



SCARED

OF REALITY

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Part 1
Beef Jerky and Mountain Dew

"Okay, you know that you are never going to wear those."

"No, I don't know that." Nick tugged on the pair of black cowboy boots, running his hand over the obnoxious tooling on the sides.

Brian leaned in a little closer to inspect, coming to the conclusion that the design was a large bird of some sort. "In twenty-two years, you have never had the need to buy a pair of cowboy boots. What would make you think you'd need a pair now?"

Nick shoved Brian back in his seat and stood up, stomping his foot the rest of the way into the boots, while the salesman looked on behind them.

Catching the salesman's eye, Nick smiled, letting the guy take his cue to come forward and gush. "Those look so fabulous on you! I can't believe you have never owned a pair of cowboy boots. It's definitely a good look for you!"

Nick looked at Brian with an "I told you so" smirk. Brian just rolled his eyes.

Nick clomped over to the full-length mirror, admiring the boots from all angles. The salesman hovered over his shoulder like a little ghou, smiling his approval. Sitting back in his chair, Brian folded his arms over his chest and laughed.

"I have to say, Nicky, I especially like them with the shorts."

Nick slapped the palms of his hands on his long, multi-colored, Hawaiian shorts. "I'm gonna start a new trend, bro."

"I don't think ugly will ever be in," Brian said under his breath, but loud enough for Nick to hear.

The salesman seemed appalled by their exchange and turned his back on Brian. "Sir," he said, placing a hand on Nick's shoulder, "you know that *you* make the clothes; the clothes don't make you. With your good looks and build, you could pull off the retro Hawaiian cowboy look." Brian could tell the guy was freaking out at the thought of losing the commissions on Nick's \$7,000 impulse purchase.

"I completely agree," Nick replied with a grin, once more checking himself out in the full-length mirror. "Maybe I should get a pair for my friend, in case he changes his mind?" Nick waggled his eyebrows at the salesman, and the salesman raised his own eyebrows in response.

"I don't think that's such a bad idea, sir. I mean, he will be kicking himself in the morning if he passes up these great, one-of-a-kind shoes."

"If they're one of a kind, then how can Nick possibly buy a pair for me and a pair for himself?" Brian shifted in the plush, velvet chair, ignoring the gorgeous blonde who had taken a seat beside him to try on a pair of outrageous red stilettos.

"Well, you see, sir, every boot from this company is one of a kind. So these are the only pair like this..." He waved a hand towards Nick's boots like he was Vanna White on *Wheel of Fortune*. "But we have another gorgeous pair of boots with a similar bird on the side in red."

"Oh my God." Brian slouched down low in his seat as the salesman knelt down and dragged from a box a pair of scarlet red cowboy boots with a giant bird on the side, just like Nick's black boots. Both Nick and the salesman had huge smiles pasted on their faces as the guy dragged off one of Brian's Timberland boots and proceeded to jam the ugly red creation on his foot.

Twenty minutes later, Brian and Nick walked out of the store in their matching cowboy boots onto Rodeo drive.

"We look cool," Nick said, swinging the bag that held his old shoes by his side.

"We look like two rejects from a porno movie," Brian replied, picking up his pace to the car.

"You act like that's a bad thing," Nick replied. "Besides, speak for yourself, man. Maybe *you* would be rejected, but *I* would be a shoe-in to star in one of those."

Stopping, Brian sat down on the sidewalk, oblivious to the stares of the shoppers around him, and pulled off the red boots, dropping them to the pavement. Then he pulled his Timberlands out of the bag and proceeded to tug them on with an irritated sigh. "You can be such an idiot sometimes," he said, jamming the boots into the bag, just as a woman in head-to-toe red leather with silicone everything dropped a dollar bill at Brian's feet and kept on walking.

"If I'm such an idiot, then how come you're the one on the ground that people are tossing money at like you're a bum or something?"

Picking up the dollar bill, Brian stuffed it in his pants pockets and stood up, slinging the bag with the cowboy boots at Nick. "Here, take your stupid porno boots."

"*Here, take your stupid porno boots,*" Nick mocked with a laugh, following in step behind Brian towards the car. "Besides, that's just all the more pairs of cool boots for me."

Brian grabbed his keys from his pocket and pointed them at the sleek, black BMW at the curb. Two beeps, and the car unlocked. Nick pulled open the passenger door and slung

his two bags over the front seat into the back seat and then climbed in. Brian walked around the car and climbed in the driver's side, slamming the door shut behind him.

“God, you are always in such a sour mood.” Nick pulled his door shut as Brian pushed the master control to lock the doors. “I was just having some fun.”

“Yeah, \$14,000 worth of stupid fun. I swear, you don't think sometimes. Do you have any idea how long it takes some people to make \$14,000, and you just flush it down the toilet on two pairs of dorky-ass boots that will end up in the back of your closet, gathering dust.”

“One pair was for you,” Nick said in a pouty voice.

Throwing the car into drive, Brian peeled out from the curb and flipped a U-turn, heading up towards Beverly Hills.

They wound up through the hills, past the incredible homes with even more incredible histories. It was hard to imagine the way life used to be here, with all of the famous movie stars, directors, and film producers that had once inhabited the glorious mansions. Brian had been living in Beverly Hills for almost a month, in a rented home that had once belonged to Frank Sinatra. When he called his real estate agent and asked her to find him a place to rent while he was in California, he never dreamed it would be the house of a great legend. He said yes before the monthly rental price was even out of his agent's mouth.

It seemed so strange to be here without Leigh. Their time off they had always tried to spend together, being their own little “family.” But this time it was different. They were at a crossroads.

After the tour had ended, Brian wanted to work on his own dreams for once and not the dreams of the group. He wanted to work on a solo album of his own. Something mellow and beautiful, full of songs he had written with his wife in mind. And he also wanted to start a family. Leigh had been putting him off for awhile now, saying she wanted to have time together as husband and wife before they introduced a baby into the mix. And Brian had agreed.

But as more and more time passed, he began to get more baby-hungry, and Leigh had begun to get less baby-hungry. She talked more about her career than a family, and when she had come to Brian with the idea of taking a six-month acting workshop in New York, Brian knew that his dreams of a bunch of little rugrats running around the house was all but over.

They fought about it for almost three solid days. Neither one of them slept, instead opting for loud yelling matches that lasted all night. And in the end, Leighanne had taken up residence in the guest cottage in the back of their house, and Brian had made reservations for two tickets to California, hoping that a little time away for them would do the marriage good.

He presented the tickets to her one morning, on a tray with eggs, toast and jam, and a rose in a crystal vase. She looked so beautiful and natural sleeping in the guest bed, her blonde hair fanned out on the pillow and no makeup on her face. Fluttering her eyes open, she seemed more put out that he was standing there than happy to see him. Placing the tray over her lap, she went immediately for the tickets.

“What are these?”

“I thought we could use some time away. Maybe we could go to the spa in Palm Springs. Do a little golfing and sleep late everyday. Try to get our marriage back on track?” He sat down on the bed beside her and took her hand into his. “I love you, and I know we can make this all work out. The baby, your career, my career.”

She pulled her hand away, shaking her head. “You just don’t get it, do you? I don’t want to have a baby. Not now and maybe not ever. I have wanted to be an actress for as long as I can remember, and I feel like I am really making progress, and I am not going to screw that up by having a baby.”

Brian stood up, a hurt look in his eyes. “Don’t you love me anymore?” he asked, tears welling up in his eyes.

“Yes, yes, I love you, Brian,” she said, picking up the tray and moving it to the other side of the bed. “I just don’t love us.”

The words hit him like a blow to his face. His heart pounded in his chest, and his hands began to slightly shake.

Leighanne rolled over and opened the drawer to the nightstand, pulling out what looked like an airplane ticket. “Brian, I am going to New York, to that acting workshop. They have a place reserved for me, and I already bought my plane ticket.”

“Okay, fine, that is fine. Then we’ll go to New York together.” Brian was talking fast. He felt like his life was slipping away from him, and he was trying desperately to hang on. “Forget California, forget a baby for now. We can talk about it again after the workshop. We’ll just go to New York and...”

“Not we,” she cut in. “*I’m* going to go to New York, and I think you should go to California. We need some time apart.” She held out his plane tickets to him. “You go your way, and I will go mine, and in six months, we can figure out what happens next.”

When he didn’t take the tickets, she sat forward and took his hand, pushing the tickets into his open palm. “Please, Brian, let’s not make this any more difficult than it already is. Just take the tickets.” His hand curled around them as they stared into one another’s eyes. “It’s for the best.”

And so that was what had happened. Leighanne had gone to New York, and Brian had gone to Beverly Hills, taking up residence in Frank Sinatra's old pad, which somehow seemed kind of fitting given the circumstances. Old Frank had had a few rocky marriages in his time, one that worked out and three that didn't. Brian wondered if his odds would be any better.

Pulling up to the gold, iron gates with the swirling "S" for Sinatra, Brian rolled down his window and started to punch the numbers into the security key pad to open the gates that lead up the drive to the house.

"I want some beef jerky and a Mountain Dew," Nick said, kicking one of his booted legs up onto the dashboard.

"Huh?" Brian turned to look at Nick to see if he was serious.

"You heard me. I want some beef jerky and a Mountain Dew."

"Well, you know there isn't any beef jerky in the house, and the only drinks I have are Coke, water, and milk."

"So let's go and get me some jerky and a Dew."

"Go get yourself some jerky and a Dew, you dork."

"But we're already in the car, Bri. All you have to do is put it in reverse, back up, and drive until we find someplace that has beef jerky and Mountain Dew."

"In Beverly Hills, that could take forever. We would have to go down more into the city."

"Bri," Nick whined, kicking his other leg up onto the dash. "I'm not getting out of this car until I have beef jerky and Mountain Dew."

They sat there staring at each other, neither one blinking, as Brian's face turned three shades of red with irritation.

"Fuck, Nick. You know, you piss me off sometimes." Throwing the car into reverse, Brian backed out into the street, not noticing the smile that Nick was trying to hide under his hand.

"Oh hell, Brian, I piss you off all the time. Why should today be any different?"

Turning out onto the street, Brian jerked the car into drive and headed back down towards the city without a word.

Nick fiddled with the radio station, stealing glances at Brian out of the corner of his eye. They hadn't spoken in almost three months, when Nick got the call one Saturday afternoon, almost three weeks ago.

"Hey Nick, how are you?"

"I'm good, how about you?"

"I'm good. I'm spending a little time in California."

"Oh yeah? That's cool. You and Leighanne taking a little vacation?"

There was a long pause on Brian's end, and Nick thought he had lost the connection when Brian spoke again.

