team, while my eyelids got heavier and heavier...

I only meant to close them for a minute, just to rest my eyes, but when I opened them again, the chair next to my bed was empty, and Brian was gone. I could hear the clatter of dishes and smell something good wafting out of the kitchen, which meant Cary was home. Somehow, “resting my eyes” for a minute had turned into a four-hour nap. I struggled into a sitting position, annoyed with myself for sleeping so long. I’d wasted the whole afternoon.

Still groggy, I stumbled out of bed and walked stiffly out to the kitchen. Cary had changed out of her scrubs, into a t-shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms, and was cooking dinner. “Hey there, Sleepyhead,” she said, smiling at me.

“Hey. Brian still here?”

“Nah, he left when I got home. He said to tell you he’ll see you later. How was golf?”

“Eh.” I sat down on a kitchen chair. “We played nine holes.”

“Who won?”

I made a face. “I got my ass kicked. But I was a crappy golf player before I got cancer, so it would’ve been obvious if he’d let me win.”

She smiled again, then turned her attention back to whatever she had on the stove. “I’m making fajitas,” she said, and I realized the good smell was coming from strips of chicken sizzling in a frying pan.

“Thought I smelled Mexican. Sounds good.” I didn’t have much of an appetite these days, but I knew Cary went to a lot of effort to keep me fed, so I always made an effort to eat.

I waited until after dinner to bring up what Brian and I had discussed. We were just watching TV together, when a commercial for an Easter sale came on and reminded me that, in another week, Cary and I would be with our families in our hometowns, a thousand miles apart. “So, next week, when you go home...” I started casually, looking over at her, “...you don’t *have* to come back here, you know. I mean, if you don’t want to.”

Cary blinked and gave me a confused look. “What do you mean?”

I muted the TV. “I mean that I don’t wanna be a burden on you. You didn’t sign up for any of this when you first came out here last year, thinking you were just getting a gig on the tour, and I don’t want you to feel like you have to stay here just to watch me die.”

Her mouth dropped open. “*Have* to? Of course I have to! But not because you’re making me, and not because I want to, but because I care about you, Nick. I love you. How could you expect me to just walk away and leave you now? Unless... unless that’s what *you* want?”

There, again, was another opportunity to be selfless, to do what was better for her than for me, to let her go so she wouldn’t be stuck on deathwatch duty for five more months.

Again, I didn’t take it.

I was still too selfish, too afraid of what would happen to me if she really didn’t come back. There was comfort in knowing Cary was there to take care of me. I knew her, I liked her, and I trusted her. I just didn’t love her enough to let her go, to sacrifice my own feelings just to spare hers. “No,” I said quietly, “That’s not what I want. I just wanted you to know you have a choice.”

She smiled sadly and scooted in closer, putting her arm around me. “I made my choice when I moved out here. Just because the circumstance have changed doesn’t mean I’ve changed my mind. I choose you.”

I’d known all along she would never leave me, unless I forcibly pushed her away. She was too involved. She cared about me too much. One way or the other, she was going to end up hurt and heartbroken because of me, and I was helpless to stop it from happening. It was too late.

I couldn’t save her any more than she could save me.

Chapter 81

Cary

Life. You think you've got it all mapped out, until fate steps in like a giant roadblock and sends you on a detour.

For example, you think you've got a great job, until you end up on a reality show, pursuing a singing career. You think you've got a shot at success, until you get voted off the show, just missing the top ten. You think your shot at a singing career is over, until you get a call from a famous pop star, offering you a spot on his summer tour. You think you're back on the road to stardom, until the pop star tells you he's sick. You think you can handle being his nurse, until you fall in love with him. You think it's just a one-sided crush, until he kisses you. You think you might have a future together, until he gets sick again. Even then, you think you'll be there to take care of him, until the end.

You never anticipate those curves in the road. They're not always marked. Sometimes, they seem to come out of nowhere.

I was sitting in a doctor's office when the next curve came, just a month after the one that had come before it, in Dr. Subramanian's office in Santa Monica. But this office was located right in my hometown of Decatur, and I was there not for Nick, but for myself.

I was diligent about getting yearly gynecological exams. Since my mom had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of twenty-four, I'd been going for annual check-ups since I was eighteen. I always scheduled them in April, around the anniversary of her death, so I wouldn't forget. I had a good doctor who knew my family history. She offered me screening tests not usually given to women my age with no family history. She understood that when I was done having children, I wanted to have my ovaries removed, to lower my risk of getting the same disease that had killed my mother.

But on that day, I was still twenty-nine, childless, and totally unprepared to hear what she had to tell me.

"There was an abnormal result in your bloodwork this time," she said, looking at me seriously. "Your CA-125 level is elevated."

I drew in a deep breath. I knew that CA-125 was a tumor marker, a protein found in ovarian cancer cells.

"I don't want you to worry," Dr. DeWitt added quickly, before I could say anything. "You know an elevated CA-125 doesn't necessarily mean cancer. It can be caused by any number of less serious problems, or nothing at all – it could be a fluke. But with your family history, I think it warrants further screening. I'd like to do an ultrasound."

But, of course, I was worried. I agreed to the procedure, and half an hour later, I was lying on the exam table while she rooted around inside me with a probe, studying a monitor that was turned so I couldn't see it. I could only watch the doctor's face as she

worked. I wondered if she always frowned when she was concentrating, or if she had seen something suspicious. I got my answer when she paused and turned the monitor towards me.

"It looks like there's a mass on your left ovary," she said quietly, pointing it out on the screen. I could see it, the blob of bright white standing out against the dark oval that was my ovary. My heart started to race so fast, it made me light-headed, and I was glad I was lying down. "Of course, it's impossible to tell what it is on an ultrasound," Dr. DeWitt was saying. "It could just be endometriosis or a benign cyst... Chances are, it's not malignant. But you'll need to have a biopsy, to be sure. The best way to do it is with an exploratory laparotomy. That way, if it is cancer, it can be staged and debulked in the same procedure, to save you another trip to the OR."

My head was spinning. I knew what she was talking about, being in the medical field, but I'd never heard these terms used in reference to myself before. I had always been the health care provider, never the patient. Even though cancer was on my radar, even though it was my greatest fear, I had still somehow never expected to actually find myself here, facing it myself. Especially not now...

"Cary?" Dr. DeWitt asked gently. "Did you hear what I said? I don't want you to worry. We just need to make sure it's *not* cancer."

"I can't have surgery right now," I blurted out, and then, embarrassingly, I started to cry, right there on the table with the ultrasound probe still inside me. Dr. DeWitt eased it out, stripped off her gloves, and took my hand between both of hers. Slowly, falteringly, I told her about Nick, that he was dying, that I was taking care of him, and that I couldn't be laid up for six weeks while he needed me. "Can't you do it laparoscopically?" I begged.

Dr. DeWitt hesitated. "The recovery time is certainly much shorter for a minimally-invasive procedure, but it's easier to miss things when you go in laparoscopically. An open procedure is really what you need for an accurate diagnosis."

I knew then she was already thinking cancer, even though she kept assuring me it could be something else. She wanted to look for metastasis. Fearing the worst, I asked, "Will I lose my ovary?"

"Chances are, yes, your left ovary and fallopian tube will have to be removed. *If* it turns out to be cancer, and *if* you were done having children, we'd probably go ahead and take out the right one and your uterus, too, to lower the risk of it spreading. But since you haven't had children, we'd try to spare your right ovary, fallopian tube, and uterus, unless they contained cancer, too."

In the back of my mind, I knew she was speaking hypothetically, but it felt all too real to me, like a nightmare come to life. "So, worst case scenario... if it's cancer, and it's spread... you would take out everything, right then and there?"

"You would have to give your consent for that ahead of time... but yes, ideally, that's what would happen. We don't like to cut someone open twice if we only have to do it once."

I felt sick at the thought of going in for exploratory surgery and coming out with all of my reproductive organs gone. Without them, I would never be able to have children of my own, and I wanted to be a mother, so badly...

"I really want to have a baby someday," I said, wiping tears from my eyes. "Can I hold off on the surgery long enough to freeze my eggs beforehand, just in case?"

Dr. DeWitt smiled and nodded. "I was going to suggest the very same thing. Only, since freezing eggs is still in the experimental stages, your best option is to freeze embryos. You can use your partner's sperm or donor sperm, and the resulting embryos will be preserved for future pregnancies. The cycle takes four to six weeks to complete; I think it's safe for you to wait that long."

She seemed to think we had come to a resolution, but I left her office that day with my head still spinning. I was facing a diagnosis of the same cancer that had killed my mother and the chance I might never have children. Nick was dying. My whole world was falling apart. I couldn't think of the future, but I didn't want to be in the present, either.

Instead, I dwelled on the past, thinking about my mother. This must have been how she felt when she found out it was cancer causing her fertility problems. There was a difference, though. *She already had one child*, I thought. *She had me*. She and my dad had wanted more children, I knew, but I would be happy with just one, if that's all I could have. One would be better than none.

All throughout the rest of my visit back home, I thought of nothing but babies and how I might never have any, because I might have cancer. It didn't help that it was Easter, and there were reminders everywhere – the Easter eggs, the cute baby animals, the commercials with little girls running around in frilly Easter dresses and shiny new shoes. When I got together with Jessica, who was due in three weeks, I looked at her big, pregnant belly with envy.

I couldn't bear to tell Jess what I was going through yet, knowing it would only make her feel bad in her current condition, but I had to tell my dad. I didn't want to do that, either; I knew he would be upset and worried. But I had given Nick such a hard time about keeping his secret, I wouldn't let myself make the same mistake.

So I told my dad, and his reaction was worse than I thought. He's never been great at handling his emotions, and his favorite coping mechanism is to avoid talking about what's really bothering him and fixate on something else. I knew this about him, but I was still surprised when he flew off the handle and said, "Well, that's it! You're not going back out there with him."

“What?!” I cried, taking “out there” to mean California and “him” to be Nick. “Of course I am! I have to. I’ll get a referral to a good gynecologist in LA, and I’ll have the procedure done there. I can’t just abandon Nick; he needs me.”

“This isn’t about Nick. This is about you and *your* needs. That’s what you need to be focused on right now.”

“I am, Dad, but I have to be there to take care of him.”

“And who’s going to take care of *you*, when you’re recovering from surgery?”

I shook my head; I hadn’t thought that far ahead. There was so much uncertainty in the immediate future, I couldn’t say. “I don’t know, Dad, but we’ll figure something out.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, too. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Dad,” I pleaded. I knew he couldn’t stop me from leaving, but I didn’t want to go back without his blessing. I felt guilty for moving so far away in the first place. “Please understand... I have to go back. I need to be there for him.”

“Why? So you can watch him die? Why would you put yourself through that?”

I was shocked by his sudden coldness. “How can you say that?! You were there for Mom, when she was dying. You wouldn’t have abandoned her.”

“She was my wife.” My dad’s eyes shone brightly in his red face. “We were married.”

“So what? I love Nick. I don’t need a ring on my finger to prove that.”

“You’ve only known him for a year. You’ve given up your whole life for him!”

“You and Mom only knew each other a year before you got engaged.” I looked him right in the eye, and although I was shaking, I managed to keep my voice steady as I said, “Don’t try to argue with me on this, Dad, because you’re not going to win. Nick only has a few months left, and I’m going to spend them with him.”

“And then what?” he asked quietly. “What are you going to do when he’s gone?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t thought that far ahead yet, because even though I knew I’d have to face it one day soon, I couldn’t imagine the world without Nick. “I don’t know,” I whispered, looking down.

My dad didn’t say anything back right away, and when I raised my eyes again, he was just staring at me, an odd expression on his face, like he was trying not to cry. Finally, he said, “Alright. Go take care of him. But... take care of yourself, too.”

I nodded, wiping tears from my eyes. “I will.”

He opened his arms to offer a hug, and I accepted it gratefully, crying on his shoulder as he rubbed my back and whispered that it would all turn out okay. They were empty words. We both knew it wouldn't work out that way. Sometimes, life just doesn't.

Chapter 82

Nick

While Cary was home in Illinois, I was back in my own hometown of Tampa, Florida, celebrating Easter with the Carter clan.

I hadn't spent a holiday with my family in so long, it was ironic that Easter would be the last one, seeing as how none of us were religious. But we did all the traditional stuff, anyway, mostly to take our minds off the real reason we were together. We dyed eggs. My mom cooked a big ham dinner. We even went to church.

At first the whole thing felt like an act, like we were just playing pretend, dressing up to go to church, but once we were sitting in the sanctuary, and I was listening to the sermon, I started really thinking about Jesus. I thought he'd been around the same age I was when he got crucified. Had he felt the same way I did, knowing he was going to die? At least he had something to look forward to, being resurrected and rising into Heaven and all of that. I didn't really believe in all that stuff, but sitting in a pew, surrounded by people who did, made it easier to imagine there *was* a God and a Heaven, or *somewhere* for me to go once I died, so I wouldn't just be... gone.

After church, we went back to my mom's house for Easter dinner, which went off without a hitch, none of the usual dysfunctional drama. It was weird to see everyone on their best behavior, getting along. Mom didn't ask anyone for money, although I wondered if the nice family dinner was her way of making sure I remembered her in my will. BJ stayed relatively sober. Leslie didn't scream at anyone. Aaron kept his shirt on. And no one threw food. *House of Carters* would have been a lot different show if we'd come together because I was dying. "If E! could see us now," I joked during dinner, earning a round of weak laughter.

I guess it was all an act.

Later, while the others were cleaning up, Leslie snuck off to feed baby Alyssa, and after awhile, I followed her. I found her alone in one of the bedrooms with Alyssa on her shoulder, thumping her back. "Almost done," Leslie said, flashing me a smile. "Just waiting on a burp."

I smiled back. "You're gonna have to teach her how to burp on command, like Uncle Nick."

Leslie sighed, turning away from me. “I wish you’d be around to teach her yourself,” she said, facing the wall. I heard her sniff and knew the waterworks were starting up again. Of them all, Leslie had cried the most when I’d told them my prognosis, which surprised me, since we’d never been close. I figured it was just the hormones making her emotional, but then, she always had been the family drama queen.

“Aww, c’mon, don’t do that, Les,” I begged her. “You know I wish I could, too, but let’s not go there right now.”

“I’m sorry,” Leslie sobbed, turning back around to face me. Tears were streaming down her face. “But why can’t they do something? Why can’t they give you my stem cells or bone marrow or whatever I was a match for? I can donate now!”

It was my turn to sigh. We had been through this before. I’d thought everyone was past the denial. They’d all had suggestions at first: Mom wanted me to see doctors in other countries where they had experimental drugs that hadn’t been approved in the States yet, while BJ kept going on about holistic therapy and hippie crap like that. Angel thought I should have tried the chemo and radiation, and Aaron just wanted to know when I was going to get a prescription for medical marijuana. And now Leslie was bringing up the transplant thing again.