"Hey, do you think you might have some spare time to come out here and keep me company? I'm renting this great house in Beverly Hills."

Nick sat up in bed, glancing over at the redhead sleeping beside him. What the hell was her name again? He'd picked her up at the club the night before. They'd danced until 2:00 a. m. and then she had spent the night with him at his place.

"Yeah, sure, I haven't got anything going on. Do you think that Leigh will mind?"

"No, she won't mind. She isn't here." Brian didn't go into details, and Nick didn't press. "So just call me back on my cell with your flight info, and I'll pick you up at the airport."

"Okay, bro, I'll talk to you later."

Dial tone.

Rolling over, Nick tapped the sleeping redhead on the shoulder. "Hey," he whispered, trying desperately to remember her name. Katie... Kelly... Kimmy... "Hey you." He poked her again and waited while she moaned and opened her eyes. "Hey, you have to go now. I'm going out of town."

Walking up the terminal concourse, Nick spotted Brian right away. He was leaning against the wall in a faded blue baseball cap, a t-shirt, and baggy jeans, holding a sign with the word "CARTER" scrawled across it in big bold letters. They both laughed, exchanging hugs and hard slaps on the back.

"God, man, I am so glad you're here," Brian said into Nick's shoulder.

Pulling back, Nick looked into Brian's bloodshot eyes and knew something was wrong. He was pale and thinner and looked like he hadn't slept in weeks. But he knew Brian

well enough not to pry. Brian would talk about things when he was ready. So Nick filled the silences with stupid chatter and tried his best to make his old friend smile.

It wasn't until the end of their first week hanging out together that Brian finally confessed that he and Leighanne were separated. They were in the middle of a heated game of poker when Brian broke down and started to cry. Nick sat there, not knowing what to do or say, as Brian poured out the whole story. He had never seen Brian cry like that before. And Nick didn't know how to give advice on this subject. He had never been in love with a girl so deep that it was painful when she left him. And he certainly didn't know what it was like to be married and share that kind of bond with anyone. His mind quickly went through all the things that people said in the movies...

"Good riddance."

"You're better off without her."

"She doesn't deserve you."

But none of them seemed to work for this particular situation; Brian's life wasn't a movie. So in the end, Nick said nothing. He just scooted his chair over beside Brian's chair and pulled him into a big, awkward bear hug, offering Brian the only thing he could think of. A shoulder to cry on.

This morning, Nick had tried to think of something fun to do to get them out of the house where they had been holed up for three weeks, playing video games, swimming, and watching movies on cable. He knew that Brian wouldn't want to go clubbing, and strip bars were out of the question, so he had come up with the next best thing. Shopping. But Brian had been in a foul mood since the early morning phone call he had gotten from Leighanne. He hadn't told Nick what they had discussed, but Nick knew it wasn't good when Brian had come down the stairs, car keys in hands, growling, "Let's go, I haven't got all day."

Nick picked Rodeo Drive for their spree, but Brian just wasn't in the mood. He had lagged behind all day and was merely content to sit in the chairs in the stores while Nick tried things on or flirted with the sexy sales girls at some of the more trendy stores. The boots had been a joke to get Brian's mood out of the gutter, but all it had seemed to do was piss him off more. So now Nick had come up with the beef jerky and Mountain Dew idea to keep them out of the house and away from the phone, where Leighanne might call him back and make things even worse.

Two hours later and many miles out of Beverly Hills, and they were still driving around, looking for a place that sold what Nick craved. They had found places that had Mountain Dew or places that had beef jerky, but none that had them both stocked at the

same time. The last place they went, Nick told them that he wanted a twenty-ounce Mountain Dew, not a sixteen-ounce. Brian was so mad, he had screamed profanities at Nick on the way back out to the BMW, throwing his car keys at Nick's head and missing by an inch.

"Why can't you just get the fucking Mountain Dew at one place and the beef jerky at the other!" he shouted, pointing a finger at Nick as he stooped to retrieve the keys from the ground.

"It's just not the same. I want a twenty-ounce Mountain Dew and a pack of peppered beef jerky from the same place so I can eat them together."

"OH MY GOD!" Brian screamed as he walked over to Nick, snatching the keys from his hand. Climbing back into the BMW, Brian started to back out before Nick was even all the way in the car. Pulling his foot in, Nick grabbed onto the door and pulled it shut as Brian peeled out and headed west. "One more place, Carter. That's it. I am not driving any further. If the next place doesn't have it, then too bad."

Twenty minutes down the road, Brian spotted a tiny gas station on the corner. Cutting across oncoming traffic, he rolled up into a parking stall and jammed the car in park, leaving it running.

"Okay, I am going in there alone, and I am going to get you Mountain Dew and beef jerky. If they don't have Mountain Dew and beef jerky, then I am getting you Coke and Twinkies. If they don't have Coke and Twinkies, then I am getting you freaking root beer and a ham sandwich. Whatever I bring out of there, you will drink it and eat it, and you will shut the hell up and like it, do you understand?"

Nick opened the glove box and pulled out his sunglasses, popping them onto his face with a smile. "You betcha, buddy. I read you loud and clear." Nick jumped as Brian climbed out and slammed the door shut behind him, stomping inside the gas station with a scowl on his face.

Smiling to himself, Nick leaned forward and fiddled with the radio, finding an old Run DMC song that reminded him of being a little kid. Settling back in the seat, he closed his eyes and mouthed the words.

It was about five minutes later that the passenger door to the car opened.

"So, what's the verdict? Sprite and Ding Dongs?" Nick asked with a small laugh.

Brian didn't answer him.

Opening his eyes, Nick looked over and did a double take. The person standing in the passenger door was wearing a black t-shirt and black Levis. Brian hadn't been wearing black? Pushing his sunglasses up on his head, Nick sat forward just as the person knelt down.

"You're not Brian."

"That's right, Pardner," the guy said, looking down at Nick's cowboy boots. "I like your boots."

The guy had black, greasy hair that was slicked back on his head, a bushy black mustache, and dark, angry eyes. Nick's eyes flashed to the front of the gas station, searching for any signs of Brian coming out.

"Your friend is still looking for your drink," the guy said, licking his dry, cracked lips. "Did you hear what I said to you?"

Nick shook his head, his eyes darting around for help.

"I said I like your boots."

Nick tried to reach for the door handle to pull the door closed, but the guy blocked his reach and pushed him back in his seat.

"I also like your car."

Shit, the guy was carjacking them.

"Look, you can have the boots, and the car," Nick said nervously, reaching down to tug off one of the boots.

The guy shoved a hand into Nick's chest, pushing him back in the seat. "You're right I can have the boots and the car. Now move over behind the wheel. You're going to drive."

Nick tried to protest, but the guy was already moving in on top of him, pushing Nick into the driver's seat. Nick's foot got caught on the open glove compartment, and he fell forward onto the steering wheel, honking the horn as he landed awkwardly in the driver's seat.

"You stupid motherfucker." The guy quickly reached into the waistband of his jeans and pulled out a gun. He pushed the barrel of the gun into Nick's left temple so hard, he drove his head into the driver's side window with a loud crack. "You try something like that again, and I will have no problem blowing your brains out all over the interior of this fine car. Now drive."

Pulling the car into reverse, Nick backed out of the parking space, wincing from the pain of his head hitting the window and wondering if the guy was going to kill him.

Just then, Brian came walking out of the gas station, a twenty-ounce Mountain Dew in one hand and a bag of peppered beef jerky in the other, watching with confusion as Nick peeled out onto the main road, leaving him in his dust.

Part 2
Get Rid of Your Sins Before You Die

Stupid son of a bitch, Brian thought, tossing some bills at the cab driver as he climbed from the car in front of his home.

Nick had pissed him off for the last time. It was a stupid idea to have him come out here to keep him company when he was feeling so low about his life and his marriage. And now for him to take off and leave him who-the-hell-knows-where with nothing more than a stupid Mountain Dew, some beef jerky, his wallet, and his cell phone was the last straw.

Stopping at the security gates of the house, he punched in the code and waited while the gates drew back enough for him to slip inside, and then he walked slowly up the drive. Passing the garage, he noticed that the BMW was not in its stall and figured that Nick had probably decided to ditch him to do some partying. Whatever. He just didn't care anymore. When Nick came back, he was going to tell him to go back to Florida.

Besides, there was nothing more that Nick could do. Leighanne had informed him this morning that she wanted a legal separation, and there was nothing Brian could say to change her mind. She sounded happier than she had in months and even giggled a few times during the course of the conversation, making him wonder if someone was there with her?

Taking his house key out of his pocket, Brian unlocked the back door and went inside. Turning on the pantry light, he slipped his shoes off, leaving them on the mat by the backdoor, and went upstairs to the bedroom. He decided not to turn on the light; he was tired and pissed off, and all he wanted was some sleep.

Falling face-first onto the bed, he sighed. Who would have thought that life would turn out to be so hard, that marriage would turn out to take so much work? He was one of those people who believed that love conquered all. What a crock that had turned out to be.

Brian didn't remember falling asleep until the ringing of the phone woke him up. Looking around the dark bedroom, he rubbed his eyes and tried to make out the numbers on the digital clock on his nightstand.

12:00 a.m.

Rolling onto his back, he swung his arm up and over his head, fumbling around for the phone. "What," he said in a sleepy voice, his eyes half closed as he began to drift back to sleep.

When there was nothing but a dial tone, but he could still hear the ringing, he realized it was his cell. Patting his right pant pocket, he reached in and pulled out the phone, punching the button to answer. "What?"

There was a pause.

"Bri." It was Nick.

"What, asshole." Brian rolled onto his side.

"Bri, I'm in trouble."

"You're damn right you're in trouble. You stranded me at the gas station, and I had to call a cab, which took an hour and a half to get there. And by the way, if you want your Mountain Dew and beef jerky, you'll find it in the parking lot of the gas station. I had the cab driver run over it a few times to make sure it was good and smashed. And another..."

"Bri, I'm in trouble," Nick repeated himself. His voice was low and nervous.

Rolling back onto his back again, Brian sighed. Great, Nick had probably gone and gotten himself in trouble with the law again. He was always out drinking too much and partying with people he didn't know. Even though he was a millionaire and a Backstreet Boy, he still felt like he needed to impress people to be popular.

"What did you do now?" The other end was silent. "Did you crash my car, Nick? If you wrecked that car, so help me God, I will..."

"Brian, I'm scared." Nick's voice was shaky, and he sounded like he was fighting back tears.

Sitting up, Brian turned on the lamp and let his eyes adjust to the light. Looking down at the cell phone for the number on the caller ID, all it said was "BLOCKED CALL."