“Cause that’s not what I want, Leslie,” I said firmly. “You have no idea what I went through with the first transplant. It was torture. I lost all my hair; I lost a ton of weight; I was sick to my stomach, throwing up; I almost died from an infection! It wasn’t worth it, a whole month in the hospital, feeling like shit, just to buy me a few more months of feeling semi-normal. I’m not going through that again. I’m not gonna spend the time I have left lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to tubes that are pumping me full of poison.”

Leslie sniffled again, holding Alyssa with one hand, wiping her tears with the other. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“Don’t apologize. You were in Canada; you were pregnant. You had your own life to worry about. I wouldn’t have wanted you to see me like that anyway.”

She nodded, but the tears kept on pouring out. “I just... I just wish we’d been closer...”

I’d been getting that a lot the last few days. It made me feel guilty, because it was just as much my fault we weren’t closer as any of theirs. I was the one who had distanced myself from the rest of them in the first place. “Hey... no regrets,” I said softly, reaching out to put my arm around her. “I’m glad we’re spending time together now. I’m glad I got to meet my niece.”

Leslie managed a smile back. “You wanna hold her?” she asked, offering me the baby.

“Sure...” I took Alyssa from her and sat down in the chair in the corner of the room, where she’d been breastfeeding. Now that she was full, Alyssa was getting sleepy. She

snuggled into my chest as I cradled her in my arms, her little mouth falling open while her eyes drooped shut. I smiled down at her. “How’d you make such a cute kid?” I teased.

Leslie laughed and wiped her eyes again. “I dunno... must be Mike’s genes.”

She was a mess, mascara running everywhere. “Go wash your face,” I told her. “I’ll watch her for awhile. I promise I won’t drop her.”

Laughing again, Leslie nodded and hurried out of the room, leaving me alone with Alyssa. I wasn’t used to being around babies, especially ones that small. Somehow, I couldn’t remember Baylee or James or Mason ever being so small. I wished I would be around to watch her grow up, but if all those people in church were right, and there *was* a Heaven, maybe I could watch from there.

It was hard leaving Florida and my family the next day. I knew it might be the last time I saw them all together like that. The guys and I were planning a show in Orlando as part of our final tour that summer, but there were no guarantees my siblings would all be able to make it. There were no guarantees I would, either. But I hugged them all and said “See you soon” anyway, because I couldn’t bring myself to say “goodbye.”

Angel flew back to LA with me. I slept most of the flight. When we got off the plane, I was stiff and sore from sitting still so long. My legs tingled, and my back ached. I hobbled like an old man into my condo, while Angel dragged my luggage. “Honey, I’m home!” I called, but the condo was empty; Cary wasn’t back yet. Her flight was supposed to be getting in around the same time as mine, so Angel waited with me until she came home.

I could hear Hambelina oinking out in the hall before I heard the front door open. When Cary came in, carrying her little pig in its pet taxi, I called, “Hey, babe! Welcome back!” A part of me was relieved that, even after our conversation a couple of weeks ago, she really *had* come back.

Cary put on a smile, but I could tell right away that it was forced. “Hi!” she said, almost too brightly. “You beat me home, huh?”

“Only by half an hour or so. How was your trip?”

“Oh... eventful.” She flashed another tight smile that told me she had more to tell when Angel was gone. “How was yours?”

“I’ll let Nick tell you all about it,” said Angel, taking her cue to leave. She got up from the couch, sweeping her long curtain of hair over her shoulder, and leaned down to give me a quick hug before she headed out.

Once she was gone, I looked at Cary and said, “So... ‘eventful,’ huh? More eventful than a holiday with the Carters?”

She laughed. "I take it yours was 'eventful,' too, then?"

"Actually, no... not really. It wasn't bad. It was actually pretty normal – which *isn't* normal for us. Go figure – when most families would be falling apart, the Carters come together."

Cary smiled, a real smile this time. "That's really good to hear. I'm glad it went well."

"Yeah, me too. So what happened in Illinois?"

Cary sighed. "Lemme go drop my stuff off and change my clothes, and then I'll tell you."

That didn't sound good. I wondered if something was going on with her dad or her friend Jessica, who I knew was having a baby soon. It never occurred to me that something might be wrong with *her*.

I waited while she took her luggage back to the spare bedroom, where she kept her clothes, and returned dressed more comfortably. She dropped down onto the couch beside me and turned to face me, tucking one leg underneath her. "So," she said, sighing again. "I scheduled a doctor's appointment while I was home, just a yearly exam with my gynecologist. But she found a mass... on my left ovary..."

My heart sunk into my stomach, and I felt a sick sense of *déjà vu* as I remembered hearing similar words. "*The x-ray shows a mass in your chest.*" I stared at Cary, frowning, because this couldn't possibly be happening to her, after everything she'd gone through with me and her mom. "*She had cancer. Ovarian cancer,*" I remembered Cary telling me. "*She died when I was nine.*"

"Is it cancer?" I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer, afraid for *her* this time.

Cary shrugged. "I don't know yet. She said it's probably not. I think it probably is." She swallowed. "She tested my blood for a protein called CA-125, which is a tumor marker found in ovarian cancer. My level was high. Elevated CA-125, plus an obvious mass... well, I can put two and two together. The fact that my mom died of the same thing just makes it more obvious."

I was amazed at how calmly she spoke, but I understood, too. She'd had a few days to process this. She'd probably already told other people, her father for sure. She didn't want to get upset in front of me. But I could tell how much this had rattled her. Her face was totally white, paler than usual, and I could see the fear in her eyes.

I wanted to say something to reassure her that it couldn't be cancer, but how could I? I had been there. I knew it could happen to her, because it had happened to me. So all I said was, "How will you find out for sure? A biopsy?" That was what they had done for me, I remembered, among all the other tests.

She nodded. "It's a little more complicated than that. I have to have an exploratory laparotomy – surgery, where they open me up and check everything. Both ovaries, my fallopian tubes, uterus, abdominal wall, everything, to see if it's spread. They'll take out the ovary with the mass at the same time so they can biopsy it, and if it's cancer and it's spread other places, they'll be able to get as much of it as they can."

I felt sick again at the thought of a surgeon ripping her open and poking around at her insides, and my disgust must have shown on my face, because she added, "I know; it sounds extreme, right? But it's the only way to be sure. They don't want to miss anything, and if it turns out to be cancer, I'd rather they just take care of it right then and there."

"Yeah... true..." I nodded. "So when is this happening?"

"I don't know yet." She swallowed again. "It's major surgery. The recovery takes at least six weeks. I don't wanna be laid up for six weeks, when you..." She stopped herself suddenly, but I knew what she'd meant to say.

"Don't you worry about me," I said fiercely, taking her by the shoulders and looking her right in the eyes. "Don't delay this 'cause of me. You know as well as I do this isn't something to mess around with. I don't want you to get stuck dealing with the same shit I am. If you need to leave, I'll understand. You need to take care of *you* first. I can find someone else to take care of me."

She smiled sadly. "You sound like my dad."

"Well, good. Your dad's a smart guy."

"He didn't want me to come back."

I shifted my weight, feeling guilty that she had anyway. "Maybe you shouldn't have."

"I wanted to. I want to have the surgery here. I figure, if the guys and their wives are able to help out, stay with you while I'm in the hospital and all of that, it'll be okay. I'll only be in the hospital a few days, and I should be back on my feet in a week or so. We'll get through it together. I want to stay with you."

I shook my head. It was crazy, how much she cared about me. She was being ridiculous. But again, I didn't push her away. I didn't tell her to go home and have the surgery there, where her dad could take care of her. I just said, "I don't know why, but okay. You're right; we'll make it work. The guys can hang out with me, and when you get out of the hospital, I'll take care of you. It'll be my turn to make the meals and change the bed and stuff."

I grinned at her, and she managed a smile back. "That's a scary thought."

What scared me was the possibility that I might not be in any shape to take care of her, the way she had me. It had been over a month since I'd gotten my death notice. Dr. Submarine had said I might live six months, but that was just the average. Either way, my time was running out. "So when do you think this will happen?" I asked, trying to keep my tone casual.

"Ideally, as soon as possible, but... there's something else I need to think about first." Her voice got shaky, and for the first time, tears sprung into her eyes. She sniffed and took a swipe at them with her fingers. "If I go in, and they find cancer, they're gonna wanna take out everything. I won't be able to have children."

As the first tear trickled out of her eye, I understood. Cary, who was so nurturing, so made to be a mother, was worried she was going to lose that ability. I couldn't relate exactly, but I sympathized with her, because I'd been thinking about kids a lot lately. I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close to me so that she could cry into my chest. "I'm sorry," I whispered, smoothing her hair, rubbing her shoulder. "Isn't there any way they can spare something?"

"It just depends on how bad it is," she said, her voice muffled by my t-shirt. "I have to give my consent ahead of time; they won't take anything out unless I say they can, but if it's spread..."

"But hopefully it hasn't."

"Hopefully not. But realistically, most cases of ovarian cancer aren't diagnosed until the later stages. They call it 'the silent killer' because it usually doesn't cause symptoms until then."

Like my cancer, I thought, remembering Dr. Submarine telling me it was common for my disease to be advanced when it was diagnosed. But something else Cary had said struck me, and I took her by the shoulders again and held her up, forcing her to look at me. "You haven't been having symptoms from this, have you?" I demanded, stricken by the possibility that she had been sick and hiding it from me so I wouldn't have one more thing on my mind to worry about.

She shook her head quickly. "No... honestly, no, I haven't. I feel fine, totally normal. This was a huge shock to me, too."

"Oh..." I let out a breath. "Good. I mean, not good, but... you know."

She smiled through her tears. "I know."

"So... what are you going to do?"

"I want to freeze some eggs... that way, if they end up having to take out both ovaries, I might still be able to have kids of my own in the future."

I nodded. Again, I thought back to my own diagnosis, when Dr. Submarine had suggested freezing my sperm, in case the chemo made me infertile. I didn't know if it had or not; Cary and I still used condoms out of habit. It had only been about a year since I'd gone to the sperm bank, but the experience felt like a lifetime ago. Back then, I'd been in a state of shock and devastation over finding out I had cancer, but at least I'd still had hope of a recovery, hope of a future. That hope was gone now. They'd probably just pitch my poor, frozen little swimmers once I was gone, too.

To Cary, I said, "That's a good idea. You should do that."

"Mm-hm. The thing is, there's a much higher success rate with eggs that are fertilized before they're frozen. Embryos. So I—"

I smirked. "You need some sperm. Some man seed."

She blushed. I loved that I could still make her do that. "Well... yeah."

In all honesty, I don't think she was asking me. I might have mentioned the sperm bank once; she might have remembered, but maybe not. Either way, I don't think she would have gone so far as to actually ask. But once the thought occurred to me, it seemed obvious. The natural solution to the problem. Finally, there was something I could do to help her out, something I could give her in return for all that she'd sacrificed for me.

"You can have mine."

Her eyes widened in between blinks.

"Yeah, I mean, I've got some frozen – you know, from last year, before I started chemo." I shrugged. "They can use that, right?"

"Well, yeah, but... are you sure?"

"Sure, why not?" The more I thought about it, the more sure I was. "It's not like I'm gonna need it. But you need some, and I got some, and hey, it might be nice to know who your baby daddy is if you ever decide to make some babies with it. And if you don't, no big deal, but if you did, it'd be kinda cool to know there'd be some little rugrats running around with my DNA, you know?"

A smile spread slowly across her face, and her eyes filled with fresh tears. She nodded and said, "I think that'd be cool, too."

I grinned at her. "Are you saying you wanna have my babies?"

She giggled, blushing even more. "If that's what you want."

"Oh, no. This ain't about what I want. This is about what *you* want. Do you want to have my babies, Cary? If so, you better say the words. Say it," I goaded her.

She was laughing and crying at the same time, her face bright red and her eyes shining.
“Alright, fine! Nick, I wanna have your babies!”

“Yes!” I pumped my fist in the air, laughing at her. I had heard girls tell me that before, totally serious, but it meant a lot more coming from Cary. All jokes aside, it meant a lot because I knew that she really loved me, and I knew that if there was anyone I trusted to bring a child of mine into the world without me, it would be her.

Taking her in my arms again, I said, “I haven’t seen you in, like, five days. Why don’t we try to take our minds off all this for awhile, and practice making babies the old-fashioned way, huh?”

She laughed. “I can’t let you knock me up now, Nick; that would just make everything even more complicated.”

“Alright, alright, no worries; I got condoms. Will you please let me fuck your brains out, while I still can?”

“Gosh, you’re such a charmer, Nick. How could I resist such a romantic offer?”

I grinned. “You know I love it when you get sarcastic.”

She smirked. “And you know I love it when you get sexual.”

“Oh yeah?” I cocked my brow and leaned closer to her, until we were nose to nose. “Am I sexual?”

“Yeah...” She drew out the word, then dissolved into giggles.

“If I’m everything you need, you better rock my body now.” Grinning, I stood up, so that she slid off me onto the couch. If I were stronger, I would have swept her off her feet and carried her back to the bedroom, but under the circumstances, it was better just to saunter off there myself and count on her to follow me.

Sure enough... “Only if you fuck my brains out and make me forget everything I just told you,” she replied, scrambling after me.

“Hey, my offer stands,” I called over my shoulder and grinned to myself, thinking, *Yeah... I still got it.*

I wasn’t gone yet.

Chapter 83

Cary

Nick and I both kept busy over the next few weeks. For him, it was important not to waste one minute of the time he had left. For me, it was necessary to take my mind off everything that kept running through it whenever I had time to think.

I continued to work at the clinic, but I was already starting to hate my new job because it kept me away from Nick. I had no choice but to keep working, though; I needed the money, and I needed the health insurance benefits. I was facing major surgery and the possibility of further treatment after that, and the process of retrieving and freezing one's eggs sure isn't cheap, either. But I was doing it, anyway, because it was the one thing that put my mind at ease.

While I was at work, Nick spent his days with the guys or other friends in the business, planning the release of his second and final solo album and the Backstreet Boys' last tour that would follow it. The album, called *I'm Taking Off*, was set to come out on Tuesday, the twenty-fourth of May, but its release had been overshadowed by the news that Nick's cancer had returned and was incurable.

The phone had been ringing off the hook ever since his publicist had issued a statement, as offers for interviews and messages of support came pouring in. Nick finally had to turn off his phone and insist that close friends go through me if they needed to get a hold of him. He granted only one interview, an exclusive with Oprah, who had always been good to the Boys. She flew out to LA for an intimate, one-on-one interview with him at home, rather than forcing him to fly to Chicago to sit down in front of her live studio audience. The segment aired during her show on a Wednesday in mid-May.

On my way home from work that afternoon, I stopped by the pharmacy to pick up prescriptions for both Nick and myself. For Nick, stronger painkillers, to take the edge off the headaches and back pain he was experiencing more and more often. For me, a set of hormone injections, which I had to give myself to stimulate my ovaries into producing extra eggs that could be extracted and frozen. As I stood at the counter, waiting for the pharmacist to fill both, it struck me how strange and sad it was that while I was planning for my future, Nick was preparing for his death.