"Where are you, Nick? What happened? Look, whatever it is, we can figure it out together. I didn't mean what I said about the car. If you wrecked it, I can just buy another one."

There was nothing but silence on the other end, and Brian was getting scared himself.

"Nicky, talk to me."

"I have your friend." The voice that answered back on the other end of the phone was not Nick.

"Who is this?"

"No one you know."

"Where is Nick?"

"He's right here with me. I have your friend, and I have your car."

Brian stood up and reached for the phone on the nightstand.

"I'm pretty sure that I am going to kill him," the voice said. "But he said he was scared, so I told him that if it would make him feel better, I would let him make one last call before he died."

Brian could hear Nick crying in the background. He picked up the receiver of the phone with the other hand and punched in 911.

"You can call the cops. It won't matter. The only difference it will make is that I will kill him sooner."

Brian set down the phone in the cradle, his hand shaking. "Please don't kill him," he said in a hoarse whisper. "He didn't do anything to you."

"No, you're right, he didn't do anything to me."

Brian paced the floor, trying to think of the right words to say, hoping this was some kind of joke, but knowing that it was not.

"I have money," he blurted out. "Lots of money. Name your price, and I can get it for you."

"How much have you got on you now?"

Brian reached in his back pocket, tugging out his wallet. It fell from his hands and hit the ground. He dropped to his knees, flipping open the billfold and pulling out a wad of bills. "I have six hundred and two dollars," he said, standing up and dropping the wad onto the bed. "Wait, wait, I have more." He walked quickly to his dresser, pulling open the top drawer and fishing around in the back, until he came up with another wad of bills, secured with a gold musical note money clip. Stripping the clip off of the bills, he tossed it into the dresser and counted out the bills into his hand. "I have three thousand, six hundred and two dollars in cash. I can get it to you right now." He looked down at his wedding band and his Rolex watch. "I also have a wedding band that is worth a couple of thousand and a Rolex that you could get good money for."

When there was no answer on the other end, Brian began to panic. Even Nick's crying had stopped. It was an eerie silence that made him wonder if he had been dreaming the whole thing.

Wake up, Brian.

Wake up, Brian.

Wake up, Brian.

"Okay." The voice came back on the line. "I want you to bring me the money, the ring, and the watch. I am going to give you an address. If you call the cops, I'll put a bullet in his head."

Brian grabbed a pen from the top of his dresser and scribbled the address on the back of an envelope he found nearby. The man's voice was garbled, and he asked him to repeat himself to make sure that he had heard the address correctly, but the guy just laughed.

"No way, buddy. You either heard me, or you didn't. You'll either be here, or you won't, and your friend will either live, or he will die."

Dial tone.

Nick sat in the corner of the one room apartment, back against the wall, knees drawn to his chest, as he watched the guy talking on the phone. He couldn't hear what he was saying, but when the conversation was over, he pushed the end button and threw Nick's cell phone against the wall with a loud crash. Nick watched the cell phone smash into a million pieces as the guy turned around and faced him.

"What are you two? Some little daddy's boys out playing with daddy's money and daddy's car?"

The guy moved to the table in the center of the room, where he had placed Nick's wallet after taking it from him.

"Where does a kid like you get eleven hundred dollars in cash and two platinum cards from?" he asked, shuffling through the contents of Nick's wallet, which he had dumped all over the table in search of cash.

Picking up Nick's Florida driver's license, he twirled it between his fingers before turning it over to read the front. "Nickolas. That's like Santa Claus, isn't it? I think I will call you St. Nickolas." The guy laughed at his own joke as he tossed the driver's license back down on the table and walked across the room towards Nick.

"Hey." The guy kicked Nick's leg with the toe of his boot. When Nick didn't look at him, the guy drew his leg back and slammed it hard into Nick's legs, knocking them out from under his chin. "I said, hey. When I say hey, you are supposed to say, 'what.'"

Nick looked up at him, his eyes blurring with fresh tears. "What," he said, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Remember when I said I liked your boots?"

Nick nodded, looking down at the boots. The stupid boots.

"Give them to me."

Nick must have looked confused because the guy knelt down eye-level with him and grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him close to him so that their foreheads touched. The guy's skin was warm and sweaty, and his breath reeked of beer and cigarettes.

"Give me the boots, asshole."

He released his grip, slamming Nick's head into the wall with a smile.

Nick reached down for this left foot and tugged the shiny, black boot off, handing it to the sweaty dickhead, and then he did the same with the right foot. The guy stood and walked to the couch in the opposite corner of the room. Sitting down, he pulled off his own shoes and tossed them in a pile and then pulled on the boots slowly, one at a time.

When the guy had first climbed in the car and pointed the gun at Nick's head, he had gone into a sort of dreamlike state, where nothing seemed real. He couldn't even remember steering the car or pushing on the gas or stopping at the stoplights. Everything had seemed to happen in slow motion. Even the guy's voice as he yelled out the directions of where he wanted Nick to go had sounded sloppy and slow, like he was speaking under water. Even now, sitting there on the floor of the disgusting, dimly-lit apartment, with its smell of sour milk and cat shit, he still felt like it was all a dream.

Movies and made-for-TV cop shows flashed through his mind of people who were kidnapped or carjacked or worse. It seemed like in the movies, people always tried to fight back or get away from the attacker. Nick himself had contemplated taking the guy once they arrived at the apartment. Imagining himself like Superman or some WWF wrestler, just kicking the son of a bitch's ass. But he had quickly changed his mind when the guy had dragged him out of the car by his hair, the gun pressed into his back, and stood him up to face him.

He had at least three inches on Nick and outweighed him by seventy five pounds easily, all of which was pure muscle. He had dragged Nick up to the third floor apartment like he was a rag doll and tossed him inside headfirst, leaving him sprawled out on the rug like an animal. He was so scared of the reality of what was happening that Nick had quickly let his mind return to its safe, dreamlike state, where everything was slow and had a soft glow around it.

He watched now as the asshole strutted around the room, admiring the cowboy boots, the gun stuck in the waistband of his jeans, and he wondered if anybody would find him here. Nick knew that he himself had talked to Brian on the phone. What he had said

and what Brian had said were all lost to him now. He just hoped that Brian wasn't mad at him for buying those stupid cowboy boots, and he hoped that Brian would miss him when he was dead.

Brian pulled into a rundown-looking motel and parked the car. Grabbing the scrap of paper with the address on it, he walked quickly through the double glass doors and made his way to the front desk.

A woman in her fifties sat behind the counter, clad only in a dirty white tank top and some cut off shorts that were about ten sizes too small. She was fanning herself with a sheet of paper and watching a rerun of *The Golden Girls* on the small black and white TV set that was beside her on the desk. When Brian approached the counter, she looked up at him for a second and then returned her attention to the show.

"Excuse me," he said, slapping the piece of paper down on the counter in front of her.

"What," she snapped, her eyes never leaving the TV screen.

"I'm not from around here, and I need your help. I am trying to find this address."

Her eyes looked at him and then slid down to the address on the piece of paper and then back up to his face. "What, are you looking for drugs or something?"

It was strange how quickly the scenery in Los Angeles could change. One minute, you could be in the most posh neighborhood in town, and a few hours later, you could be in hell.

"No, I'm not looking for drugs. I'm trying to find my friend."

She reached over and turned down the sound of the TV set and then reached below the counter and pulled out a map. "I'm busy watching my show. If you want to find that place, you can find it yourself with this." She pushed the map at him with a scowl.

"Thanks, you've been no help at all," he said under his breath, as she cranked the sound back up and turned away from him. Taking the map, he walked back out to the car and climbed in, locking the doors and turning on the overhead light. Shit. He had no clue where he was or where he was going. And while he was determined to think positive that everything would work out okay and that this was just some poor bastard who wanted to stiff Nick and him for some cash while scaring them in the process, he couldn't help wondering if everything was going to turn out alright.

Leaning his head back against the seat, every prayer he had ever been taught swirled through his mind, as he tried to find the one that was right for this situation. Finally, he decided they were all right for this situation, as he unfolded the map and rubbed his tired eyes.

"Hang on, buddy," he said out loud, as he moved his finger down and around the winding lines on the map. "Just hang on."

There was a loud knock at the door that made Nick jump. But the guy seemed to be expecting someone, as he calmly walked to the door and flipped the three deadbolts. He opened the door only a few inches and talked low so that Nick could not hear what he was saying to whoever was on the other side. Then, closing the door, he walked over to Nick.

"Okay, Jolly Old St. Nick, get up." Nick did as he said and got to his feet. The guy pulled the gun out of his waistband and jammed it into Nick's forehead. "You're going to do everything I say, right?" Nick nodded, swallowing hard. The guy smiled. "That's what I thought." Lowering the gun, he waved it in the direction of the door.

Nick walked to the door with the guy close behind him and opened it upon command. Stepping out onto the landing, Nick looked down and could see that the BMW was no longer parked below. In its place was an old, dark-colored pickup truck with another man leaning against the driver's side door, apparently waiting for them.

The guy shoved the gun into Nick's back from behind, prompting Nick to walk, stocking footed, down the two flights of stairs to the truck. The other guy grabbed him hard by his upper right arm and flung him into the open driver's side door. The first guy climbed in the passenger side, and the second guy climbed in behind Nick, sandwiching him in the middle.

"Okay, so where are we going, Mo?" Mo. So the name of the guy that had carjacked him was Mo. Seemed to fit.

"Go to the warehouse." Mo squirmed around, trying to get comfortable in what little space he had, what with Nick practically sitting on his lap. He would shove Nick a little from the right, and then Nick would bump into the other guy, who would shove him from the left.

"Knock it off asshole," Mo said. Nick didn't know if he was talking to him or to the other guy. Mo grabbed a pack of cigarettes out of the glove compartment and tapped two out. He then pulled a lighter out of his shirt pocket and lit them both and passed one across Nick to the other guy.

Nick inhaled the smoke as it passed under his nose, knowing that if he got a hold of that pack, he would smoke it in five seconds flat. He had promised Brian that he wasn't smoking anymore, but what Brian hadn't known was that Nick was sneaking smokes every chance he got. And then he would cram his mouth full with mints and gum and douse himself in cologne to cover the scent. One night, Brian asked him why he smelled so bad. Nick thought he was busted for the cigarettes, but it turned out Brian was

talking about the overwhelming smell of cologne that filled the room. So after that, he didn't spray himself so many times.

"...I said, do you want one, kid?" Nick blinked himself back to reality and looked over at Mo. He was holding out a cigarette. Nick nodded, taking it and pushing it between his lips while Mo flicked the lighter until it caught on the tip.

Nick nodded a thanks, his eyes sliding to the clock on the dash. 2:00 a. m. He wondered where Brian was and if he was still mad at him. He also wondered if Brian had called the police, or if he was going to go all *Mission: Impossible* and try to save him on his own. For some reason, Nick didn't think that it would matter either way. He already knew he was a dead man, and nothing Brian could do could save him now.

Leaning back in the seat, he pulled his knees up and hooked his arms around his legs, trying to keep them from sliding to one side or the other, the cigarette dangling loosely from the corner of his lips.

Suddenly, the guy jerked the wheel of the truck and turned off of the main road. Mo reached down and snapped on the radio as they bumped down the dark road. He rolled the dial through the stations, finally settling on some country station with a sleepy voiced DJ that welcomed them to his evening shift called the "Night Ride." Pulling the cigarette from his lips, Nick leaned forward and stubbed it out in the half-filled ashtray.

"Aren't you going to the finish that?" Mo asked.

"Nah. I think I just quit," Nick said, his stomach turning and his head pounding.

Mo laughed beside him. "Yeah, that's a good idea, kid. It's always good to get rid of your sins before you die."

Part 3

Eyes on the Prize

Brian turned the radio up loud, punching through the CDs, trying to find something fast and obnoxious to keep him awake. Damn, he had bad taste in music, he thought, as he pushed through the selection of easy listening tunes that were better suited for a sixty-year-old preacher than himself. When had he become so old? he wondered, switching the selector to radio, finally settling on a rap station that was blaring Eminem.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked at the piece of paper again, reading the address out loud to himself over and over until it sounded like a bunch of mush. He was tired and more than a little scared of what awaited him once he arrived at the destination on the paper.

His mind kept flashing back to the phone call.

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to kill him..."

Shit. What if he did kill him?

The cell phone rang, making Brian jump. "Hello."

No one said anything on the other end. All he could hear was the low hum of country music.

"Hello, are you there?"

"Yeah, we're here." It was the same voice that had called before.

"Is he okay?" Brian squinted up at a passing street sign, trying to make out the street numbers.

"I don't know if okay is the word I would use. He's alive."

"Brian." Brian felt his whole body relax at the sound of Nick's soft voice. A million images flashed through his mind. Images of the first time they had met, the recording studio, the tours, the holidays they had spent together. It made Brian wish that they could go back and start all over again. Forget the fame, the money, the wives and the girlfriends. All of the things that had driven wedges between them. He wished for the days when they were just two dumb, naive kids that loved to sing and laugh.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked.

Nick laughed a little. "I don't really know. I think I'm scared to die," he said, and then the line went dead.

Snapping the radio off, Brian had to clear his mind. He pulled over to the side of the road and dropped his head to the steering wheel. Tears flowed freely as he fought with his own better judgment over what to do next.

"Okay, we're here."

Nick opened his eyes at the sound of Mo's voice. Squinting into the night, he tried to make out where "here" was. The other guy had doused the headlights, so there was nothing but black everywhere he looked. Mo and the other guy opened their doors at the same time and climbed out. Nick stayed put.

"C'mon, kid." Mo gestured for Nick to slide out, but Nick didn't move. "Didn't you hear me? I said c'mon."

"No."

"No?" Mo said, a look of irritation on his face. The other guy snorted, slamming the driver side door shut and walking off. "What do you mean, no?"

"Why the hell should I get out of the car? You keep saying you're going to kill me anyway, so why not just do it? Why should I do what you say?"

Mo leaned against the car door, pulling the gun from his waistband. He dangled it at his side for a second and then raised it, leveling it at Nick's head. "You never know, kid. If you're good and your friend does what I told him to do, I might let you go."

"And you might not."

"And I might not. What the hell is this? I'm not into riddles, kid. You're starting to get on my nerves. Now get out of the car."

Nick still didn't move. Mo reached in and grabbed him by the leg and pulled him. Nick kicked at him with his stocking foot. The two of them struggled with one another as Nick reached his arm out for the latch on the driver's side door, kicking at Mo at the same time, as hard as he could. Mo stuck the gun back in the waistband of his jeans and grabbed both of Nick's legs. Shit, he was strong, Nick thought, as he reached out, trying to grab onto something sturdier than the door latch, which was sliding out of his sweaty hands.

"Look, kid, give up. You know I am going to win," Mo growled, fumbling around to try and get a better grip on Nick.

"Fuck you," Nick mumbled back, as his right leg came free of Mo's grip. Pulling his right leg forward, Nick thrust it backwards as hard as he could, making direct contact with Mo's chest. The man let out a shout as the wind was knocked out of him, and he

fell backwards onto the ground. Nick paused, wide-eyed, for just a split second, and then he scrambled up into the truck. Pulling the latch on the driver's side door, the door swung open, and Nick spilled out onto the ground.

"Gus, Gus, get your ass over here! I need help. The kid is getting away!" Mo was yelling, as he rolled over and stood up, running around the side of the truck. But he was too late. As he came around the driver's side door, he saw that the door was open and the kid was gone.

Nick ran as fast as he could across the clearing, never looking back. He ignored the rocks that cut through his socks into his feet, keeping his eyes on the prize. Straight ahead, he could make out thick patches of trees and bushes. That was where he would run to; that was where he could hide. Between the black of night and the trees and bushes to hide him, there was no way those guys could find him now. He would stay there until it was light and then make his way out to the main road, where he would find someone to take him to safety.

Just as he reached the trees, light poured in behind him. They must have turned on the headlights to the car. Nick put his hands out in front of him and dived headfirst into the bushes. He rolled down an embankment, tumbling head over foot, unable to grab on to anything as he finally came to a stop at the bottom.

"Fuck!" he screamed through clenched teeth, as his hand shot to his forehead that was sliced open and bleeding, not to mention his skinned up elbows and knees and his right ear that had hit some sort of rock on the way down.

Rolling over onto his stomach, he scrambled up onto his hands and knees and crawled quickly over to a thicker section of bushes and branches. Sitting cross-legged, he tried to make himself small, as overhead, he heard the sound of the truck engine, and he knew that they were looking for him.

3:30 a.m.

Brian turned the car off of the main road and started down a dark, bumpy, dirt road. Flashing on the brights, it didn't seem to help much, but he did notice that there seemed to be fresh tire tracks, and he hoped that he was headed in the right direction.

He'd given up on Eminem and the rap stations right after his head had started to pound harder with a splitting headache and instead had settled on some oldies grunge station that played a lot of Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and Nirvana. Nick would have been proud to hear him actually listening to Nirvana, since that had never been one of Brian's favorites.

Picking up the cell phone from the passenger seat, he had contemplated calling Leighanne. He didn't want to call her in New York because he wasn't sure if she was alone or if she was in the right frame of mind to hear what he had to say. He continued driving as he punched in the numbers of their Florida home by heart. He didn't know which home she would be returning to after her acting workshop but he knew eventually she would get to the Florida one to pack up her things, so he figured that he would leave the message on the machine. Just in case something happened to him and he never saw her again.

"Hi, you've reached The Littrells. We can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number, we will call you back..."

BEEP

"Hey, Leigh, it's me. I just wanted you to know that... well, I just wanted you to know how much..." He paused. "I love you, Leighanne. I always will. And if anything happens to me, I want you to know that I don't blame you for what happened to the marriage. Some things are just not meant to be." He sighed. "I also wanted you to know that Nick and I are in trouble. I was told not to call the police, so I am going to try and fix things on my own. If you don't hear from me again, have the police go to this address..." He read the address off twice. "I love you, baby. Don't ever forget that."

"Where the fuck is the little asshole?"

Mo walked along the edge of the embankment, lit by the headlights of the truck. Looking down, all he could see was a lot of trees and bushes and darkness.

"Look, we don't need him," Gus said, sitting on the hood of the truck, picking his teeth with a toothpick. "We got his car, we got his money and credit cards, and we got his friend. Once the other one comes, we'll just take his shit and leave him for dead."

Mo turned around, his hands on his hips. "St. Nick knows our names, he knows what the car looks like that we drive, and he knows where my apartment is."

"He was too scared to pay any attention to any of that, Mo. He will probably run like hell to get out of this town and get back to Florida or wherever the hell you said he was from and forget that any of this ever happened. He ain't dumb enough to try and press charges. He knows that we could find him and this whole thing would start all over again."

"What about the other one?"

"Look." Gus slid down off of the truck and walked to where Mo stood. "If it makes you feel any better, we can just kill the other one. That way, the trail will run cold, since he was the one with the address to this place."

Mo nodded in response as he walked along the embankment, looking one last time for any signs of Nick.

Down below, Nick shivered at the words. Kill Brian? Shit, how did they get themselves into this mess in the first place? It was hard to remember now, as he sat cold and bleeding in the bushes below. If it hadn't been real life, it would have made a really good made for TV movie, he thought, as the headlights to the truck turned off and he heard it crunching across the dirt and gravel as it backed up away from the embankment.

Crawling out, Nick stood up, his back aching as he stretched out. Leaning down, he pulled off his muddy wet socks and tossed them to the ground. Then, looking up towards the top of the hill, he tried to figure out the best way to get the hell out of there and warn Brian about what was going to happen next.

Brian drove down to what looked like the end of the road, as a large, gray warehouse came into view. He could see that the building had seven tall garage bays with metal doors and that it looked pretty deserted.

Pulling the car to a stop, he put it in park, but left it running and turned off the radio. He had made sure that he was far enough away from the building that he could still back up and get the hell out of there if he needed to. Looking to his left, he double checked to make sure the car doors were locked, and when he looked back up, he could see the outline of a man standing by the far left garage door. The cell phone rang.

"Well, it looks like you found the place," the voice said.

"Where's Nick?"

"All in good time, my friend, all in good time. First thing I want you to do is turn off the headlights. Then I am going to open the far-left garage door. After it is up, you will pull forward slowly into the bay and shut off the car. Then I want you to open the car door and toss the keys out and shut the door again. Don't get out of the car until I give you the signal that it is okay. Do you understand me?"

"I understand. But how do I know that Nick is okay?"

"I guess that is a chance you are going to have to take, isn't it?" Click.

Brian watched as the man lifted the latch on the bottom of the metal door and raised it a bit. Then he grabbed onto a chain and pulled it the rest of the way up. He signaled for Brian to pull forward and disappeared back around the side of the building.

Turning off the headlights and putting the car in drive, Brian slowly made his way into the garage. Once inside, he put the car in park and turned off the engine. He could hear the loud clanging of the garage being pulled shut behind him. His heart was pounding, and his mouth went dry. Reaching for his cell phone, he quickly shoved it in his back pocket and stared straight ahead. Once the door was shut, it was pitch black, except for the small slices of moonlight that made their way in through a boarded up window high up on the wall straight ahead.