Try as we might to forget, there were reminders everywhere. His face was splashed all over the tabloids at the check-out counter, professional pictures of him looking fit and healthy juxtaposed with paparazzi photos of him snapped when he was bald and gaunt, under headlines in big, bold print that said things like **BACKSTREET BOY'S CANCER CRISIS** and **NICK CARTER: ONLY WEEKS LEFT TO LIVE!** The magazines made me sick, so I tried not to look, but while I was still standing there, staring into space, I suddenly heard his voice, singing, "*I close the door... like so many times, so many times before...*"

"Inconsolable" had started playing over the pharmacy's speakers.

I swore someone was trying to torture me. That song hadn't even been played on the radio when it new, yet they were going to play it here, in the pharmacy, now, when Nick was dying and I was struggling just to hold it together?

"Baby, I don't wanna waste another day... keeping it inside, it's killing me... 'cause all I ever wanted comes right down to you, to you..."

I fought back tears as I handed the pharmacist my credit card without a word. My hand shook as I scribbled my signature on the receipt, and I fumbled with the two white sacks he slid across the counter to me. "Thanks," I choked, then turned and hightailed it out of there. I could still hear Nick's voice belting, "*I'm inconsolable...*" as I escaped into the California heat.

I broke down in the car – the sporty black Benz Nick couldn't drive anymore. I buried my face in my hands to block out the stares of people in the parking lot and sobbed over the steering wheel. Was this how it was always going to be, after he was gone? Would I be going about my day as usual, only to be startled by the sight of his face on a magazine cover or the sound of his voice over a speaker?

I knew the time would come when it meant the world to me to have his memory so well preserved, through all the pictures and videos and recordings he would leave behind. But right now, it was like pouring salt into an open wound. He wasn't even gone yet, but I was already anticipating the pain of losing him. It would only get worse before it got better.

I drove back to Nick's condo in a stupor, the silence broken only by the sound of my sniffling, as I tried to regain my composure. I checked my reflection in the rearview mirror before I got out of the car; my tears had dried, but my eyes were still red and puffy. There was no way I was going to be able to hide the fact that I'd been crying from Nick, but I grabbed the pharmacy bags anyway and took them upstairs.

The condo was quiet when I let myself in. I found Kevin sitting out on the balcony by himself, just staring into space. "Hey," I said quietly through the screen door, but he still jumped, startled. I could tell he'd been deep in thought.

"Hey, Cary, how are ya?" he said, recovering quickly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

"No, it's fine; I just didn't hear you come in." Kevin stood up and came in through the screen door. "Nick's taking a nap. He had a headache." He said it casually enough, but I saw the seriousness in his eyes when they met mine.

I nodded and held up the bags in my hand. "I have some new pain meds for him. Hopefully they'll help."

"Good. Hopefully he'll take them."

I frowned. “He hasn’t been taking his pain pills?”

“You know how he is.” Kevin gave me a long-suffering look. “He wants to work; he wants to plan and rehearse for this tour. The meds make him loopy and knock him out worse than the cancer does. Personally, I think he’s pushing himself too hard, but he swears this is what he wants to do with the time he has left, so I guess we’ve gotta support him in it.”

“Yeah... I guess you’re right.” I gave Kevin a sad smile, which he returned wearily. He looked ragged and somehow older than I’d ever realized. There were lines around his eyes and wrinkles on his forehead that I’d never noticed before, like all this stress and worry had etched them there permanently. I looked at him and remembered when I’d thought he was the most attractive man in the world, he and his cousin. Now I saw them both as nothing more than mutual friends. I only had eyes for Nick.

Kevin let himself out, and I went back to check on Nick. He was sound asleep, stretched out on his back in bed with his arms crossed over his chest. For a minute or so, I watched its steady rise and fall as he breathed. I could have stood there for hours, just staring at him, but I forced myself to walk away.

I changed clothes and flopped down in front of the TV in the living room, where I had set the DVR to record Nick’s Oprah episode. I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to watch it or not, but I decided I might as well get it over with, while Nick was asleep. I knew I would be a wreck by the end of the show.

Sure enough, I cried through the entire interview, as Oprah asked Nick to reflect on his life and share his thoughts on death. They sat facing each other on the same balcony where I’d found Kevin, the ocean view behind them, and Nick kept turning to stare at it as he composed his answers to her questions.

“Are you afraid?” asked Oprah, and Nick looked out at the water, licking his lips. He took a long time to answer, maybe because he was teetering between “yes” and “no” himself, but when he finally did, he sounded amazingly self-assured.

“I’m not afraid of dying. I think that the fear of death is really just fear of the unknown, and I’ve always been a risk-taker, the kind of person who welcomes change and likes to try new things. So I’m not afraid of dying itself. I have no idea what’s waiting out there for me, but I’ll find out.”

Oprah nodded. “I’m sure your courage in the face of cancer will inspire other people who are going through the same thing, Nick, but you’ve also had such an impact on so many people’s lives through your music. Is it a comfort to know that, no matter what, you will live on through the legacy you leave behind in this world?”

Nick was much quicker to answer that one. “Absolutely. I want to be remembered, not for my death, but for my life. When they hear my name, I hope people will hear my

voice. I hope they'll keep that part of me alive by listening to my music for decades to come.”

“Speaking of music, you’re releasing an album next week, a solo project?”

I smiled through my tears, as I saw the way Nick’s whole demeanor changed at the mention of his album. His posture shifted, he sat up straighter, and his whole face seemed to glow with enthusiasm. “Yeah... it comes out on the twenty-fourth; it’s called *I’m Taking Off*. ”

“Is that something you started before you got sick or while you were sick?”

“I’d been working on some stuff for it before I got diagnosed, but the bulk of the writing and recording I did this past winter, after going through treatment. It was something I came back to because I really needed a project to not only take my mind off what I’d been going through, but to help me get back to feeling like my old self again. And it really did help. This album is totally ‘me.’ It’s not about me with cancer, because that’s not how I see myself, even now. It’s about me as a person and all the other experiences I’ve had in my life – relationships, struggles, triumphs, everything. It came together during the hardest time of my life, but I couldn’t be prouder of the result.”

“It sounds like you created this album mostly for yourself, but do you see it also as sort of a parting gift for your fans?”

Nick tipped his head to the side, then nodded. “Yeah, sure. I hope they’ll enjoy it, and like I said, I want it to be something they can remember me by when they listen to it.”

I wasn’t smiling anymore. I thought of my near breakdown in the pharmacy and wondered how I could possibly stand to listen to any of his music after he was gone. I’d heard *I’m Taking Off*, and it was amazing, but hearing it in the future would only take me back to this time and this terrible pain.

On the TV, Oprah was saying, “Some people may question your decision to go on tour during your cancer treatment and now, when you know you only have a few months left. Would you say you’re doing that more for the fans, or for yourself?”

Nick licked his lips again, then wiped the corners of his mouth. “Really, it’s for both. I mean, I wanna go out on a high note and give the fans one last great show to celebrate the life and career I’ve had, but I wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t something I really wanted to do. The stage and the road have always felt like home to me; I feel best when I’m performing. Music’s like an escape for me – you know, it gets me out of my own head and takes my mind off everything else that’s going on. So focusing on the album and the tour has been good for me.”

I remembered what Kevin had said before he left. *“I think he’s pushing himself too hard, but he swears this is what he wants to do with the time he has left, so I guess we’ve gotta support him in it.”* He was right, but so was Nick. Even if it hastened his

death, this *was* good for him. I could see that now. Music was what made him happy, made his life worth living, and if he wanted to keep making music until the end, at least, as Nick put it, he would go out on a high note.

When the interview ended, I hurried into the bathroom to wash my face and dry my tears. My eyes still looked bloodshot and seemed to be in a permanent state of puffiness. I tried not to cry in front of Nick, but I did a lot of it behind closed doors these days. I think Nick probably knew. I was sitting on the closed toilet seat, taking deep breaths and trying to get myself together, when I heard him knock.

“Hey, Care, you okay in there?”

The sound of his voice made my stomach clench. “Yeah!” I called back, trying to keep my voice steady. “I’ll be out in a sec. Just... giving myself my shot...”

I don’t know why I bothered to lie. I guess I hoped I could pass my tears off as tears from physical pain, instead of the emotional kind. But Nick called me on it right away. He opened the bathroom door, which I hadn’t bothered to lock, and stood there in the doorway, holding up one of the white sacks from the pharmacy. “These shots?”

Sheepishly, I returned the smirk he was giving me and snatched the bag out of his hand. “I knew I was forgetting something,” I said lamely, and even though I knew he was onto me, I took the injection kit out of the sack and busied myself with preparing the syringe. It was actually a relief to have something else to focus on, something else to do. Nick just stood there and watched, so I put him to work. “Hold this,” I said, handing him the filled syringe, while I swabbed my belly with an alcohol wipe.

He wrinkled his nose at it. “You gotta stick this thing in your stomach?”

“Uh-huh. It won’t be bad; it’s a tiny needle.” I sounded way more casual about it than I felt; I wasn’t looking forward to the injection at all, but I didn’t dare complain about it in front of him, not after all the painful treatments he’d suffered through. “Here.” I held out my hand for the syringe, pinched an inch of flesh around my bellybutton, and plunged the needle into it. To my relief, it barely hurt. “See? Not so bad,” I said, as I pushed down the plunger.

Nick still shuddered. “It looks bad. Glad it’s not me this time.”

I flashed him a quick smile and started cleaning up.

“So what’s wrong?”

I stopped and looked at him, knowing my red eyes had given me away. “Do you really have to ask? I watched Oprah.”

He grimaced. “That bad?”

“No, you were incredible! I could never have given an interview like that.” I had stayed out of the way while Oprah was there, not wanting to be on camera. Just meeting her had made me starstruck, but the thought of sitting down for an interview with her terrified me. Nick was far braver than I’d ever be.

“Thanks. I didn’t watch it. I don’t think I want to.”

I shrugged. “I probably shouldn’t have. I mean, look at me.” I forced a laugh, wiping my eyes.

He gave me a crooked smile and held out his arms. As soon as I was in them, the tears started flowing again. “You don’t have to hide it from me, you know,” he said as he hugged me, running his hand up and down my back. “Trust me, I know how hard it is to pretend everything’s fine when it isn’t. I don’t want you to pretend around me.”

I nodded, my throat too clogged up to speak.

“I’m sorry,” he added in a low voice. “I’m sorry for putting you through this.”

This time, I shook my head. “Don’t,” I choked out. “Don’t apologize. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I took advantage of you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I whispered back, my head resting against his shoulder. “I fell in love with you. And regardless of how you really feel about me, I’m here because I want to be here for you.”

“Look at me, Cary.” I lifted my head to look up at Nick, who met my eyes and stared into them intently. “I love you. Honestly, I don’t know if it’s in the way you want or deserve, but I do love you. I just wish we had more time to let that love grow and see where it takes us.”

You know that old song “Smile” that goes, *“Smile, though your heart is aching. Smile, even though it’s breaking”*? I’ve always thought those lyrics were so sad, but that was just what I did – smiled, even though my heart was breaking.

“Me too.”

And Nick smiled sadly back, then dipped his head and kissed the tears off my cheeks.

I clung to him tightly, wishing I’d never have to let go.

Chapter 84

Nick

I remember album release days the same way I remember birthdays – where I was, who I was with, and what I did. They’re usually busy days, jam-packed with press appearances, performances, and signings, but also filled with fun, excitement, and an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment.

We were in Germany for our first album release and New York City for our second. When *Millennium* came out, we did a big MTV thing and shut down Times Square, and for *Black & Blue*, we traveled around the world in a hundred hours. To celebrate my first solo album, *Now or Never*, I was in Times Square again to make appearances on TRL and at the Virgin megastore across the street. We were also in New York on the days *Never Gone*, *Unbreakable*, and *This Is Us* were released, although most of our appearances for the last one were cancelled on account of Brian getting swine flu. It wouldn’t be the last time illness put a damper on our plans, but none of us could have guessed I would be diagnosed with cancer five months later, or that it would be our last album release as a group.

For the release of my final studio album, *I'm Taking Off*, it only seemed appropriate to go back to New York, probably for the last time. Even though it was my solo record, I didn’t go alone. While Cary stayed in LA to work, the guys came to NYC with me, all four of them, and we stayed together in a penthouse suite overlooking Times Square, where we could gaze down and look back on the history we’d made there.

It was bittersweet. Although the MTV studios were still there, TRL was no more. The Virgin megastore had closed. And the five of us could walk through the Square without causing pandemonium. That part was a relief, but still, I missed the good old days, when we were young and healthy and on top of the world, when just merely waving through the window of the TRL studio was enough to incite mass hysteria down on the street below.

That day, the twenty-fourth of May, was the first release day I could remember that wasn’t scheduled down to the minute with an itinerary of appearances, interviews, and performances I had to follow. According to my publicist, all the talk shows were still clamoring for an interview, but we’d booked only one appearance, on *Live with Regis and Kelly*, the same show on which we’d made our US TV debut back in 1997, when the co-host was Kathie Lee. The guys and I had been on the show a number of times since then, and I’d performed there to promote my first solo album. It seemed like the right place to acknowledge my last one.

I agreed to a short interview, on the condition that we stuck to talking about the album and the upcoming tour. I had talked enough about my disease and death with Oprah; I wasn’t going to go there again. Really, I just wanted to perform.

The producers allowed time for me to perform twice, once on my own and once with the Boys. Everyone on the show was sympathetic toward me, but I could tell they were also

eating up the tragedy of the five of us coming together to perform on TV one last time. I didn't talk much backstage, focusing my thoughts and energies on the performances ahead.

The hair and makeup people went to work on me, making sure I'd have a fake, healthy glow under the studio lights, and by the time they were done, I looked like my old self again. They had styled my short hair and penciled in the gaps in my sparse eyebrows. Using makeup, they'd filled out my hollow cheeks and erased the dark circles from under my eyes. Foundation smoothed out the lines of worry on my face, and bronzer brightened my pale complexion. The makeup artists had worked their magic and created an illusion of health to hide the fact that I was sick and dying.

It was no big secret anymore, though.

My stomach was in knots as I waited for my cue onstage. I hadn't performed for an audience since the last show of the *This is Us* tour... No, that wasn't right. My last time on stage had been a couple of weeks later, at the Relay for Life in Cary's hometown. A lump rose in my throat as I remembered singing for that small, close-knit crowd, all connected by the same disease that had brought me and Cary together. I wished I could go back to that day, to that feeling of hope I'd felt when I'd believed I might actually survive.

The studio audience was even smaller, and although they'd been on their feet, giving me a standing ovation as I walked out to take the stage, they sat quietly now, looking as grim and nervous as I felt waiting. Even without an interview, everyone seemed to be aware of what I was going through, behind the scenes. It made me glad I hadn't picked a ballad to sing. My favorite track on the new album was called "Falling Down," and even though I'd written it before I got cancer, it seemed the most fitting. But I didn't want to sing anything depressing, so I'd gone the opposite route and chosen an upbeat song, the title track. I wanted to get this crowd on their feet again and make them smile, make them forget. I wanted to forget, too.