He waited for a second and then opened his car door. Pulling the keys from the ignition, he tossed them out and shut the door again. He could see the silhouette of someone coming around the front of the car and down the driver's side. Then he saw the same silhouette walk back around to the front of the car. They banged twice on the hood, signaling him it was time to get out.

Swallowing hard, Brian took a deep breath and opened the car door. He stepped down onto the running board and then onto the pavement. Before he could even get both feet on the ground, an arm reached around him, cupping a hand tightly over his mouth as the car door was slammed shut, and he was dragged off into the darkness.

Nick knew he was taking a big chance and risking both of their lives, but it seemed worth it. He had made his way to the top of the embankment and was crouched down in the bushes when Brian came rumbling up in the big Excursion. From his hiding place, Nick could see everything. He could see Mo at the garage door of the large building, and he could see Brian in the car on the cell phone. He was not sure where Gus had gone to, but his guess was that Gus was inside of the warehouse. Nick watched as Mo slipped around the side of the building; then, as Brian turned off the headlights, Mo walked back around the front of the building and inside the garage stall.

Nick crouched down and made his move. Running low and fast, he made his way across the clearing arriving behind the Excursion, just as it approached the stall. He knew that Mo had gone inside on the left side of the garage, so Nick went around the right side of the Excursion as it rolled in, crouching low by the wheel well as Brian shut off the car and the garage door was pulled shut. Nick was taking a big chance, since he didn't know if they would turn on lights inside the garage. But he was going on the instinct that they wouldn't want Brian to see them, if at all possible, so they would probably keep it nice and dark. And he was right.

He could hear Brian open the car door and drop the keys with a loud clink to the pavement below. He watched beneath the car as Mo's legs came around and stooped to gather the keys, then walked back around the front of the car. Keeping low, Nick made his way around to the driver's side. Mo banged on the hood of the car and the driver's side door opened. Nick waited until Brian was out on the runner board with one foot on the ground, and then he went for it.

Hooking his arm around Brian, he clamped his hand tightly over Brian's mouth and dragged him around the back of the car. Brian struggled as Nick leaned in close, pressing his left temple to Brian's sweaty face. He easily dragged Brian around the back of the car and over towards the passenger side.

"FUCK!" The shout was Mo's. "Where the fuck are you, you little jackass? I can't believe that you would risk St. Nick's life like this."

Nick pushed Brian down to the ground, his hand still clamped over his mouth. Brian struggled beneath him so Nick leaned down on him, pinning him beneath his weight until he stopped moving.

"GUS, GUS, GET THE FUCK IN HERE! HE'S TRYING TO GET AWAY!" Mo was pissed. Nick could hear him kicking the car over and over as he moved around the driver's side.

Getting up on his knees, Nick pulled Brian up with him, his hand still clamped around his mouth. Then he stood up into a crouched position and dragged Brian with him into the darkness of the warehouse. Where they were going and what they would run into was anybody's guess.

"Mo, there ain't no light in this place, so you gotta use your lighter!" Gus was yelling from somewhere in the warehouse. And then Nick saw a little light from a lighter blink on up and over to his right.

Brian was still struggling against Nick's force so Nick leaned down and hissed in his ear, "It's me, you idiot, so stop squirming." Instantly, Brian's body relaxed, as Nick slowly released his grip on Brian's mouth. "It's me," he said again, as Brian turned and their eyes met in the darkness, both sets wide and full of fear, but also full of recognition that they were alive. Brian's white-toothed smile gleamed in the darkness, and Nick grinned back as they ducked down and crawled along away from where they had seen the lighter flick on.

"Listen, you little motherfucker, you better just give up now, or else we will put a bullet in St. Nick's head, and you can watch. Is that what you want? Do you want your friend to die?" This time it was Gus who was yelling out the threats, unaware that Nick was alive and well and helping Brian to freedom.

The two crawled along the floor of the warehouse, keeping low and stopping every few seconds to feel around and see if they were near an exit. They could see the lights from two lighters in different areas of the large warehouse flick on and off as Mo and Gus searched for Brian. Luckily, Brian and Nick were far enough ahead of them that the small circle of light from the lighters was not enough to give up their whereabouts. Nick veered off to the right, with Brian following, as he reached out and found the chain that was secured to the bottom of one of the garage doors. He stopped, Brian bumping into the back of him, and got down flat on his stomach.

Pushing his fingers underneath the metal door, he pushed ever so slightly to see if it would give any or if it was locked, and to his amazement, it raised ever so slightly. He reached back and grabbed Brian's arm. "Help," he said in a whisper, as Brian crawled up alongside of him, and both of them pushed up on the door. With a loud screech, the door budged slightly, and both Nick and Brian stopped.

"Shit, they're trying to get out through one of the doors!" Nick heard Mo shout, as the loud slap of the cowboy boots on the pavement started coming fast in their direction.

"Go! Go!" Nick yelled, as he and Brian stood up and, together, lifted the garage door high enough that they could slip beneath it. Dropping to their knees, they both rolled out and then, standing, broke out into a full run across the clearing.

"SON OF A BITCH!" Mo was screaming from behind them, as Brian and Nick criss-crossed over each other's paths. The moonlight and coming morning was their enemy as they ran forward without looking back, and then six shots rang out...

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

Brian looked over at Nick, and Nick looked over at Brian, and for an instant, time stood still.

Both of them dropped to the ground, Nick rolling to the right and Brian skidding forward to a stop, face-first on the ground. Opening his eyes slowly, Brian couldn't catch his breath, and he winced as he tried to raise his head. Slowly, he turned to his right, where he could barely make out Nick lying barefoot on his left side on the ground in the moonlight.

"Nick... Nicky..." Brian's voice didn't even sound like his own as he called out Nick's name. Brian tried to push himself up, but his arms were shaky, and he didn't have the strength. "Nicky, talk to me." Brian rotated his body around and dragged himself across the gravel to where Nick lay.

For an instant, he forgot where he was or how he gotten there, as he put a hand on Nick's back and tried to pull him over. "Hey Nick, c'mon buddy, talk to me," he pleaded, pulling on Nick's shoulder until he was finally able to roll him onto his back. "Are you

okay, Nicky?" Struggling to get up onto his knees, Brian looked down onto Nick's face, and he knew that his friend was far from okay.

Nick's face was pale, and as he touched a hand to Nick's forehead, his skin was clammy and cold to the touch. Brian noticed a fine trickle of blood winding its way down from the corner of Nick's mouth, and he also noticed that Nick's hands were clutched together tightly over his stomach.

Pulling on Nick's hands, Brian released his grip to reveal a spreading pool of thick, dark red blood on his shirt and hands. Nick had been shot. And as he noticed a new circle of blood starting to spread further up on Nick's shirt, Brian knew that Nick had been shot more than once.

Leaning down to cradle Nick in his arms, Brian looked back over his shoulder as two figures moved towards him in the darkness, and suddenly, it all became clear.

Part 4: *We Are So Screwed*

Time flashed backwards and then forwards, stopping on the important points. The shopping trip on Rodeo drive, the search for the Mountain Dew and beef jerky... Nick leaving with the car and the strange call at midnight... The long drive to the middle of nowhere, the stop at the seedy motel with the nasty desk clerk, the warehouse coming into view... And finally, there was Nick, pulling Brian into the darkness, the long run from two unseen evils to freedom, and the gun shots... Brian's mind hit on each one until he was snapped harshly back into the reality of what was happening now. Nick had been shot, and the two men who were chasing them were only steps away.

Brian looked up, making eye contact with the man holding the gun. He shuddered at the dark, blazing eyes and large strides as the man advanced on them, his arm out straight, the gun pointed right between Brian's eyes.

"Don't fucking look at me!" the man screamed in a voice full of adrenaline and anger. "Don't you even fucking look at me!"

Brian carefully lifted Nick's head out of his lap and lay it down on the ground, never breaking eye contact with the man with the gun. He tried to speak. Tried to plead his case, to beg for the life of himself and his friend. But before he could say a word, he was slammed upside his head with the barrel of the gun. When that didn't knock Brian down, the guy made sure that the next one did. With a second smack, the barrel cracked against Brian's face, and he spun right and crumpled on the ground beside Nick.

His head was foggy, but Brian was aware that one of the men had him by the ankles and that he was being dragged across the gravel, back in the direction from where he and Nick had come. Sharp pains burst in his temple, and he could have sworn that a few of his back teeth were missing as the taste of blood filled his mouth. He was also aware that Nick was being dragged along the ground beside him. Squinting through the darkness, he could just make out Nick's body, arms outstretched, chin tilted towards the sky, his whole body still.

He listened to the conversation between the two men. His head was getting cloudy, and it would feel so good to just sleep...

"These two fucking idiots piss me off. Everything could have been so simple if they would have just followed the plan."

"What does it matter anyway, Mo? So you killed St. Nick. We were going to kill them both anyway, weren't we? But hey, at least St. Nick made it interesting," Gus said with a deep, rough laugh. "He made you hunt him down instead of just shooting him like a dog."

The last song Brian had heard on the radio, as he pulled up to the warehouse, now filled his head. It was "Alive" by Pearl Jam. How ironic that a song called "Alive" would be playing loudly in his mind when he knew that he and Nick were most certainly dead.

Nick was having the most beautiful dream. He was on a beach with pure, white sand as far as the eye could see and incredible, turquoise blue waves lapping at the shore. A beautiful, dark-haired girl held him tightly by the hand, running in front of him, looking back over her shoulder every so often to make sure he was keeping up. Her smile was wide, and her eyes dancing, and when she giggled, it reminded him of the sound of wind chimes.

Nick threw his head back in laughter as the girl began to run faster and faster, his feet tripping in the deep, soft sand as he stumbled and then regained his balance. And then, suddenly, he felt a strange pain. A deep stinging in his gut that made him stop running and drop the girl's hand. She stopped as well, turning to face him, taking his hand back into hers as she squeezed it tightly with reassuring eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice barely audible over the crashing waves.

She just giggled at him, her eyes trailing down his chest to his stomach. Then, stepping back from him, she dropped his hand and began shaking her head over and over, her once dancing eyes becoming cloudy and full of fear. Nick followed her gaze, looking down to his bare, tanned stomach. It was covered in thick, red blood.

"What the fuck happened to me?" he gasped, his voice lost somewhere in the air. "Why am I bleeding?"

When he looked back up, the sky had turned a dark, threatening swirl of black and gray, and the once calming, turquoise waves were pale and raging.

The girl was gone.

Looking back down again to his stomach, he tried to stop the blood that was now flowing. But it wouldn't stop. Why wouldn't it stop? As fear overcame him and his body began to shake, Nick looked anywhere for comfort and felt his eyes drawn towards the sea.

So, doing the only thing that seemed right, he slowly walked out into the angry waves and let them swallow him whole...

7:30 a.m. New York

Leighanne woke with a start, her eyes blinking open, her heart pounding in her chest. She had been having a horrible nightmare, the details of which she couldn't now recall. Throwing the covers back, she stretched and sat up, looking over to the other side of the bed, still not quite used to it being empty.

Her acting workshop had been the best thing she had ever done. It had brought new life into her stale world and had made her feel like she was "somebody" again instead of a Backstreet Boy's wife. She was renting a wonderful loft in the heart of New York City, where life was fast-paced and invigorating and so much more exciting than married life had become.

Walking out of the bedroom, across the open space where the TV and sofas were, she stopped to put on a pot of coffee and then went to retrieve the newspaper from the front stoop. Locking the door behind her, she leaned against it, clutching the paper to her chest and thinking back to the last conversation she and Brian had had the day before. He had been angry and defiant, accusing her of having an affair before finally slamming the phone down in her ear. She had merely called to warn him of the separation papers so that he wouldn't be surprised when they arrived. She felt it was the least she could do. And she was glad that she had been able to get the divorce idea out in the open before he cut her off.

Leighanne had known that she and Brian weren't a good match from the beginning. She wanted fame and glory, and he was already experiencing that and was looking forward to a future where he could take a break and just relax. But she had allowed herself to get swept up in his southern charm and sweet disposition. She loved seeing her name linked to his in all of the magazines as well as her face beaming on *Entertainment Tonight* while she gave them a sneak peek at her wedding preparations. And she had to admit, it had been exciting to be with a guy that millions of girls had pinned up on their bedroom walls and wept over while he sang on stage. Someone that so many other women wanted, but could not have. But over the last year, she had begun to admit to herself that no matter how hard she tried to mold and shape Brian, they would never be that kind of classy Hollywood couple that she longed for them to be. No matter what she did, Brian would always be that down home kid from Kentucky. A guy who was happy to be in a t-shirt and jeans, surrounded by little kids in a big house with a white picket fence and a boring old porch swing. When what she wanted was a penthouse in New York, surrounded by grand furnishings and gorgeous jewelry that she could wear while they attended plays and premieres, decked head to toe in Armani, while photographers screamed their names.

Spreading the paper out in front of her, she grabbed a mug from the counter and poured herself a cup of steaming, black coffee, and then she reached for the phone. Every few days, she checked the messages at both of their homes to keep up on what was going on. They often traveled back and forth so much that their friends and family had a hard time keeping up with them, so it wasn't unusual for them to have a dozen or so messages at both houses with people trying to track them down. She first dialed the phone number to the Florida home, waiting for the beep to punch in her four digit code to retrieve messages...

"Hi Leigh, it's Mom. I've been trying to get a hold of you, but you must not be leaving your cell phone on. Sweetie, I hope that the workshop is going well, and I know that you and Brian will work things out. If you get this message..."

Beep. Leighanne hit the star button to move on to the next message

"Hey guys, it's Kevin, just checking in to make sure everything is okay. I haven't heard from you in awhile, Bri, and we need to all get together to hammer out the recording schedule for the..."

Beep. Hitting the star button again, she yawned. She was surprised that Brian hadn't already called Kevin to let him know how awful she was being and that their marriage was all but over. But then again, she guessed it didn't surprise her, since Brian looked up to Kevin and would probably not want to admit to his cousin that he wasn't able to make his marriage work. Knowing Brian, he wouldn't tell anybody until months after the divorce was final, hoping that he would be able to still put the pieces together.

"Hey Leigh, it's me. I just wanted you to know that... well, I just wanted you to know how much... I love you, Leighanne. I always will, and if anything happens to me, I want you to know that I don't blame you for what happened to the marriage. Some things are just not meant to be..."

It was Brian. Leighanne sighed at the sorrowful sound of his voice, a part of her wondering if she was making a mistake.

"I also wanted you to know that Nick and I are in trouble..."

Oh great, he was with Nick. The one guy she didn't want him to be with. Where Nick was, there seemed to always be trouble lately, and she had explained to Brian more than once that being with Nick was like living next door to a trash dump. It brought your property value down.

"I was told not to call the police, so I am going to try and fix things on my own. If you don't hear from me again, have the police go to this address... I love you, baby. Don't ever forget that."

Leighanne quickly hit the pound key to rewind Brian's message again. What the hell was he talking about? Was this some kind of stupid prank dreamed up by Nick to get her to come back to Brian? Listening to the message again, she was even more confused the second time. Hitting the pound key one last time, she walked to the kitchen and grabbed a pen and piece of paper and jotted down the address that Brian read off twice and then hung up the phone, forgetting to listen to the rest of the messages.

Tapping the pen on the kitchen counter, she tried to make sense of what Brian had said. Her first instinct was to call Brian and ask him what was going on, and why he would play such a stupid game with her? But she thought better of it when she recalled their

last conversation and how angry they had gotten with one another. So instead, she decided she would call Howie.

The day before yesterday, she had run into Howie coming out of Barneys, his hands full of shopping bags, a tall exotic woman on his arm that he introduced as Collette. Leighanne knew that she had caught him off-guard when he asked where Brian was and she had replied “Beverly Hills,” moving onto the next topic without much explanation. She and Howie had always been polite with each other, but never very close. He asked her to join them for lunch, but Leighanne had declined, and then he had told her that he was going to California for a few days and would be staying at the Beverly Wilshire. He said he would give Brian a call, although she doubted it, since Howie never really hung out with any of the other guys when they were on break. They had exchanged a friendly hug and kiss on the cheek before he and Collette climbed in a chauffeur-driven town car and headed uptown.

Looking at the clock now, with the phone in her hand, Leighanne debated what to do. Knowing that Brian and Nick were together, she realized that this could be some drunken stunt on their part that Brian would regret in the morning as he slept off a hangover. Or something could really be wrong. It was still early in California, so, tossing the notepad with the address to the countertop, she decided that she would finish her coffee, take a shower, and then give Howie a call. Maybe she would ask him to give Brian and Nick a call and see what kind of trouble they were up to so that she herself could avoid any more problems with Brian until the separation papers arrived on his doorstep.

Mo and Gus worked quickly, dragging the two boys’ bodies into the warehouse and shutting the heavy, metal garage door with a bang. Gus walked down along the front of the warehouse, making sure that all of the padlocks on the doors were secure so there wouldn’t be any more escape plans, although it didn’t look like St. Nick would be doing much escaping his current condition.

While he was busy doing that, Mo pushed his lighter out in front of him, flicking it on, and made his way over to the Excursion. He opened the passenger door, the interior lights turning on, and dropped his lighter back into his shirt pocket. Climbing in, he pulled himself over to the driver’s side and made himself comfortable.

First, he looked around the inside of the car, running his hand along the dash, flipping down the visors, and checking the seats. The only thing he found of any interest was a faded, blue baseball cap with a white K sitting in the passenger seat. Plopping it on his head, he moved to the glove compartment, where he found a bunch of rental agreement papers, a box of Altoids, and a pair of expensive-looking sunglasses. Taking the sunglasses, he stuffed the rest back in the glove box and shut the door. Looking around, his attention was drawn toward the console between the seat. Jackpot.

Smiling to himself, Mo reached down and retrieved a gold wedding band, an incredible watch with the word *Rolex* gleaming up at him from the cobalt blue face, and a worn leather wallet.

"Son of a bitch," he murmured to himself as he flipped open the billfold to reveal a thick wad of bills that made his mouth water. Pulling the money out, he could see that it was mainly one-hundred-dollar bills, crisp and clean as if they had just come from the bank. "Who the fuck are these kids?" Putting the bills back in the wallet, he also saw that there was one platinum card, an ATM card, a video rental card, and a driver's license.

He pulled the license from behind the plastic window and, holding it up to the map light above him, he clicked it on and studied the face in the picture. He realized that he had only talked to the kid on the phone; he had never actually seen his face. Even when he had hit him in the head with the gun and dragged him back to the warehouse, Mo had never really looked at his face.

The license said his name was Brian and that he, like St. Nick, lived in Florida. From his birth date, he was a little older than he looked in the photo, and for some reason, he reminded Mo of his kid brother, who had died when they were teenagers.

As he went to put the license back in the wallet, he noticed a picture beneath it. A small photograph of a woman with blonde hair and a not-so-innocent smile. Mo wondered why her picture was in the wallet. Was she his sister, girlfriend, wife?

What the hell did he care. In another few hours, he wouldn't have to worry about St. Nick and Brian from Florida. In a couple of hours, this would all be over. He and Gus would have some cash and goods to sell for even more cash and everything that they had done to achieve it would all be a faint memory.

Gus worked quickly, flipping Brian over on his stomach as he tugged his arms behind him and tied them with some rope. The warehouse filled with light as Mo turned on the headlights to the Excursion, slid out of the car, and walked back towards them. He stood above Gus, watching as he planted a knee in Brian's back to give him leverage to secure the rope tighter before he tied the knot. Then Gus stood up and walked down to Brian's legs. Pulling them together at the ankles, he looped another length of rope around them and tied another knot.

Brian lay there still, his body exhausted and in pain, his mind fading in and out of reality, as white shooting stars went off in his eyes from the earlier blow to his head. He knew that he was being tied up and that he was facedown on the cold concrete of the warehouse floor. He could not see Nick, but the stench of blood was heavy in the air, so he knew he must be near by.

"You don't need to tie up St. Nick," Mo said, as Gus moved to grab another piece of rope. "He isn't going anywhere. Look at him. At the rate he's bleeding, he'll be dead in an hour." He nudged Nick with the toe of his boot, then knelt down beside him. The kid's breathing was shallow and raspy, and his skin had gone a strange shade of grayish white.

One of his blue eyes was open slightly and turned up towards the sky. Mo reached out and placed a finger over Nick's eyelid, shutting it so that he could have some peace.

"How do we know that he won't get away?" Gus asked over Mo's shoulder.

"How do we know he isn't going to get away? Well, we know that because he has been shot twice in the gut and he is barely breathing. Plus, in a half an hour, there will be more blood on this fucking floor than there will be in his body. And you sort of need your blood to live, asshole."

"That's going to be one big goddamned mess to clean up," Gus moaned in a whiny sort of voice. Mo turned to look up at him, a look of irritation on his face. "What?" Gus asked, twirling a piece of rope around his hand.

Ignoring him, Mo stood up and walked away. "Follow me. I need to talk to you outside."