"Places, everyone!" shouted the producer from the side of the stage. The show was about to come back from a commercial break. "We're live in three... two..."

I looked to Regis and Kelly, who were standing together on the other side of their set. Regis held up a copy of my CD in front of one of the cameras and said, "Here to perform a song from his new solo album, *I'm Taking Off*, please welcome... Nick Carter!"

I swallowed hard and sucked in a deep breath as I heard my track start to play. I found the camera that was filming a close-up of my face and gave it a sultry stare as I tilted the mic toward my lips and started to sing. "*You're just a chemical reaction... a love the galaxies erased. I thought that I was goin' crazy... You took me to another place. Another big bang explosion... don't even know who you are... 'cause somethin' 'bout you is strange; girl, you're actin' like an alien...*"

On the chorus, I ripped the mic out of its stand and raised my free hand over my head, punching the air. “*I think I’ll put my spacesuit on... so I can jump into my rocket,*” I sang, crossing the stage, wanting to look like I was full of energy and having the time of my life. “*Call ground control ‘cause something’s wrong...*” I tried to get the audience to stand up and wave their arms. I wanted them to have as much fun as I was. “*I-it’s your gravity, that’s holding onto me... gotta break free and take me halfway to the sun; countdown’s begun; I’m taking off... I’m taking off.*”

It worked. Soon the fans were on their feet, arms swaying, faces shining, and I was back in my element, lost in the song, all depressing thoughts shoved into the depths of my mind, where they couldn’t surface anytime soon. There was no place for those kinds of thoughts onstage. I’d succeeded in making everyone forget.

But as I neared the end of the song, something changed. The audience was still up and dancing, and I was still singing my heart out, but the words had taken on a new meaning. “*Countdown’s begun; I’m taking off...*” This wasn’t a song about outer space and aliens, and it wasn’t just a metaphor for a relationship gone wrong. This song was about a journey, a journey that, in some ways, was almost over and, in another way, was just about to begin.

“*I’m taking off, baby, and not coming back... ‘cause I’m taking off, baby, and I’m moving fast...*” As I belted out those words, I gave myself over to them, knowing they were true. “*Destination unknown...*” I didn’t know what lay ahead or what was waiting for me on the other side, but I accepted my fate and, in some weird way, looked forward to finding out. “*Taking off...*” I sang, my eyes and arms raised toward the bright, white lights beaming down from above. “*I’m gonna break away... Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah...*”

“*Five... four... three... two... one,*” the distorted voice in my backing track counted down, and I thought, *My time’s almost up.* But I was still hell bent on making every last second count, and so far, I’d gotten my way.

“Thank you,” I mumbled into the microphone, as I was rewarded with another standing ovation. The live feed cut to another commercial break, giving me a chance to mop the sweat off my face before I sat down with the Boys for our brief interview segment. After just the one song, I was breathing hard, and it occurred to me that I might not have enough stamina left to make it through a whole, two-hour concert, let alone the six we were planning. I played it off, though, refusing to let them see any signs of weakness from me. After the tour, I was prepared to curl up and die, but not before. Not before.

True to their promise, Regis and Kelly kept the interview quick and only asked me about my album, while the rest of the guys answered questions about our six, sold-out shows around the world. Then Regis looked out at the audience and said, “Now, you folks may not know this, but these guys made their US television debut when they performed right here on our show back in 1997.” Turning to Kevin, who had easily fallen right back into his old role as spokesperson for the group, Regis added, “Would you fellows be willing to take us out with one of your old songs?”

“You bet, Regis,” said Kevin, with a tight-lipped smile that looked more like a grimace. I could tell by the look on his face and the tone of his voice that he was struggling to hold it together. In a way, I’d thought this last appearance would be easier for him than for the others, since he’d already moved on from the group, but in that moment, I saw that he was having as hard a time as anyone, maybe even harder.

We moved quickly to the five stools that had been set up on the stage at the other side of the studio, as our guitarist, sitting behind us, started strumming out the opening chords to “I Want It That Way.” We had debated between singing this song and “Show Me the Meaning of Being Lonely,” both singles from *Millennium*, both songs that featured all five of us singing lead, but in the end, the thought of doing “Show Me the Meaning” on TV that day was just too goddamned depressing. “I Want It That Way” was a classic. It was the song we would probably be best remembered by, after all of us were dead and gone. It seemed like the right note to end on.

But as AJ drew out his final, “*Cause I want it... that way...*” I couldn’t help but think that this wasn’t the way any of us would have wanted it. We’d all thought we’d have years, whole decades left to perform together. Even after Kevin left, there was no end in sight for the rest of us. We expected to keep on going as a group until we were old men. I never thought my body would betray me well before I hit middle age, or that I would be the first to leave them permanently. And no matter how many times we sang “*Tell me why,*” we would never know the answer.

That night, as we sat around our hotel suite together, I said, “You know, if you guys wanna keep going after I’m gone, I’d be okay with that.”

Brian, Howie, and AJ all looked up at me. Kevin stared down at his lap. No one said anything back.

“I mean it,” I added. “There’s no reason the group has to die, too. You guys could still perform as a trio, or Kev could come back and-” But I stopped and trailed off, because Kevin was already shaking his head, and slowly, the other three shook theirs, too.

“This isn’t like when Kev left – no offense, man,” AJ said quickly, looking over at Kevin, who just waved his comment off. “We won’t be the Backstreet Boys anymore with just three of us.”

“There is no Backstreet Boys without you, Nicky,” Howie added quietly, without looking me in the eye.

“Aw, c’mon, Howie. You can have all my leads – and all my fans...” I tried to grin, even though I felt like crying. No one else smiled at my attempt to joke around.

“Howie’s right,” said Brian. “I think this tour’s gonna be it for the Backstreet Boys.”

I guess I should have known they would react that way, but even though I was touched, I also felt disappointed and even a little guilty, like it was my fault the group was falling

apart. I knew it wasn't, not really, but still, it was because of me there would be no more Backstreet Boys. I felt bad for the guys, who had the whole rest of their lives and careers left ahead of them. I knew they would find other things to do, solo projects and acting gigs and that kind of stuff, and there was no doubt in my mind they would be successful at whatever they did. But I had always envisioned us walking along the same road into the future, not taking totally different routes, separate from each other. Where my path came to a dead end, theirs would continue on in different directions, without me, and without the group.

The tour seemed more important than ever. Six shows, on six different continents, spread out over two weeks. A chance to say goodbye to our fans around the world. A way to celebrate the success we'd shared as a group and, at the same time, let go. I couldn't wait for it to start, but I dreaded it ending, because the end of the tour would mean the end of so much more.

Still, I was excited about going back on the road, just for a little while... and for the last time.

Chapter 85

Cary

In early June, we flew to Frankfurt, Germany for the first show of what the Boys had decided to dub "The Curtain Call Tour." The name fit Nick's whole idea behind the tour – to take the stage for the last time on each continent and be recognized by the fans who had supported the group for so long. It also made sense to start in Germany, one of the first countries to embrace the Backstreet Boys so many years ago.

I had never been to Germany before, nor to any of the other countries on the tour itinerary – Japan, Australia, South Africa, Brazil. I wished I could be more excited about visiting such foreign and exotic places, but instead, I was filled with a sense of dread that overwhelmed all other feelings. It dominated me, the fear that this tour was going to be too much for Nick, the knowledge that even if he made it through the two weeks of traveling, it would still only be a matter of time.

Time was something he didn't have much left of, and I could hear it ticking away, as fast I could feel my heart racing in my chest whenever I thought about it. I tried *not* to think about it, but that was impossible. The dread was with me wherever I went, and it had followed me overseas. I couldn't enjoy myself, knowing what lay ahead.

No one seemed excited about this tour... not even Nick. It had been all his idea, but now he faced it with a sort of grim determination. Maybe it wasn't something he *wanted* to do, but something he felt *had* to do, for the fans and for the guys as much as for himself. But the guys weren't the same lively bunch I'd met at the beginning of the *This is Us*

tour. They, too, seemed quieter, more sedate. I hoped they'd be able to fire up the charm onstage the following night, or their concert would seem more like a funeral than the celebration it was supposed to be.

The night before the show, Nick and I relaxed in our hotel room, which was small, but clean and comfortable. We had just gotten back from dinner with all the guys and their families, and after eating too much heavy German food and drinking too much strong German beer, I was feeling sort of sick. Lying next to me on the bed, Nick was quiet. I wondered how he was feeling, but I didn't ask, knowing he was tired of the question. He'd made a big deal out of wanting to go out for a big German meal, but he hadn't eaten much at dinner and only drank one pint of beer, while I'd downed one and then another and most of a third, eager to drown my anxiety in alcohol. Nick hadn't had much of an appetite lately, and I worried it was yet another sign of the cancer taking over his body. "What are you thinking about?" I asked him instead, wanting to get out of my own head for awhile.

"Nothin'," he said at first, then added, "Just thinking about how it used to be when the guys and I would come overseas, back before we blew up in the States. They'd all go out on the town at night, and I'd get left behind at the hotel, 'cause I was only one who couldn't drink yet. Except here in Germany... I always liked Germany, 'cause the drinking age is only sixteen. I could go out in Germany. Everywhere else, though, I'd be stuck lying around my hotel room, trying to watch TV in foreign languages. I wish I could say I'd picked up more from it." He smirked, inclining his head toward the TV.

It was on, but neither of us were really watching. We'd found a channel that was showing *ET*, only it was dubbed over in German. At first, we had fun with it, laughing at *ET* saying "*ET zu Haus telefonieren*" instead of "ET phone home," but it didn't take long for the novelty to wear off. We left it on for background noise, but it was starting to get on my nerves. All the characters sounded like Dr. Schnabeltier, the transplant doctor who had put Nick through all that torture without curing him.

"Did you at least learn some good pick-up lines to try out on the German girls?" I asked, for the sake of making conversation.

He laughed. "If I did, I don't remember any now. All I know how to say is 'I love you.' *Ich liebe dich.* I'll use that one tomorrow night."

I smiled and then turned my head, so he wouldn't see the tears that had suddenly welled in my eyes. *What brought that on?* I wondered. I was such an emotional wreck these days, I didn't even know. It didn't take much to bring me to the verge of tears. All I knew was that I loved Nick so much it hurt... and that losing him was going to hurt so much worse.

"What are you thinking about?" Nick turned the question back on me.

I swallowed hard, blinking back the tears. I couldn't tell him what I'd really been thinking: that I was dreading this tour because it felt like a countdown to the end. Six

shows to go... then five... then four, three, two, one, and after the last show, Nick would go back home to die. *The countdown is on.* The last time I'd thought that was the night before his stem cell transplant, when there was still hope for a cure. Now there was no hope left.

Nick was getting worse. He still had good days where he could get up and go out and do the things he wanted to do, but they sapped him of his strength and led to more and more frequent bad days, which he spent lying in bed, too tired and weak to get up, incapacitated by blinding headaches or back pain, which was sometimes accompanied by strange, tingling sensations in his arms and legs. I prayed for the next two weeks to be all good days. That was all there was to hope for now: that Nick would make it through this tour and die on his own terms.

“Cary?” When he said my name, I realized I’d never answered him.

“Just that I love you, too,” I whispered to the wall, then cleared my throat, trying to get back my composure. “How do you say it again?”

“*Ich liebe dich.*”

I rolled over to face him again. Looking into his beautiful, blue eyes, I managed a smile to mirror the little smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “*Ich liebe dich,*” I repeated.

All six shows of the Curtain Call tour had sold out in a matter of minutes, and I’d heard stories of tickets being scalped on Ebay and StubHub for thousands of dollars. Every fan wanted to be in the audience for one of Nick Carter’s last concerts.

Every seat was filled in the Festhalle Frankfurt, and all around me, I could hear fans talking in different languages – not just German, but English, Spanish, French, and languages I didn’t even recognize. There were fans from all over Europe, maybe even other continents, who had spent hundreds on travel expenses and come thousands of miles just to be there. I marveled over their devotion, but at the same time, I understood.

Following the procedure to retrieve my eggs for the sake of freezing embryos, I had taken a twelve-week medical leave of absence from my job to travel and take care of Nick, as well as my own health. I would be off the whole summer, long enough to recover from the exploratory surgery I had scheduled for the end of June and to see Nick through the tour and perhaps through to the end. No one could predict when, exactly, the end would come, but Dr. Subramanien had given him six months, and by the end of the tour, three of them would be gone. I knew it was unlikely he’d make it much past the summer.

I knew it, but it was hard to believe it once the concert began. The fans started screaming like usual when a video montage of the Boys through the years came up on

the big screen, and the live band started to play. I recognized the beginning of “Everyone,” which they repeated over and over again until it was time for the guys to take the stage.

They rose up from under the stage on moving platforms, and the lights were dimmed so I could just see their five silhouettes. My breath caught in my throat, as I realized how long it had been since I’d seen the familiar shape of the five of them onstage together. My eyes filled with tears, as I realized it was a sight I would never see again, once this tour was over. But I tried not to dwell on it. I tried to stay in the moment and enjoy every precious second of the show. I knew every fan around me must be going through the same internal struggle.

But even though it was in the backs of our minds the whole time, once the Boys started singing, it was almost possible to forget, or at least to pretend it was just another show. *“We’ve been through days of thunder...”* Brian sang the opening lyrics, and his voice sounded strong, not shaky like it had on their last TV performance. *“Some people said we don’t belong. They try to pull us under, but here we stand together and a million strong.”*

“*Let’s get on with the show,*” the guys sang together, as the music picked up, and a cheer rose over the crowd as Nick’s voice rang out powerfully, “*Let’s get started!*”

“*Turn the lights down low,*” they went on, and Nick echoed, “*Turn the lights down low!*”

“*You were there from the start,*” they sang, and Nick added, “*You were there!*”

“*We know who you are... and this one goes out to everyone... everyone... everyone. We’re standing strong ‘cause of what you’ve done, and this one goes out to you.*”

As the five Boys pointed out into the audience, the fans echoed their sentiments with screams. Goosebumps rose on my skin as they transitioned from “Everyone” into “Larger Than Life.” I knew they had frontloaded the show with these two up-tempos to get the choreography out of the way early, before Nick ran out of steam. Most of the other numbers were ballads and mid-tempos, which didn’t require as much stamina. They had planned the set list carefully, giving Nick plenty of opportunities to rest his body and voice in between the songs on which he had most of the leads.

But here at the beginning, Nick came out strong. He sang and danced like there was nothing wrong, and even though he didn’t perform the old “Larger than Life” choreography with the same energy as the other guys, he still had plenty of charisma.