Brian waited as the two men walked in the direction of the Excursion. He heard one of the garage doors being lifted and then lowered shut, and then there was silence. He waited for a split second and then rolled onto his back, his hands bound beneath him, his ankles tied with two pieces of rope. They had taken just long enough tying him up and debating over what to do with Nick that Brian was able to clear his head and regroup. He had prayed for a miracle, and one had finally come.

There was no telling how long they would be outside or what they would be talking about. Kicking his feet, he thrust his legs out over and over, working the sloppy knot that Gus had tied around his ankles. Obviously, Gus had not been a boy scout, because even in Brian's state, he could feel that the knot that Gus was tying was not going to be strong enough to hold. As he was kicking, he also worked his hands behind his back. Gus had tied that knot slightly tighter, and his hands would not budge. "Shit," he hissed, flailing around, his forehead covered in perspiration that ran down his face and stung his eyes.

He could see Nick lying on his back only a few feet away. Blood was still seeping from his wounds, pooling around his body, and Brian could hear his raspy, slow breathing. The vision motivated him to try even harder to break the ties that bound him.

And then it happened.

With a final thrust of his legs, he could feel the ropes go slack and slip down his ankles. Pulling his right leg up, it came loose from the ropes that now dangled freely around his left ankle.

Sitting up, Brian kicked the ropes off of his ankle to the ground and rolled over onto his knees. Crawling over towards Nick with his hands still behind his back, he leaned down and whispered into Nick's ear.

"Nicky... Nicky, it's me. If you can hear me, I want you to know that I am going to get you help. I swear to God, I am not going to let you die. You just have to believe in me."

The whole time he spoke, he continued to work the knot at his wrists with his fingers. It was getting larger and easier to manipulate, and he knew it would only be matter of seconds and he would be free.

"Listen buddy, I know that I am taking a big chance, but if I don't try, we are dead anyway. Do you know what I am saying? Everything is going to be okay, Nick. I'm going to make sure of it. You just need to hang on. You saved me back there, and I'm going to pay you back."

Slipping the middle finger of his right hand under the now loose knot, Brian pulled as hard as he could and, finally, the knot gave away just enough that he was able to wriggle his sweaty hands out from between the circle of rope that bound his wrists together.

Pride in himself was put to the side, as he stayed focused on what he needed to do. Dropping the rope to the ground beside Nick, he wiped the sweat from his forehead and rubbed his watering eyes. Looking down, he smiled at Nick, wondering if it would be for the last time.

"If we don't get out of this alive, Nick, I'll see you in Heaven, buddy," he whispered, standing up. "I'll be the one wearing the Kentucky hat and holding the Carter sign at the pearly gates."

Crouching down low, Brian ran towards the Excursion, his eyes glued on the boarded up window that he had first noticed when he pulled in the warehouse. He knew that time was of the essence, and he was going to make every second count.

Nick lay on the floor of the warehouse, listening to the steady rhythm of Brian's shoes on the pavement as he ran away. He couldn't move his arms or legs, and he was so cold. He wanted to return to that raging sea in his dream. At least there, the water was warm, and he wasn't in pain. Letting himself relax, he began to slip back into his dreamlike state, Brian's last words echoing in his head.

"Everything is going to be okay, Nick..."

And while he wanted desperately to believe the words that his friend had said, all Nick could think was, *We are so screwed.*

Part 5:
Answer the Phone, Nick

Mo walked away from the warehouse quickly, Gus on his heels. He had to get the fuck out of that place for a minute. He had to take some time to think. He had never killed anyone before. There had been a few times he had come close, in bar fights or just plain fights with people who pissed him off, but he had never actually put a bullet in someone and watched them die. Despite what he had said, he never wanted to kill the kid.

Lighting a cigarette, he shoved it between his lips as he kept walking and tried to think straight. St. Nick was as good as dead; there was nothing that was going to change that. And the other one had seen Mo shoot Nick. Whether or not he could identify Mo or Gus, Mo did not know.

"Mo, where are you going?"

"We need to figure out what comes next," Mo said, flicking the ashes to the ground as he continued walking.

"What do you mean, what comes next? We shoot the other one in the head, and then call it a day. Simple. By the time anybody even finds this place, we will be long gone. And the chances of anybody tying us to the warehouse or those two kids would be impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Why not impossible?"

Mo finally stopped walking, dropping the half-smoked cigarette to the ground as he lit another one. They stood there, silent, for a few seconds, as the picture of Nick lying there, covered in blood, flashed over and over in Mo's head. If he would have been satisfied with the BMW, things would have been over and done with. But he'd gotten greedy, especially when he'd seen all the cash in Nick's wallet, along with the credit cards. And when that Brian kid had talked about more cash and fancy watches and jewelry, it was more than he could stand.

"Listen Mo, the sun is going to start coming up soon. We gotta get the hell out of here. So you gotta decide what we're going to do, and you gotta decide fast."

Brian skidded to a stop in front of the Excursion, the headlights casting large shadows of him on the warehouse wall. Pushing a foot up onto the bumper, he climbed onto the hood so that he was level with the window, and he began his escape.

There were three large boards overlapping each other across the window. Brian grabbed on with both hands, tugging as hard as he could. The boards were rotten, and the first

one gave away easily under pressure. Tossing the remains to the ground, he went to work on the second board. It was a little harder, but as he gave a giant tug, it, too, crumbled, and the third board was as easy as the first.

Standing back, Brian looked up at the now exposed window. It was broken, only a few jagged pieces remained, sparing him the noise of smashing the glass himself. Grasping on to the windowsill, he pulled himself up, hooking one leg over the sill while dragging the other leg on the wall to try and get a toe hold to boost himself up. He ignored the pain from the shard of glass that had cut through his Levi's into his leg and continued pulling himself up and into the window.

Once he had his whole body in the window, he maneuvered himself around and dangled his legs out behind him. Then, grasping on to part window sill and part glass, he lowered himself down, the glass slicing into his skin as he held on tightly until his body was lengthened out. He took a deep breath, said a quick prayer, and let go.

Landing with a thud in the darkness, Brian fell backwards, catching himself with his elbows before his head hit the ground. He didn't have time to think about what to do next; he just rolled over, stood up, and sprinted away, as fast as he could, from the warehouse and into the darkness.

Brian had not realized that when he had been flailing around on the warehouse floor, trying to get free, his cell phone had slipped out his back pocket, spinning around before it stopped by Nick's left hand.

Lying there, his body still, Nick was aware of nothing but the beauty of dreaming. As his hand twitched lightly over the cell phone keypad, the battery bars on the right hand side of the phone screen had already begun to fade away...

Mo and Gus stood there, not saying a word, as they both stared out into the distance. The sky was just beginning to turn a lighter shade of black, signaling the coming of morning, and Mo knew that things needed to be taken care of. Sighing, he reached in the waistband of his jeans, pulling out the gun, which he turned around in his hand, gripping it tightly for comfort. He had already killed one person tonight, so the second one shouldn't be that hard.

Turning around, he and Gus made eye contact as Mo cocked his head slightly, signaling Gus to follow him. And then he turned and walked back towards the warehouse. It was quiet, except for the crunching of his boots in the gravel. He wished that there were crickets or birds or something making noise to ease the tension of what he was about to do. Gus walked out around in front of him, meeting Mo at the garage door. Leaning down, he pulled the chain and raised the door as Mo walked in behind him, the gun in his hand down at his side.

He walked in quick, purposeful strides along the front of the warehouse, towards where the two boys lay. His heart was pounding wildly in his chest, and sweat beaded his upper lip as he swallowed hard and raised the gun. He looked up as he drew nearer to where they had left Nick and Brian, ready to aim and hit his target.... His jaw dropped. Only one body was lying on the floor... and where the other body should have been was nothing but three pieces of rope.

"SON OF A BITCH!" Mo screamed, the words bouncing off of the warehouse walls. SON OF A BITCH, THE KID IS GONE!" Mo turned in a circle, pulling at the roots of his hair like a madman. He felt like his temples were going to burst as he let out a loud, agonizing scream that sounded like a wounded animal.

Gus stood a few feet away, a shiver running up his spine as Mo turned to face him. He had known Mo a long time, and he had never seen a look like that in the man's eyes.

Breathing hard through clenched teeth, Mo walked slowly to Gus and placed a hand on his shoulder. "When we find that kid, I'm going to gut him. Do you hear me, Gus? I'm going to gut him, and then I am going to enjoy watching him suffer. No one pulls this shit on me, and I mean no one." Turning back around, Mo reared back a leg and kicked Nick's lifeless body twice before he turned back around and headed towards the Excursion.

Brian stumbled forward across the field behind the warehouse, picking his way through the tall weeds and underbrush. Turning to look over his shoulder, he could still see the light from the Excursion headlights in the warehouse window, and he wondered if Mo and Gus had returned yet to find him gone.

It had been painful for him to make his escape, leaving Nick there wounded and dying. He couldn't shake the image of Nick's bloody lifeless body on the warehouse floor. He wished that Nick would have given him a sign or opened his eyes when he had spoken to him before he left. Anything to let him know that he would hang on just a little while longer. But there had been nothing.

As he continued to run, there was some crunching in the brush to his right that made him jump. A fat rat ran across his path, making him trip and fall as he tried to avoid the disgusting thing. Landing on his side, he rolled over onto his stomach. He pushed himself up on his knees and looked around. What the hell was he doing, and where the hell was he going?

The only thing he knew for sure was that the one definite road to freedom was back the way he came. But could he risk trying to get back around the front of the warehouse in order to go down the main road? Because when they did find him missing, that was probably the first place they would look for him. Pivoting on his knees to look up towards where he had been running, he could see nothing but more weeds and land that rose in a slight incline towards the horizon. What if there was a road over that horizon?

Or a house or a gas station or anything that could get him to safety? Could he risk the time it would take to get that far? Especially if there was nothing there but more land?

Standing up, he wiped the sweat from his brow and smacked the palm of his hand against his forehead in frustration. "Think, Brian. Think," he hissed, turning around in a circle. "Fuck."

He knew what he had to do. He had to go back the way he had come from. He had to find his way to the main road. It was the only way out, and if he didn't do it, Nick was as good as dead.

New York

Leighanne stepped out of the shower, wrapped her long blonde hair in a towel, and pulled on her robe. The mirror was steamed up, so she ran her hand over it in a circular motion, clearing a spot to study her reflection.

Her acting workshop had been going really well, better than she had expected. Yesterday, one of her instructors had spoken to her about her need to work on her "emotions" acting. He explained to her the importance of this skill, especially if she were to get a role on Broadway or doing plays where she would need to "project to the back of the house." So she and the instructor had worked on it for the better part of the workshop. He would toss out an emotion, and she would have to portray it to the best of her ability. It had actually been quite fun, the instructor running around her in circles, shouting out "angry," "excited," "mad," "enthusiastic." She had wound up in a heap on the floor, laughing so hard she had thought she would wet her pants.