It took its toll on him, though. After the opening medley, the stage lights went dark while the guys ran backstage for drinks of water, except for Howie, who stayed out to welcome the audience to the show. While the spotlight was focused on him, stage hand scurried in and out of the darkness, setting up five stools behind him. Then the lights came back up and the rest of the guys came back on stage, settling onto their stools. I was close enough to see the sweat streaking Nick’s face, to notice how hard he was

breathing already, his chest expanding rapidly. *Oh God, I prayed. Please let him get through this. Please don't let anything go wrong.* But there were so many things that could. I shuddered as I imagined Nick collapsing, going into convulsions on the stage.

But he didn't, and after a few more songs, when things seemed to be running smoothly, I started to relax again, to almost forget. For awhile, I was actually enjoying myself, lulled into a false sense of security by the familiar music I'd loved for so long. But all it took was one song to bring me back to reality. It hit me like a slap in the face when the band played six haunting notes that I associated with lyrics: *Don't wanna lose... you now...*

The melody was enough to break my heart, but it was worse when they actually started singing the words. "*Don't wanna lose... you now. Baby... I know we can win this.*"

But we can't, I thought sadly, looking up at Nick on the stage. His image blurred before my eyes as they filled with tears. *We're both going to lose.*

"*Don't wanna lose... you now. No, no... or ever again.*"

How can they stand to sing this? I wondered. But I knew the answer: the fans had voted on it, and even if the lyrics hit too close to home, it was a song they'd once enjoyed, a song they'd always said they wanted to perform again. If only it were under different circumstances...

I'm sure Brian was regretting it when he started the next verse. His voice cracked and wavered as he sang, "*I got this feeling you're not gonna stay. It's burning within me. The fear of losing, of slipping away...*" His voice sounded thick, like he was choking back tears. His eyes glistened in the stage lights. "*It just keeps getting closer...*" Finally, Brian's voice broke, and he bowed his head, sucking in an audible breath.

Thankfully, Kevin was there to cover for him. "*Whatever reason to leave that I've had...*" he sang in harmony, until Brian jumped back in with the melody, "*My place... is always beside you...*"

Whether it was planned that way or not, Brian and Nick happened to be sitting next to each other, and on that line, Brian leaned away from Kevin and towards Nick, reached out, and took his hand. Through my tears, I couldn't make out Nick's reaction.

"*...and I... wish that I didn't need you so bad,*" the cousins sang, their voices shaky, but in perfect harmony. "*Your face... just won't go away...*"

"*Don't wanna lose... you now...*"

I don't know how they made it through the rest of the song, let alone the rest of the show, but somehow, they did. That's the mark of a true professional, I guess, and here were five of them. They had performed through both physical and emotional pain before – injuries and illnesses, losses of loved ones, personal health crises, national tragedies. They knew when to let their emotions show and when to hide them deep

down, so they wouldn't surface on the stage. There were tears in their eyes when they joined hands and bowed, but they left the stage gracefully, with no dramatics, while the house lights came up on fans who were distraught, sobbing on each other's shoulders.

For most of them, this was the last time they would see all five Backstreet Boys perform together, live and in person. The last show. Ever.

For me, there were still five more shows to get through.

But the countdown was on, and for Nick, time was running out.

Chapter 86

Nick

I bet a lot of people put "travel around the world" on their bucket lists, but I wonder how many of them actually get to do it.

I'm lucky. I got to do it.

Germany, Japan, Australia, South Africa, Brazil... In the last ten days, I'd been to five different countries, on five different continents. I'd seen beautiful sights, tasted delicious food, touched the hands of people from all around the world, and heard them speak in at least a dozen different languages.

This trip had put me on sensory overload and taxed my body to its limit, but the tour was almost over. We were almost home... back on familiar turf, back to the place where we'd begun, the only city that made sense to host our very last show.

Orlando, Florida.

The night before the show, we just drove around our old stomping ground, pointing out places we remembered. We ate dinner at one of our old favorite restaurants, one of the places Lou used to take us to eat when we were just starting out. I had good memories of those days – not of Lou, but of the way it used to be, when we were young and eager, with stars in our eyes. I remembered meeting the guys for the first time, getting to know them. I idolized Brian; he was like the big brother I'd never had, and even though he was five years older than me, he never acted like it. I was in awe of AJ, who was only two years older but wise beyond his years, like he'd already seen and done it all. Kevin intimidated me, but Howie put me at ease, and I came to respect them both and appreciate the way they looked out for me in those early years.

So much had changed since then, both the places and the people. We'd grown up, grown apart in some ways, grown closer in others, especially lately. Like we'd always

said, it would take death to tear us apart. I'd just always imagined us being old men when that finally happened. I never thought it would happen in our thirties... or that I'd be the first to go. But it wouldn't be long now.

The day of the show, I lost the ability to walk. I felt the usual back pain and some tingling in my legs when I lay down to take a nap before soundcheck, and when I woke up, it was like my legs were still asleep. They felt too heavy and weak to move, and my feet had gone numb. It was hard not to panic. I called out to Cary, who was in the bathroom of our hotel suite, getting ready. She came out with a mascara wand in her hand. I tried to keep my voice calm when I told her, "I don't think I can get up."

She frowned, her forehead creasing in confusion. "What do you mean? Are you okay?"

That was a dumb question, which she seemed to realize as soon as she said it, but it didn't matter. "Something's wrong with my legs. My feet are numb."

"What??" So much for my effort to keep us both calm. Cary dropped her mascara and rushed over. There was probably a black stain on the carpet now, but I couldn't see it. I was lying flat on my back, not even sure if I could sit up, let alone stand. "Are you in any pain?" Cary asked, looking me over.

I started to shake my head, but as I did, I felt the pain shoot down my back, radiating out to my arms. "Just in my back."

"Can you feel this?"

I raised my head just a little, fighting through the pain, and saw her running her thumb along the sole of my bare foot. My foot seemed to know she was tickling it because my toes curled up and spread apart, but the only sensation I felt was a little pressure. It didn't tickle. It hardly even tingled. "Sort of. Not really."

Looking concerned, she gently picked up my foot in her hand. As she lifted my leg off the mattress, the pain in my back shot down into my leg, and I winced, sucking in a sharp breath. She lowered my leg again quickly and looked up at me. The seriousness of the situation was written all over her face. "Your spinal cord is being compressed by the cancer," she said quietly. "We need to get you to a hospital."

"No," I replied right away, before I'd even had a chance to think about it.

"Nick!" she cried just as automatically, her voice rising. "Don't start this again. Don't be stupid. This is an emergency! If this isn't treated right away, you could end up paralyzed."

"Didn't you tell me I was probably going to end up that way at some point anyway?"

She let out an exasperated sort of sigh. "Maybe, but not necessarily. Not if we can prevent it!"

I shut up for a few seconds, weighing the options in my mind. Cary knew best, and she was probably right – I should go to the hospital. But we were in Orlando, and tonight was the last show. *My* last show. Ever. Twenty thousand fans were in town to see me perform one last time, and millions more were gearing up to watch the live broadcast of it on music channels around the world. If we had to cancel, I wouldn't just be letting them down. I'd be letting myself down, too.

I knew I was being stupid, but I made the decision with my heart, instead of my head. “I still wanna try to perform,” I told Cary. “And afterwards, we’ll go straight to the hospital. I promise.”

She shook her head at me in disbelief. “How are you going to perform, if you can’t even get up off this bed?”

“Help me.” I reached for her, knowing she couldn’t refuse my pleading, puppy eyes. Against her better judgment, maybe, she took one of my hands and slipped her other arm under my back, helping me to slowly sit up. It hurt, but I felt better once I was sitting straight, my legs dangling limply over the edge of the bed. “I can do this,” I said, with a confidence I didn’t feel. “We’ll just have to improvise.”

Improvising meant sending Leigh and Leighanne out on a wild goose chase to buy a stool with a back, so I’d have something to lean against onstage. They bought five of them, so the stools would still match. Improvising meant putting the stools right on the moving platform that raised us onto the stage, so the fans wouldn’t see the guys physically carry me on and off. Improvising meant changing the choreography, so I could do it sitting down.

If the guys realized what a bad sign this was, they’d never let me perform, but luckily, they didn’t know as much as Cary did, and I didn’t tell them. I downplayed my pain and doped myself up on enough medication to numb it, for now. I couldn’t dance, I couldn’t even walk, but I could still sing, and for the next two hours, that was all I needed to do.

So I did.

If the fans realized there was something wrong, something besides the obvious, they didn’t acknowledge it. They screamed just as loud as the fans in Germany, Japan, Australia, South Africa, and Brazil had, and because they were the home crowd and this was the last show, they sounded even louder.

I lost myself in the music and the magic of each moment, and even though I knew it in the back of my mind, it was hard to believe that this was my last time on stage. For awhile, I managed to forget that it was the last show, that I was confined to the stool because I couldn’t walk, and that I’d be dead in a matter of months. I buried those thoughts, just as I buried the pain, and I didn’t let either surface until the end.

It all came back during our second-to-last song – not so much the pain, but the weakness, the fatigue, the realization that the concert had caught up to me, and my stamina was shot. *Just one more song after this one*, I told myself. *I can make it*. But I didn't just want to "make it." It was the last song I'd ever sing in front of my fans. I wanted to make it count.

"*But we,*" I came in with my solo, "*are two worlds apart...*" My voice sounded shaky and flat, but it didn't matter. "*Can't reach to your heart, when you say...*" I could hear the fans singing along so loud, I'm not sure they could even hear me. "*...that I want it that way. Tell me why...*"

I held my mic out to the audience to amplify the sound of twenty thousand voices answering, "*Ain't nothing but a heartache.*" The fans always sang the loudest on "*I Want It That Way*," but that night, they sounded louder than I'd ever heard them. They didn't even need the microphone, so I pulled it back to my lips.

"*Tell me why...*"

"*Ain't nothing but a mistake,*" chanted the whole crowd, and their voices bounced off the ceiling of the arena and brought tears to my eyes. "*Tell me why...*"

"*I never wanna hear you say... I want it that way.*"

I finished my big part of the song and listened to each of the other guys take theirs in turn. "*Am I your fire? Your one desire?*" AJ was so talented, his voice still strong despite years of smoking. "*Yes I know... it's too late...*" I hoped he'd do more solo work after I was gone. "*But I want it that way...*"

It was somehow comforting to hear Kevin come in on his solo, instead of Howie. Hearing him sing, "*Now I can see that we've fallen apart from the way that it used to be,*" made me feel the exact opposite – that we weren't falling apart at all, that everything was back to the way it should be, even if it wasn't true. AJ's voice blended with Kevin's in perfect harmony. "*No matter the distance, I want you to know, that deep down inside of me...*"

And then Howie's soft voice came in, singing his two lines with the same passion and care he gave all his solos. "*You are my fire... the one desire. You are...*" he sang, the big brother I loved to torment... and love with all my heart.

"*You are...*" sang Kevin, a better father than my own.

"*You are...*" sang AJ, my first friend in the group.

"*You a-are...*" sang Brian, my best friend for life.

Then the thousands of fans, some of whom had probably seen us perform in this city eighteen years ago, came together and cried, "*Don't wanna hear you-!*" Their voices

were so deafening, no one could hear mine crack on the high note, but I'm sure they could see my tears on TV screens all over the world. I couldn't help it; how can you not cry in the midst of a moment that's so sad and so beautiful at the same time? I was slipping away, yet I was so surrounded by love and support that I wasn't scared anymore.

I'd lived an extraordinary life in my thirty-one years, and even though it was being taken away from me sooner than I would have liked, at least I was going out with a bang. At least I'd be remembered by the people here tonight and around the world. At least a part of me, the part I was most proud of, would live on.

"Cause I want it... that way," finished AJ, and as our stools sank beneath the stage, out of sight, I decided that if it had to happen, there was no other way I'd want it.

"How we doin', Nicky?" Howie asked, looking over at me in concern.

I was exhausted and out of breath, covered in a sheen of sweat even though I'd never left my stool, but I mopped off my face, caught my breath, and answered, "I'm alright. One more song. Let's do this."

The screams swelled to fill the arena as we rose back up onto the stage for the encore. So many cameras were flashing, it created a strobe light effect. Everything looked distorted, surreal. I swayed a little on my stool, feeling light-headed and dizzy, but once the familiar music started, I got my bearings back.

The fans screamed with recognition as the band repeated the same three, haunting notes, under a tinkling of bells, and I thought of mummies and coffins. I'd chosen a biodegradable wooden casket, so that after my body rotted away beneath the ground, I'd simply become a part of the earth again. I didn't want to be a mummy; that was only for the video, which played on the big screen behind us as Brian started to sing.

"Everybody... rock your body. Everybody... rock your body right. Backstreet's back, alright!"

The lights came up as the music picked up, and confetti shot out of cannons on the sides of the stage. We'd debated over what should be the last song, but came to the consensus that it should be something upbeat, something fun, something that would celebrate the career we'd had, not mourn its end. There was no better number than this one.

The fans showered us with support, dancing in the aisles, rocking their bodies and waving their arms like they just didn't care. Cary reported that they did this every night, then dissolved into tears when the song was over, but that was to be expected. I was just glad that, for now, they could suspend their sadness and live in the moment, as I was.

"*Am I original?*" I sang, and they screamed as usual.

"*Am I the only one?*" Brian added, to more screams.

“Am I sexual?” I asked for the last time, and the crowd answered with a resounding cheer that told me they still thought so. I found Cary, standing on the far left side of the stage, and winked when I caught her eye. She responded with a watery smile.

“Am I everything you need? You better rock your body now. Everybody...”

We sang the chorus again, until the music wound down to my solo. The audience fell totally silent to listen, as I sucked in a deep breath and sang, *“So everybody, everywhere... don’t be afraid; don’t have no fear.”* This time, my voice didn’t crack. It sounded smooth and strong as I finished, *“I’m gonna tell the world, even once I’m gone... As long as there’ll be music, I’ll keep singing on and on...”*

The arena exploded with cheers as the music revved back up to the last chorus. We sang it twice, and even though a part of me wished we could repeat it all night, my voice was tired and my body even more so.

When the song ended, we joined hands for our final curtain call. The guys slid off their stools to bow. I stayed put on mine, simply tipping my head in gratitude to the thousands of fans who were on their feet, giving us a standing ovation. The house lights had come on so we could see them all, but their faces blurred before my eyes, which were filled with tears.

It’s hard to describe how I felt in that moment. Overwhelmed, I guess, with so many emotions threatening to burst out of my chest. I know I was relieved when the platform finally lowered us below the stage, so I wouldn’t break down in front of the fans.

The guys each hugged me, then lifted me down into a wheelchair and took me backstage. My family was there waiting for me, their faces all a mess of tears, too, but there wasn’t much time to talk.

A few minutes later, Cary came with a whole crew of EMTs, and they rushed me to the hospital.

Chapter 87

Cary

In the hospital, they treated Nick with massive doses of steroids and radiation to his spine to relieve the pressure. He regained the sensation in his legs and was sent home after a few days.

But once we were back in LA, he went downhill fast. It was like, now that the tour was over, he’d given his body permission to start shutting down. At first, he had good days

and bad days, but eventually, the days when he could get up and out of bed became few and far between, and as the good gave way to the bad, he became bedridden.

In the midst of Nick's decline, I went in for exploratory surgery and came out with a diagnosis: tumors of low malignant potential on both ovaries. The good news was that I didn't have full-fledged cancer, only a precursor to it. The bad news was that, in order to prevent it from spreading and turning into something more serious, both ovaries had to be removed. I tried to look on the bright side: I was cancer-free, my chance of survival was ninety-nine percent, and I could still get pregnant someday, using the frozen embryos I'd made from Nick's sperm. But whenever I thought of having a baby that way, a baby that would be biologically Nick's, I just wanted to cry. Nick would never know his own child.

But he was happy and relieved for me. "I'm glad you won't have to go through the same shit I did," he said, sitting in a wheelchair beside my hospital bed. It was weird to see our roles reversed for once – me, the patient, and him, the visitor. "I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy."

I felt guilty, though, for getting a good prognosis when his was so grim. "Survivor's guilt," my dad told me, during one of our frequent phone conversations. "I felt the same way after your mom died. If I could have traded places with her, I would have. It seemed so unfair that I got to watch you grow up, and she didn't. She loved you so much..."

I liked to think that my mother *had* watched me grow up, that she was watching over me still from some unearthly vantage point, and that when Nick passed on, he would go to the same place. But not even this fantasy could change the reality of my situation: it still sucked to be the one left behind.

After I came home from the hospital, we gradually resumed our old roles. Before long, I was back on my feet, and Nick was confined to his bed. I was getting better, while he was getting worse. The unfairness of it all really hit me then: I was going to live, and he was going to die, and there wasn't anything either of us could do about it.

"This sucks," Nick muttered one evening, as we were lying together in his bed, watching the sun set outside his window.

"I know," I agreed quietly. There was no use pretending otherwise. I reached over to softly stroke his arm, ready to pull my hand back if he flinched. Some days, he liked to be touched this way, and at other times, it hurt him. The cancer in his spine affected the sensation in different parts of his body, and I never knew how he'd react. When he didn't flinch, though, I kept stroking, up and down his forearm. His arm hair felt light and wispy against my fingertips, while the veins protruding from under his skin felt hard and wiry. Life was pumping through them, but at some point soon, it would stop. His skin would lose its warmth and grow cold. His muscles would go limp, then stiff. The blood would congeal in his veins.

I knew how death worked. I had seen it in the residents at the nursing home where I'd worked, old people who simply went to sleep and never woke up. But it disturbed me to think of that happening to Nick. *He's too young*, I thought desperately. *It's too soon*. I reached down and threaded my fingers through his, letting the warm, firm squeeze of his hand around mine reassure me.

I knew it bothered Nick, too. He still wanted me to sleep with him at night, even though he probably would have been more comfortable without me in his bed, and he kept me up late, just talking. I think he was afraid of dying in his sleep. We both knew that was probably how it would happen, though. He was already starting to sleep more often. He dozed off and on throughout the day, drifting off for a few hours at a time, almost like an infant does. It's strange how, towards the end of life, we regress to how we began life.

"I bet you wish I'd never called you that day," Nick said, after a long pause.

For a second, I wasn't even sure what he was talking about, but then it clicked, and in my head, I could hear his voice singing "Evergreen" to me over the phone. A lump rose in my throat, but I choked out, "Of course not. Then I never would have gotten to know you. I wouldn't have fallen in love."

"You wouldn't have anyone to grieve."

"I would have," I insisted, remembering that, before I'd met him, I'd still been a fan. "Just not in the same way."

"It would have been better for you that way."

"It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," I recited automatically. Even though the words were trite, they were true. If I had a choice, I still wouldn't trade in the year I'd had with Nick to take away the pain of losing him.

He turned his head toward me and smiled. It was a different smile than the one I was used to; it only stretched halfway across his face and didn't reach his eyes, which had a faraway look, like a part of him was already gone. I missed his playful smirk, the way his eyes twinkled when he was teasing me. "Thanks," he whispered, his fingers pressing into the back of my hand. "Thanks for loving me."

I didn't know what to say back to that. It wasn't like I'd had a choice about whether or not to fall in love with him, either. My only choice had been to stay and take care of him, and that, I supposed, was really what he was thanking me for. So I just smiled back and leaned in closer to kiss his forehead, tasting the salty sweat on his skin and inhaling the familiar scent of his hair. At least those things hadn't changed.

He had his eyes closed when I rolled away, and he was quiet for so long that I thought he'd fallen asleep – not unusual, these days. But then, out of the blue, he said, "So I've been thinking..."

“About what?” I prompted, after he trailed off.

“I know I’ve put you through a lot already, but there’s something else I want you to do for me, after I’m gone.”

“Name it,” I replied right away, knowing I’d do anything for him, but inside, my heart began to hammer. What was he going to ask me to do?

“I want to start a camp... a music camp, for kids with cancer. You know, somewhere they can go to get away from home and the hospital for awhile and just have fun. It’ll be centered around music and the arts, but there’ll be other stuff to do there, too – a lake where they can swim and go boating and fishing, basketball courts, and other sports and activities.”

“That sounds really cool, Nick, but-” I started to say that, as much as I liked the idea of it, I didn’t know anything about starting a camp. I’d never even gone to camp, myself, as a child. He knew I wasn’t the outdoorsy type. What did he expect me to do?

But I’d underestimated Nick. This wasn’t just an idea he’d thought of out of the blue. It was a fully-formed plan he’d already begun to put into action. “I already bought the land,” he went on, interrupting me. “Howie helped me find some. It’s in rural Tennessee, about halfway between Nashville and Memphis, where the St. Jude hospital is.”

“Perfect,” I whispered, with tears in my eyes, as I realized how much thought he’d put into this. He loved Tennessee, and it really was the perfect place for such a camp.

“Kevin’s going to oversee its development. His dad ran a summer camp, you know, when he was growing up, so he kinda knows what he’s doing. My money will finance it, but I need someone to run it. I need *you*, Cary.”

I took a deep breath and held it a few seconds before slowly releasing it. Then I said, “It’s a great idea, Nick. It really is. But... I don’t know anything about running a camp. My degree’s in medicine, not management.”

“I don’t expect you to do it alone. The guys will help you get whatever you need, and you can hire other help, as much as you need. But I want the person in charge to be someone who cares about me and is committed to carrying out my vision. I want it to be you. You’re the perfect person for the job; you know music, you know medicine, and you know me. That’s what matters the most.”

I felt overwhelmed with the enormous undertaking he was charging me with, but at the same time, I was flattered he was entrusting it to me. How could I say no? Till the day he died, I’d never be able to refuse Nick, especially not when his request was such an admirable one. “I’ll do my best, then,” I said and was rewarded with a real smile, one that brought light and life back into his eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispered, and returned my kiss.

Later that night, after Nick had fallen asleep, I got up and sat out on the balcony, rocking Hambelina like she was a baby. I think the soothing back and forth motion was more comforting to me than it was to her, though, of course, she lapped up all the love and attention I was showing her. With Nick so sick, she’d been neglected lately.

As I cradled her in my arms, I thought of *Charlotte’s Web*, the reason I’d always wanted a pet pig. My mom had read that book to me as a child. I remembered being eight or nine years old, snuggled up next to her in bed, enjoying the story of Wilbur, the pig, and Charlotte, the spider. At the time, I thought she’d chosen it because she knew how much I loved animals. It was only later that I realized she had read it to teach me about death... and to help prepare me for her own.

I was forever Wilbur, moved around from place to place, person to person, always to be left behind by the people who meant the most to me. My mother. My grandmother and grandfather. Now Nick. He was my Charlotte. He’d changed my life, helped me to make a name for myself, and just when my future was starting to look bright, cruel fate was going to step in and take him from me. All I could do to thank him was the same thing Wilbur had done for Charlotte – take care of his “magnum opus,” his great work, and help bring his children safely into the world.

I would run the camp. I would have his babies, once I met someone to help me raise them. I would go on living and try to make something of my own life.

In my head, I knew these things would happen, someday, but in my heart, I couldn’t imagine living without him or loving anyone else. I could hardly stand to think of the future, knowing he wouldn’t be a part of it. It hurt too much. It hurt so much, I felt like I was dying right alongside him, and I knew my pain would linger long after his stopped for good.

If I wasn’t ready to face the future without Nick, then all I could do was cherish every moment of the present. With that thought in mind, I went back inside and crawled into bed with Nick. I snuggled up next to him, savoring the warmth of his body and the soft sound of his breathing. It hadn’t yet taken on the death rattle of fluid build-up in his lungs, a sure sign that the end was near. His lungs sounded clear, his breathing slow and steady. I closed my eyes and let the reassuring sound of it soothe me to sleep.

Chapter 88

Nick

I’ve been thinking a lot about fate lately. Are our lives already planned out for us, written in the stars even before a random pair of chromosomes join together to create

us? Is there any such thing as randomness, or is everything predestined? I've always said it was God-given talent that got me into music and destiny that brought me, AJ, Howie, Kevin, and Brian together. If that's true, was it also God or destiny that decided to give me cancer? Was that first rogue cell always lurking inside me, lying in wait like a landmine, ready to be triggered and start multiplying? Has my whole life been leading up to this?

It feels that way, but maybe not. Maybe it is all random, and I'm just unlucky, one of the two percent of people who get non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the one percent of those who get my form of lymphoma, and the fifty percent of those who die from it. Maybe life just sucks, and then you die, and sometimes you die young.

I don't want to die. Especially not now. But here I am, doing it anyway. I guess that's a part of life, too. Sometimes you just have to do things you don't want to do. Even die. Everyone has to do that, someday.

I don't know when that day will come for me, but I know it won't be long now. My time's running out, and it's getting harder and harder to keep track of the little time I have left. I can feel it slipping away, like sand in an hourglass, only it doesn't seem to happen steadily.

Sometimes it goes grain by grain, minute by minute. Hours seem to stretch into days, with nothing to do but lie in bed. My body is so weak, and my legs are basically worthless. Even if I thought they still had the strength to support my weight, I can't control them enough to walk anymore. The pain in my back is excruciating, from the little cancer cells jolting the nerve endings up and down my spine. The headaches are killer, too.

I'm on a constant flow of drugs now to control the pain, but they control me, too. One minute, I'll be in the middle of a movie or a conversation, and the next, the credits are rolling, or the person keeping me company is gone. That's when time seems to pass by in big clumps – when the drugs knock me out. The higher the dose, the longer the blackout. It's been happening more and more often lately. I sleep a lot. Like a cat, I'm probably asleep for more hours than I'm awake these days. That's how I know there won't be many days left.

Cary said it would happen this way. I'll start sleeping more and have trouble staying awake. Eventually, I'll slip into a coma. Then, one day, I'll just stop breathing. I won't even know it's happened. It will be painless, Cary tells me, and peaceful – she'll make sure of that. I trust her. I've always trusted her, and she's never let me down.

"One of us will be with you when it happens," she says softly, stroking my hair, tracing my eyebrows with her fingers. I close my eyes because it feels good, but I fight to stay awake. "They say the last sense you lose is hearing, so even if you're not conscious, you'll still be able to hear us. We'll talk to you, even if you can't respond."

I nod to let her know I'm still listening. She stays by my side like this, talking to me, even when I'm too tired to carry on a conversation. She's started reading to me, too. *Charlotte's Web*. She mentioned it once, as the reason she got Hambelina, and told me her mom used to read it to her as a kid. I said I'd never read the book, only seen the movie, so she went out and bought a copy and started reading it out loud to me while I lay there in bed. At first, I thought it was kind of silly. I've never been much of a reader, and I'm not a very good listener either – I tend to doze off in the middle of chapters. But to be honest, I've kind of come to enjoy it. When I can stay awake, I love listening to Cary's voice, going up and down as she reads, making the words into almost a melody. She's a good reader; she gets the rhythm of the words right, and she does different voices for each of the different animals. She'll make a great mom someday.

Listening to her makes me think of my own mom. Believe it or not, she used to read to me, too, when I was a kid. I miss those days... being young and innocent, more afraid of gremlins biting my toes than the cancer consuming my whole body. Death wasn't on my mind much then. It was something that happened to old people and pets, not little boys, not grown men in the prime of their lives.

Now it's on my mind all the time. Whenever I feel my eyelids starting to droop, I wonder, *Am I going to wake up?* And when I do, I feel relief, but only for a few seconds. *Not this time*, I tell myself. *Not yet. But soon. Maybe next time.* And then I dread falling asleep all over again.

I shouldn't be afraid of dying in my sleep. Isn't that the best way to go? The problem is, I don't want to go at all. Even though I gave up treatment, I'm still fighting. *Keep breathing*, I coach myself. *Keep your eyes open. Stay awake. Stay alive.*

I know I can't fight it forever, but I'll stay in the ring for as long as I can.

Keep breathing. Keep your eyes open.

But it's hard because they feel so heavy...

Against my will, I let them close, and when I open them again, the light in my room has changed. It's getting dark now. I've blacked out again and lost the entire afternoon. Cary's chair is empty, but then the door pushes open, and artificial light spills into my room, and I see her silhouette framed by the doorway.

She's carrying a tray, and I can smell the food on it. Broth. And toast. It turns my stomach. "Supper?" she asks, and I shake my head no. I can't remember the last time I felt hungry. That's another way I know it won't be long. I've always loved food. Too much, maybe. Sometimes I try to choke some down, for Cary, but not tonight.

"Okay," she sighs, not even bothering to beg me. "Maybe later. Let me know... I can always heat it up for you."

“Okay. Thanks,” I say, but I know I won’t want it later, either.

Later comes before I know it. More time lost to sleep. It’s not even good sleep, either. I don’t dream anymore, and when I wake up, I don’t feel rested, but just as tired as I was before.

It’s very late now. The sky outside my windows is pitch black, but my room is lit with the soft glow of a nightlight. Cary always leaves it on so I won’t be afraid if I wake up while she’s asleep. But it’s not this kind of darkness I’m afraid of.

She’s sleeping now, on an air mattress on the floor beside my bed. I wish she would still sleep with me – in the same bed as me, anyway – but she’s stopped doing that. The tubes get in the way – an IV line in my port, pumping me full of pain meds; an oxygen cannula in my nose, helping me to keep breathing. I sometimes thrash and moan in my sleep, she tells me. It sometimes hurts to be touched, and the last thing she wants is to hurt me.

But I still want to touch her. I want to feel her body next to mine, so warm and full of life. I don’t like lying there alone, waiting for death to come and take me. But Cary’s still recovering from surgery, and I don’t want to hurt her either.

I am, though.

She tries not to show it, but I know it hurts her to look at me, to sit by my bed day in and day out and try to make conversation as usual when she knows I’m too tired and weak to keep up my end of it. I look down at her while she’s asleep and unable to hide it, and in the soft light, I see the dark shadows under her eyes, making her face look as skeletal as mine. Does she actually eat the food she cooks for me, I suddenly wonder, or has she lost her appetite, too? She looks like she’s wasting away, the same as me.

I realize this dragged-out process of my dying is slowly killing her, too, and for the first time, I wish for it to speed up and get the hell over with, so that Cary can go on living.

I don’t get my wish. I wake up in the morning, still breathing, and despite my concern for Cary, I feel relieved. I’m still alive.

I look down at the air mattress, but it’s empty, the sheet and blanket neatly pulled up and turned over. I can’t help but smile; it’s so like Cary to still make the bed, even when it’s not a real bed.

I turn my head, expecting to find her sitting in the chair on the other side of my bed, but instead, I see Howie and AJ. Neither of them are looking at me; they aren’t even looking

at each other, although they seem to be in the middle of a conversation. AJ has his hands in his lap and is picking his fingers. Howie's staring at a spot on the floor. Neither of them have noticed I'm awake. If they had, they wouldn't be talking about me.

"I used to be so jealous of him," Howie says. "Both of you, actually. You and Nicky were so young and so talented. Everything came easy to you. You got all the solos, all the girls."

"Nick got all the girls," AJ interjects. "That little asshole had chicks falling all over him before he even knew what to do with them."

Howie chuckles. "Right? It sounds pathetic, but a part of me always wished I could trade places with him and see what it was like."

That is pathetic, Howie, I think, rolling my eyes. I decide I better let them know I'm listening, so I say it out loud.

Howie jumps. "Nicky! I didn't know you were awake."

I smirk at him. "I heard my name. Bet you don't wish you could trade places with me now, huh?"

Howie's forehead creases so deeply, I can count the wrinkles. "I would if I could," he says quietly. "I'd do anything to make this go away for you."

I appreciate the sentiment, but it's bullshit. "You don't really mean that. But it's okay," I add, before he can protest. "I'd be worried if you did. You've got a wife and a kid. You don't wanna die like this. No one does. I sure as hell don't."

"I know," Howie whispers. I see that his eyes are brimming with tears, and I feel like crap for making him cry. "I just wish you didn't have to."

"Me too." I look away from Howie, giving him a chance to get his composure, and focus on AJ instead. "Sorry I'm gonna miss your wedding, bro," I tell him. "I wish I could be there."

AJ's voice sounds raspier than ever when he says, "You will be. You'll be there in spirit, won't you?"

I hope.

Smiling, I say, "Rochelle's a great girl. You're a lucky guy. Just don't do anything to fuck this one up, okay? If you do, I'm gonna come haunt your ass. I bet I'd make a really annoying poltergeist."

AJ smiles back. "I'll try not to."

“You better. I’ll be watching you.”

When I wake up again, sometime later that day or the next, Howie and AJ are gone, and Brian and Kevin are there instead. “Having fun watching me sleep?” I try to ask them, but even though the words sound clear in my head, they come out garbled.

Brian and Kevin both look up. “Hey, bud,” Kevin says. He makes an attempt to smile, but it doesn’t erase the solemn look on his face.

I try to smile back, to say hello, but all that comes out is a moan. I feel myself frown. *What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I get any words out?*

The two of them look at me, then at each other. I can tell what they must be thinking. Brian tells Kevin, “Cary said he’s been like this for awhile.”

Awhile? How long is awhile? What does that mean? How much time have I lost?

“Just keep talking to him. He can hear us, even if he can’t talk back.”

Then why are you talking about me like I’m not here?

It’s infuriating, not being able to voice all the questions in my head. I feel confused and frustrated, not to mention scared. Sand is pouring through the hourglass faster than I can stand. I wish I could plug it up, pause it for awhile, but I’m powerless to stop time. It keeps slipping through my fingers, whether I’m aware of it or not.

Kevin leans in close to me, looking right into my eyes. “Nick? Are you listening?”

I groan out a yes and try to nod, but my neck feels too stiff to move, my head too heavy to lift off the pillow. I blink instead, hoping he’ll get the message.

“It’s okay if you can’t talk to us. Brian and I just want you to know that we’re here for you, and we love you.”

There goes Kevin, getting mushy on me. Normally I’d make fun of him for it, but I’m not exactly in a position to do that now, so I just lie there and listen.

“You’re like the little brother I never had,” Kevin goes on. “You drove me nuts back in the day... still do, sometimes... but I love you like a brother, and I’m gonna miss you more than you know.”

His voice gets thick with emotion, and he looks away, but not before I see the tears sparkling in his eyes. I feel a burning in my own eyes, as tears prickle in their corners. *I’m gonna miss you too, Kev.*

Brian takes over, leans forward and grips my hand. His eyes blaze as he looks into mine and says, “I know we’ve had our differences over the years, but you’re still the best friend I’ve ever had. We’ll always be Frick and Frack. I’ll never forget the good times we had, all the mischief we made and the practical jokes we played, all the fun we had on the road. I’ll carry those memories with me for as long as I live. No one will ever be able to forget you, Nick.”

I hope you live a good, long life, Brian. You deserve it.

I also hope he and Kevin know I feel the same way about them, my big brothers and best friends. When was the last time I told them I loved them? When was the last time I let my guard down and my emotions out and showed them how much they really mean to me? I worry that I’ve missed my chance, that it’s now too late for me to say the same things they’re telling me. So I squeeze Brian’s hand, with all the strength I can spare. I look into his face and hope that my eyes and my touch will convey all the words I’ve left unsaid.

Brian smiles sadly, and I think he understands. That’s a relief, because I’m too tired to keep trying. My eyelids are already getting heavy again. Fighting sleep is like treading water in the middle of a choppy sea. I can only do it for so long before I succumb to the waves crashing over my head. Eventually, my hand slips limply out of his, and I feel myself sinking back into the dark depths.

I hear Cary’s voice, calling to me from far away. It sounds distorted, as if I’m hearing it from underwater. I try to break through the surface, to keep my head above water, but I don’t have the strength.

I’m drowning.

Weirdly enough, I’m not afraid. I give in to the water and let myself float, listening to the melody of her voice as she reads. Like music, it comforts me.

“Your future is assured. You will live, secure and safe, Wilbur. Nothing can harm you now. These autumn days will shorten and grow cold. The leaves will shake loose from the trees and fall. Christmas will come, and the snows of winter. You will live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world... Winter will pass, the days will lengthen, the ice will melt in the pasture pond. The song sparrow will return and sing, the frogs will awake, the warm wind will blow again. All these sights and sounds and smells will be yours to enjoy, Wilbur—this lovely world, these precious days...”

What I wouldn’t give for one more year – to spend the rest of summer on the beach here in California, see the changing leaves of fall in Tennessee, celebrate the holidays with my family in Florida, ring in the new year with the guys in New York. If the world’s going to end in 2012, I want to be there to witness it. But it looks like I’m going to miss out on the apocalypse. At the rate I’m going, I may not even live to see tomorrow.

The water presses in on me from all sides. It's getting harder to breathe.

“Why did you do all this for me?” he asked. ‘I don’t deserve it. I’ve never done anything for you.’

“You have been my friend,’ replied Charlotte. ‘That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what’s a life, anyway? We’re born, we live a little while, we die. A spider’s life can’t help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone’s life can stand a little of that.”

Cary suddenly stops reading. Without her voice to guide me, I sink further into the darkness. I’m not sure how long I’m under – I’ve lost all sense of time – but when I emerge again, there are other voices around me.

“He sounds awful. Is he supposed to be breathing like that?”

Brian.

“There’s fluid accumulating in his lungs, from lying in bed so long.”

Cary.

“Can’t you do something for him?”

Angel.

“All I can do at this point is keep him comfortable. He doesn’t want his life prolonged.”

“So you’re saying he wants to die? What a bunch of bullshit.” AJ.

“He has a living will, AJ.” Kevin. “He gave me power of attorney. Cary’s right; he wouldn’t want to be put on a ventilator or anything like that. If it’s his time, we have to let him go.”

“We’re here, Nicky.” Howie. Like a lifeline, his hand holds onto mine. “We’re all here.”

I want to tell him I’m still here, too, but I can’t seem to escape the darkness. It crushes me, pins me to the bed. My eyelids are too heavy to lift. My hand is too heavy to move. I’m too tired to fight it anymore.

I wake up in my bunk. I can feel the tour bus swaying gently as the road rumbles underneath its tires. The motion comforts me. The sound of passing cars soothes me. I am home.

Cary is lying with me, her body wrapped up in mine. I am curled around her, holding onto her like a teddy bear. Her body is soft and warm in my arms. Her hair smells good when I press my face into it and slowly inhale.

Then I lift my head and look around. The guys are on the bus, too, even Kevin. It's like old times.

"We're almost there, Nick. Are you ready?" Kevin asks.

I nod. I'm ready.

"It's time to go. Come on."

We all get up and walk off the bus and into the arena. I can't tell which one. After all these years, the cities start to blur together. The venues all look the same. We could be anywhere.

We get up on the stage and mess around, as fans pour in for soundcheck. I have fun with the songs they request. I sing like Michael McDonald. I sing like my nasally, sixteen-year-old self. Sometimes I wish I still was sixteen. As we answer questions, I recognize faces in the crowd, fans whose lives I've touched. Their smiles make me feel good about the life I've lived.

When we're done, the fans file past us, wanting to touch and hug us. They grab my hand, hanging on for dear life. Bright lights flash in my face as I pose for pictures. Soon, they're ushered out, and the arena is empty again, except for the people who really matter, my closest friends and family. I didn't notice them until now, but there they are, sitting in the first row of seats – my mom and dad, my grandparents, my brother and sisters and niece. It's nice to see them all together.

We're here, Nicky. We're all here.

It's almost time.

We gather backstage. I notice everyone is wearing white. We make a circle, holding hands. Brian leads us in prayer. Then Kevin says, again, that it's time. Cary wishes me luck. "I love you," she whispers in my ear.

"Love you too," I say back, flashing her my most charming grin.

Before we go take our places underneath the stage, I peek out between the curtains. The arena is a full house. I look for Cary in the front row. For a second, I think I see her, then realize it's a different woman, one who bears a striking resemblance to her nonetheless. I do a double take as I realize that sitting next to her are my grandparents. On her other side, I see Howie's dad... and alongside him, though I never met him, I recognize Kevin's father, too.

It's nice to have them in the audience. I sneak under the stage and climb onto the platform that will carry me up to it. As I wait for our cue, I look around and realize the guys are no longer with me. I am alone in the dark. Fear ripples through me, but before it can take over, the platform starts to move.

Light appears over my head, as the platform slowly rises up to the stage, and instantaneously, I feel better. My fear melts away. It's warm in the circle of light.

The platform stops, even with the stage. As I step into the spotlight, I expect to hear screams, but I hear nothing.

Just silence.

Chapter 89

Cary

It happened just the way I told Nick it would. First he started sleeping more, then drifting in and out of consciousness. Finally, he slipped into a coma. I stayed by his side, taking care of him the best I knew how. I kept him clean and comfortable. I made sure he wasn't in pain. I watched for signs that death was approaching.

When his breathing became labored, I called all four of the guys and his sister, Angel. They'd been coming to see him in shifts almost every day anyway, but this time, they arrived all at once and gathered around his bed.

"He sounds awful," Brian said, frowning as he looked down at Nick. "Is he supposed to be breathing like that?"

"There's fluid accumulating in his lungs, from lying in bed so long."

"Can't you do something for him?" Angel pleaded, her eyes already filling with tears.

As torturous as it was listening to Nick wheeze, I had to shake my head. "All I can do at this point is keep him comfortable. He doesn't want his life prolonged."

"So you're saying he wants to die?" AJ snapped, glaring at me. "What a bunch of bullshit."

"He has a living will, AJ." Kevin spoke calmly, his voice a low monotone. "He gave me power of attorney. Cary's right; he wouldn't want to be put on a ventilator or anything like that. If it's his time, we have to let him go."

AJ flopped down into a chair, looking mutinous. Slowly, the others sat down around him.

"We're here, Nicky," murmured Howie, reaching out to take Nick's hand and squeeze it.
"We're all here."

There was no response from Nick, but I hoped he could still hear Howie. I'd like to think he knew we were all there, that he left this world surrounded by love.

He was a fighter until the end, lingering longer than I'd expected him to. We sat with him, waiting, as the sun sank into the sea outside his bedroom window. The sky was heartbreakingly gorgeous that evening, shades of vivid orange and pink streaked with purple clouds. We left the balcony doors open to let in the fresh ocean breeze and watched as the sky darkened to indigo. And still, Nick held on.

His breathing was raspy and shallow, and every now and then, it would stop for a few seconds. We'd all hold our breath and watch his chest, wondering if that was it, and then, just when I'd get up to check, Nick would suddenly gasp and start breathing again. This happened several times before it stopped for good, and each time, I felt the same mixture of dread and relief.

After awhile, Kevin leaned forward, bringing his face down close to Nick's, and quietly said, "If you're ready, Nick... if it's time... you can go."

"What are you doing?!" Angel cried, her voice rising as fresh tears spurted into her eyes.
"Why are you saying that to him?"

I looked between them, seeing the contrast between her youth and his wisdom as he answered, "Because... he may need permission to let go."

"We don't want him to suffer anymore," Howie added, putting a hand on Angel's knee.
"He's suffered enough. It's time for him to be at peace."

"It's okay, Nick," Kevin went on. "You can let go now."

It wasn't long before Nick's breathing slowed down. I checked his pulse; it was weak and fluttering. His hand was cold and pale, the result of decreased circulation. I squeezed it in mine, wanting not only to warm it, but to let him know I was there.

Brian led us in a prayer. I closed my eyes and bowed my head, but kept my hand clenched around Nick's, my fingertips pressed against the radial artery in his wrist, feeling the pulse there. When the prayer was over, I leaned forward and whispered into his ear, "I love you."

It may have just been an involuntary spasm, but I swear I felt his hand contract around mine. Then he made a hoarse, gurgling sound as he drew in a breath, and I knew instinctively that it would be his last. We all watched his chest rise and then fall, as the

air rattled out of his lungs. It did not rise again. His pulse fluttered feebly under my fingertips for a few more seconds before I lost it.

I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I silently stood up and slipped my stethoscope into my ears, sliding the bell under his covers to confirm what I already knew: Nick was gone. I nodded in answer to the unsaid question that hung in the air, then turned away, so they wouldn't see the tears spill from my eyes.

Once everyone had processed what had just happened, they went their separate ways. Kevin volunteered to call the authorities and wandered off to find the right number. Howie said he'd take care of calling the Boys' manager, Jenn, who could handle things on the professional end. Angel went into another room to call her family, and Brian went to call his. AJ walked straight out onto the balcony and lit a cigarette. And somehow, I was left alone in the bedroom with Nick. It felt surreal, like I was in the middle of a bad dream. It was hard to think clearly.

I knew there were two phone calls I would have to make myself, one to Dr. Subramanien and one to my dad. But I wasn't ready to talk to anyone yet. I busied myself tending to Nick's body, disconnecting the tubes that had delivered oxygen and pain medication and pushing the medical equipment aside, until it looked like he could just be sleeping. But no... something wasn't right. Realizing what it was, I arranged his arms so that they were resting on his chest, crossed over each other, like he was hugging himself. Now it looked like he was asleep.

Looking down at him, I smiled... and then started to sob. I couldn't keep up a professional charade with a loss so personal. Nick's pain was gone, but mine was unbearable.

I couldn't stand to sleep in Nick's room that night, so I slept in the guest room instead. When I woke in the morning, I was struck with *déjà vu*. I remembered waking up in this same room the morning after meeting Nick for the first time... and finding out he was sick. I felt the same sense of dread I had then, as the events of the previous evening came back to me, only this time, it was a thousand percent worse.

Nick was dead. There was nothing I could do to help him now. The guys and his family were handling all the arrangements, so I kept myself busy by cleaning the condo until my dad called to say he'd caught an early flight to California.

I appreciated him coming out. It was a comfort to have him there for the memorial service. Afterwards, he helped me pack up all of my stuff in Nick's condo, and we flew home together. I had no intention of going back to LA, back to my job. There were too many memories there. I just wanted my old life back.

But of course, it wasn't that simple. I'd lost my apartment and my position at the nursing home. In a way, I'd lost myself. My life felt directionless and empty now. I had

no choice but to move back in with my dad, until I got back on my feet. I think he was secretly thrilled to have me home, but I felt like I'd never be happy again.

For awhile, I was actually angry at Nick. How dare he call me up and lure me out to LA under false pretenses? How dare he promise me fame and then saddle me with his sick secret? How dare he let me fall in love with him and leave me in such pain? He'd completely turned my life upside down and left it in ruins, and it was up to me to pick up the pieces. I didn't even know where to start.

Then, a few weeks after Nick's death, I got a phone call from Howie. It was the first I'd heard from one of the guys since I left LA, and although it was nice to hear Howie's voice, it hurt, too.

"How've you been?" he asked.

I answered honestly. "Not so good."

"Me neither," he admitted. "It's been hard for all of us. AJ's a mess; Rochelle caught him drinking, and now they're thinking about postponing the wedding again, until he can get his act together. Brian's back in Georgia, and Kevin's been keeping his distance; I don't think he wants to see us. Too many memories, you know?"

I knew. I couldn't understand why he was telling me all of this; didn't he realize he was making it even harder for me? But I just let him ramble on, until I heard him say, "I talked to Nick's lawyer the other day." I remembered Jordan Keller, whom I'd met in Nashville, the day Nick signed his advance directive. "He said he's been trying to call you, but hasn't been able to reach you."

I frowned, remembering several random phone calls from Tennessee I'd ignored. I had assumed they were telemarketers. I didn't know anyone in Tennessee anymore. "Why would he want to reach me?" I asked.

"To discuss Nick's will. You're named in it."

I felt my eyebrows shoot way up on my forehead. Nick had included me in his will? I'd always been under the impression that I loved Nick more than he had loved me, and regardless of that love, we'd only known each other for about a year. All I could say was, "Really?"

"He left you the house in Tennessee."

My mouth dropped open. "Are you kidding me? He willed me his *house*? Why would he do that??"

"He said it's up to you what to do with it. You can sell it if you want, but I think he wanted you to keep it – so you'll have a place to stay while you're working at the camp."

The camp. His last wish. His legacy. It hadn't even crossed my mind since he'd died; I'd been too consumed with grief to give it a second thought. But now I remembered that first conversation we'd had about it, how passionate Nick had sounded as he'd laid out his plans, how determined he'd been that I was the perfect person to bring them to life.

"Is that... is that really happening, then?"

"I hope so. Nick left me the land for it. I just need to get Kevin back on board so we can start developing it. Can we count on you to help us?"

"I can always count on you, Cary," I remembered Nick saying to me once. I closed my eyes, savoring the sound of his voice in my mind, and when I opened them, they were full of tears. My voice shook as I said, "Sure, Howie. You can count on me."

I had a good cry when I got off the phone, but afterwards, I felt better. For the first time since Nick died, I felt a sense of purpose. My life had meaning and direction again. I had a place to live and a plan. I knew where I was going and what I was going to do: I would go to Tennessee, live in Nick's house, and help start the camp, as he'd asked me to do.

Despite my grief and anger, I still loved Nick Carter, and I would honor his memory by making his dream a reality.

Chapter 90

Cary

Most stories finish with an ending. This one ends with the beginning.

The beginning of a dream made reality. The beginning of my new career.

The beginning of Camp Carter.

It's been a decade since Nick died, but his legacy lives on through the camp, where children with cancer can come to enjoy themselves, as Nick did in life.

It took ten years – I guess even dreams run on Backstreet time – but finally, the place is open for operation. The campus is beautiful, set on three-hundred acres of land, centered around a lake and surrounded by woods. There is an impressive lodge where the campers come to eat and hang out, a fully-staffed clinic where they receive their treatments, a theater with auditorium seating and a full stage for shows, and a cluster of cabins with all the comforts of home. At Camp Carter, no one has to rough it without

electricity – each of the cabins come with a flatscreen and video game consoles already installed. It is, after all, Nick's camp.

Kevin and Howie are the co-owners of Camp Carter, and I am the camp director. I oversee its day to day operations and plan activities for the campers. I have a full staff of medical personnel and counselors to support me, and the Boys visit often. Brian drives up every other week to give voice lessons, while Leighanne makes jewelry with the girls and gives them fashion tips. Baylee's actually working here all summer, before he heads off to college in the fall. AJ and Rochelle will be here next week to run workshops on puppetry and stage makeup.

Most of our activities revolve around the arts, as we show the kids different ways to be creative, have fun, and take their minds off their illness. A lot of them are bald from chemo or missing limbs from surgery, but here at camp, they don't have to feel self-conscious or try to hide their condition, the way Nick did for so long. They can be themselves and do the things they love, like Nick tried to do as long as he could. I think he'd be thrilled if he could see his idea for this camp realized. I hope that he can.

I've been thinking about him a lot this summer, as our first season gets underway. Tonight has made me especially nostalgic. It's Big Band Night, a theme night of my choosing, and we're having a dance in the lodge. Everyone's dressed up and eager to try out the swing dance moves they learned this week. As I look out into the sea of suits and dresses and sweaty, smiling faces and hear the jazz orchestra play, I think back to the night Nick took me out dancing at the Cicada Club for Valentine's Day. I remember how handsome he looked in his formalwear, how glamorous I felt on his arm, and how much fun we had on that date.

I look down at what I'm wearing, the burgundy silk evening gown Nick bought me for that very occasion. I had to let it out in order to squeeze into it tonight, and it's still tighter than I remember it, particularly in the hips, but it still makes me feel beautiful and loved. Next to my wedding dress, it's the most exquisite garment I own, and it has the same sort of sentimental value. I'm glad I've kept it all these years.

The man standing next to me sees me looking, catches me smoothing the silk over the bulges around my middle, and says, "You look amazing tonight."

I turn, smiling, to Dr. Tom McAlister, the medical director of Camp Carter and my husband of five years. He grins back. His smile is much different from Nick's. It's not the kind of crooked smirk that can make my knees quiver, but a full-on goofy grin that goes all the way across his face and is infectious. I can't help but smile when I see him do it. Thankfully, he's given me plenty to smile about these last few years.

We met in Franklin, where I lived and worked after moving to Tennessee. He was an oncologist at the hospital where I worked as a nurse practitioner, and even though I avoided the cancer unit like the plague, I caught his eye in the cafeteria one day. He pursued me for months, until I finally agreed to go out on a date with him. We took things slow; he knew I'd had my heart broken, but he helped me put the pieces back

together. He helped me heal. Tom was no Nick Carter, but he was charming in his own way, with his red hair, boyish grin, and goofy sense of humor, and over time, I fell in love with him. We got married in the fall of 2016, the same year they broke ground on the camp.

“Thank you,” I say, forcing myself to stop fiddling with my dress. “I’m nervous, though.”

“You? Nervous about performing in front of a bunch of kids?” He laughs.

“I haven’t performed in a long time, though. Especially that song.”

“You’ll be fine,” he assures me. “Better than fine, actually. You’ll be amazing. You *are* amazing.”

“And *you* are too flattering,” I reply, touching the tip of his long, freckled nose with my gloved finger. “But thanks.”

“Break a leg,” he says, prodding me forward, as the band finishes their song.

Kevin steps up to the microphone, looking suave in his pinstriped suit and fedora. It’s hard to believe he’ll be fifty this year. The touch of gray in his beard just makes him look distinguished. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he announces, speaking to the crowd of mostly teenagers, “It’s my pleasure to introduce a singing sensation, making her Camp Carter stage debut tonight... our very own Carolyn McAlister!”

The kids clap, cheer, and catcall as I walk out onto the small stage, smiling nervously. But, as always, once the band strikes up my first song, I feel right at ease. I sing a set of some of my favorite swing era tunes, the stuff my grandparents listened to when they were young and brought me up to appreciate. Then I grab my ukulele and start strumming the chords of something more modern, a song that’s familiar to some of us in the room tonight, even if the kids are too young to know it.

“Lookin’ at your picture, from when we first met... you gave me a smile, that I could never forget... and nothin’ I could do could protect me from you, that ni-i-ight...”

As I sing, I see Nick in my mind’s eye. He’s smiling his usual smirk, his face frozen in time, forever thirty-one.

“Wrapped around your finger, always in my-y mind... the days would blend, ‘cause we stayed up a-all night... yeah, you and I were everything, everything to me...”

I think of those long days we spent on his tour bus, the late nights in his hotel room. I remember our whirlwind romance that started in Illinois, grew in Tennessee, and ended in California. I wonder how much longer it might have lasted, if it hadn’t been so cruelly cut short.

"I just want you to kno-ow... that I've been fightin' to let you go... so-ome da-ays I make it through... and then there's nights that never end. I wish that I could belie-eve... that there's a day you'll come back to me... bu-ut sti-ill I have to say... I would do it all again... just want you to know..."

I look up to the ceiling, my arms stretched toward the sky. I wonder if Nick's up there somewhere, looking down at me and listening. I wonder if he's met up with my mom yet. Wherever they are, I hope they're both proud of me.

"All the doors are closing; I try to move ahead... and deep inside, I wish it's me instead. My dreams are empty...from the day... the day you slipped away..."

It hasn't been easy, getting to this place in my life. I was lost for a long time, even after I moved to Tennessee. Nick's death left me in darkness. Tom was the light that helped guide me to a new beginning... and my happy ending.

"I just want you to know... that I've been fightin' to let you go... so-ome da-ays I make it through... and then there's nights that never end. I wish that I could belie-eve... that there's a day you'll come back to me... bu-ut sti-ill I have to say... I would do it all again... just want you to know... that since I lost you... I lost myself... no, I can't fake it... there's no one e-el-else..."

Despite all the pain, heartbreak, and sadness, I wouldn't change a thing. I'm happy now and in love with my husband, but I'll always love Nick, too. He'll have a special place in my heart forever, and I hope that, through this camp, his legacy will outlive us all.

"I just want you to kno-ow... that I've been fightin' to let you go... so-ome da-ays I make it through... and then there's nights that never end. I wish that I could belie-eve... that there's a day you'll come back to me... bu-ut sti-ill I have to say... I would do it all again... just want you to know."

I finish the song with tears in my eyes, but they are mostly happy tears. I feel good, especially when I see Kevin and Brian on their feet, applauding. I take a little bow and hurry off the stage, into my husband's waiting arms. "What did I tell you? You were amazing," he says, kissing me.

I don't regret never getting my singing career off the ground, but I must admit, it's still fun to perform. That's the beauty of this camp; it combines three of my greatest loves: music, medicine, and... Nick. He was right; I'm the perfect person to run it.

The dance is a huge hit, and when it's over and all the campers are sent off to their cabins, Tom and I head back to our summer house on the edge of the property, where we live while camp is in session. During the off-season, we'll go back to the house in Franklin, but for now, this is home.

The house is mostly dark, but the porch lights are on to welcome us home, and I can see the soft glow of a nightlight in one of the bedroom windows. “We’re home,” I announce softly, as we walk in through the front door.

Mason, sitting in darkness on the couch, quickly changes the channel so we won’t see what he’s been watching. I pretend not to notice, smiling as he stands up to greet us. “Hey... how’d your dance thing go?”

“It was lots of fun. How did everything go here?”

“Fine. We had fun, too. We played with cars, watched *Finding Nemo* again. We had the frozen pizza for dinner. I didn’t burn the house down.” I laugh; he has the same dry sense of humor as his father. The eyebrows, too.

“Well, thanks for babysitting tonight. We appreciate it. Tom will pay you and drive you home.”

“Okay. Goodnight, Cary.”

“Night, Mason. Thanks again!” I leave Tom to settle up with him and head down the hall, eager to change into some more comfortable clothes. But before I enter our bedroom, I can’t resist peeking into the room across the hall. The door is cracked open, and the nightlight is on. The little lump under the covers is still. I slide off my heels, slip into the room, and tiptoe over to the bed. I don’t want to wake him, but I can’t go to sleep without kissing my son goodnight.

Three years old, he is sound asleep in his big boy bed, lying flat on his back with his stuffed monkey clutched to his chest. He sleeps just like his father did. He looks just like his father, too – same angelic looks, same devilish grin. It’s hard to say no to that face. I reach down and brush his silky, blonde hair away from his forehead, whispering into his ear, “Goodnight, Theo. I love you.”

Theodore Carter McAlister. His first name means “divine gift,” and that is exactly what he is: a gift from Heaven; a gift from Nick.

I know people look at me and Tom and wonder how a brunette and a ginger can make such a beautiful, blonde baby. But whenever anyone comments on this, we just laugh and say, “Aren’t genetics weird that way?”

Of course Tom knew, when we first started trying to get pregnant, where the embryos we used had come from, but it’s never been a point of contention between us. We are both grateful for the miraculous baby with which we’ve been blessed, and even though Theo is the spitting image of his biological father, he is Tom’s son.

I kiss him lightly on his cheek, which is flushed and warm from sleep. He stirs, but doesn’t wake. I back slowly out of his room, hardly taking my eyes off his face. If I

could, I would stand and stare at him all night as he sleeps, studying every feature of his face, listening to every breath he takes. Each one is precious.

But instead, I carry my shoes across the hall to my own bedroom, where I take off my own and change into pajamas. I consider climbing into bed to wait for my husband, but I'm still too wired, so I go outside to sit on the front porch.

It's a beautiful night. A cool breeze ruffles the leaves, but the warmth of the summer sun lingers. Crickets chirp; cicadas hum. The sky is clear, and the stars shine brightly. I look up and suddenly remember sitting with Nick in the back of a pick-up truck on a night like this, looking up at the stars. He was so impressed with how many he could see, away from the city lights. I was just mesmerized by him. To me, he was more beautiful than any star.

I still miss him. I'll never be able to truly let go of him, even though he's been gone for a lot longer than he was with me. But I've always cherished the short time I had with him, and I'll continue to carry it with me, as I go on with the rest of my life. His memory is alive and well inside me. For as long as I live, I'll never let it die.