Standing now in front of the bathroom mirror, she practiced the emotions technique, shooting through each emotion at record pace while trying not to smile. This was just the kind of thing that would have Brian doubled over in laughter. He would have stood beside her making the faces, too, until they were both laughing so hard they were crying. Thinking about him made her smile. And at that moment, she missed him.

Looking up into the mirror, her face looked sad, and it wasn't acting. Then the last words she had heard Brian speak on their answering machine rang through her head...

"...Nick and I are in trouble. I was told not to call the police, so I am going to try and fix things on my own. If you don't hear from me again, have the police go to this address... I love you, baby. Don't ever forget that."

At that moment, Leighanne remembered the nightmare that had woken her up so early this morning.

Brian and Nick had been in a car, driving down a long dark road. They were both laughing and not paying attention as the road suddenly ended, and the car plunged into

the darkness. Leighanne could see Brian's face so clearly in her nightmare. His features strained, his eyes dark with fear. He looked to Nick, but Nick was gone, the passenger seat dripping with dark red blood. And then Brian had turned, and it was as if he were looking at her, even though she was only an observer and not even in the car. He looked at her, his eyes widening as they pooled with tears. And he mouthed the words, "Help me, Leighanne... Help me."

Her heart was pounding, making the peach silk of her robe jump ever so slightly, as she pushed off of the bathroom counter and headed for the bedroom. Walking to her dresser, she pulled out her address book. Flipping through the pages, she stopped on D and traced her finger down the names to Dorough. She didn't want to be hasty; after all, it was only a nightmare, and the call could still be some prank, so she was going to call Howie and see what she could find out.

She had Howie's home phone as well as his cell phone number written down. It seemed like cell phones were the only way to get a hold of any of them these days, with the guys traveling between homes and vacation spots. Sitting on the bed, she picked up the phone and punched in the cell numbers. It was still going to be early where Howie was, and she hoped he wouldn't mind if she woke him up, but her gut instinct told her that the call had to be placed, and it had to be placed now.

There were seven rings and then a sleepy, "Hello?"

"Howie." Silence. "Howie, it's Leighanne." Still more pausing. She wondered if maybe she had lost the connection until she heard him clear his throat. "It's Leighanne Littrell."

"Oh, Leighanne, hi." She could hear the rustle of covers and a female voice asking who it was. Howie must have placed his hand over the receiver because then Leighanne heard a muffled, "My friend's wife."

"What time is it?" Howie asked, his voice cracking with sleep.

"Early," was all she said, hoping that he wouldn't look at the clock. He laughed a little in response.

"Is everything okay, Leighanne?"

"I don't know." She went on to tell Howie about her separation from Brian. Skipping the more gory details, she tried to stick to the facts. She could tell he was surprised, if not a little bit saddened by the news. She then explained to him about her nightmare and the strange phone message she had received from Brian and asked for Howie's take on it.

"I don't know, Leighanne. It sounds like it could be some kind of joke that Nick came up with... but I don't know if Brian would go along with that kind of joke. Maybe if this was

five years ago, but I don't know if he would do something like that now. Do you want me to stop by their place later today and see what's up?"

"Will you call them? Just call them and see if everything is okay.... now?" There was another long pause. "Please, Howie."

"Okay. I'll call them. Give me that address Brian told you again, too," he said, grabbing a hotel notepad and pen from his nightstand.

Leighanne read him off the address and sighed. "Thanks, Howie. I really appreciate this. No matter what happens, I will always love Brian, and I hope that you and I can always be friends."

"Definitely," Howie replied, a tired smile in his voice. "Listen, I will call you when I find out something, okay?"

"Okay, Howie. Thanks." Dropping the phone into its cradle, Leighanne felt better, knowing she had placed the call. Howie would make sure things were okay, and everything would be fine.

She was sure of it.

Nick fought against the waves as they rose high above his head, threatening to eat him alive. Then, just when he thought he couldn't take anymore and he was going under for good, the waves would go tame, bobbing him around gently in their warm grip. He wondered why he didn't just drown; it seemed like it would be so much easier than trying to stay alive.

But for some reason, someone or something didn't want him dead.

Not yet.

Looking up into the distance, he could see that the beach was now a mere speck in the distance, and he wondered vaguely where the beautiful, dark-haired girl was now and why she had not tried to help him. His life flashed before his eyes in dull, muted colors that made him frown. Had his life been so boring? He couldn't really remember.

Pulling his hands through the water, he placed them on his aching stomach as his legs worked around in the water, trying to keep him afloat. God, he hurt; he hurt so badly. The pain started right in the center of his gut and radiated out in all directions, making it so hard to breathe. He could feel the warm water making its way in and out of the gaping hole in his stomach; it was such a strange sensation to feel the flesh moving around in the water. His head ached, and his ears were ringing, and in the distance, the thunder rolled as the sea began to pitch again. Nick braced himself for the raging waves, wondering if this was the time that he would be swallowed whole.

As the ringing grew louder in his ears, rain began to fall, blinding him to everything around him. Then, suddenly, he felt someone take his hand...

Howie dropped the cell phone to the covers and rolled onto his stomach with a groan. He hated mornings, especially after being out too late the night before, drinking too much champagne and fighting with his girlfriend.

Collette had fallen back asleep beside him. She was beautiful and funny, but other than that, he didn't see much of a future with her, which was what they had fought about. She didn't understand why he didn't put a ring on her finger. She had listed for him the hundreds of guys all across the globe who had wanted to marry her, but she had instead opted to date him, in hopes that he would be "the one." Howie didn't think he would ever be "the one" for any girl because he was just too picky and he enjoyed his free time too much. Listening to Leighanne talk about her separation from Brian had just reinforced the fact that marriage seemed to always ruin something great.

God, he was tired. Fighting took a lot out of a person, which was why he always tried to avoid fighting at all costs. He could feel his eyes fluttering closed as his breathing slowed down to a steady rhythm. How nice it would be to go back to sleep and not wake up until noon. But then he remembered why Leighanne called in the first place, so, rubbing his eyes, he rolled back over and sat up. He knew if he didn't make the call to Brian and Nick, he would surely forget, and then Leighanne would be pissed. So, he retrieved the cell phone from the folds of the bedspread and walked quietly into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

He knew Brian's cell phone number by heart. Sitting on the edge of the large circular marble tub, he punched in the digits and waited while it rang.

It was the girl with the dark hair. He could barely make her out through the rain, but he was sure it was her. She was treading water in front of him as she held his hand tightly in hers. Nick tried to talk, but the driving rain filled his mouth, making him cough as the waves splashed over his head. This was it, he thought, her hand holding his tightly. They were both going to die in the waters he loved so much.

The ringing in his ears grew louder, so loud he wanted to scream to try and drown it out. Shaking his head, he cried out, but there was no sound. And then the strangest thing happened. Suddenly, he could see the dark-haired girl's face. The water still pounded all around them, pelting his shoulders and back, but the rain no longer came between them. Her face was dry and her dark eyes comforting to him. She smiled a pale smile as she narrowed her eyes and said...

"Nick, answer the phone."

He must have looked confused because she leaned in closer to him, pressing her forehead to his; she smelled sweet, like lilacs and sunshine...

"Nick, answer the phone. Now."

He nodded, as the ringing in his ears continued, understanding the words she spoke, trusting her like he had trusted no one in his life. Then the rain drove a wedge between them as a large dark wave rose over her shoulder...

And then she was gone.

Nick moaned long and low, his body twitching a few times as he struggled to move. He was so cold. His eyes fluttered open and then closed as he fought against the sleep that seemed so inviting. He heard faint echoes of words that he could barely understand...

"Nick, answer the phone."

He didn't want to answer any phone. He just wanted to sleep. But the words became louder and angrier, and he wondered why his mom couldn't just get the stupid phone. Why was she yelling at him about it?

Forcing his eyes open, he looked around, blinking over and over with confusion at his surroundings. He didn't recognize the ceiling, with its strange shadows and corrugated metal. And the smell in the air... it was a scent that he was not familiar with; he felt like he was going to throw up, the stench was so strong.

He tried to roll onto his side, but he could not move his legs.

He tried to scream, but there was no sound.

Ring... ring... ring...

His right hand twitched, knocking something at his fingertips. Flexing his fingers again, he felt something. Grabbing at whatever it was, his hand was weak, and he had trouble making it work. It took three tries, but finally, he was able to pick up the object and bring it up in front of his face.

Ring... ring... ring...

His focus went in and out on it, but he was able to figure out that it was a cell phone. With his thumb, he pushed the button on the far right and placed it to his ear.

Howie had been letting the phone ring for five minutes and was just about to give up, when someone finally answered.

"Hello," he said impatiently when no one said anything on the other end. "Brian, is that you?" Nothing. "Nick?"

He could hear breathing. It was slow and shallow; whoever it was needed to back up from the mouthpiece.

"Brian, is that you? It's Howie. Listen, I know that it's early, but Leighanne wanted me to call you guys. She had some nightmare about you, and then you left that weird message on her machine, so she just wanted to make sure everything was okay. You know, buddy, I'm really sorry about the separation, and I want you to know that I will be here for you...."

Suddenly, there was an odd gasping sound on the other end, followed by choking. Howie stopped talking and pushed his ear closer to the phone, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

"H-h-h-h..." He couldn't be sure, but it sounded like Nicky.

"Nicky, is that you?"

"H-h-h-e-l-l..." He could tell Nick was having trouble speaking. Swallowing hard, Howie tried to help him.

"Nicky, are you sick? Did something happen? Do you need help?"

"H-help." He spit the word out in a deep, almost unrecognizable growl that made a chill run up Howie's spine.

"What the hell is going on, Nick? Where the hell are you?"

"H-help... I-I-I'm... d-d-d-ying..."

Just as Nick spit the final words out, the battery bar on the left side of the phone faded out, and the phone went dead.

Part 6:
How About a Board Game?

Mo and Gus walked quickly through the gravel and down the left side of the warehouse where they had stashed the truck. Gus had backed it under an old rotten tree, where the branches hung low enough to cover the top of the truck, as well as most of the windshield. Around the tires, he had pushed dead wood and weeds, which hid it well when coupled with the darkness.

Mo pushed his way through the underbrush to the driver's side and yanked open the door, while Gus cleared the tires and then climbed in the passenger side beside him. Gunning the engine, Mo threw the car into drive, as they bumped out from beneath the tree, the branches scraping like nails on a chalkboard across the windshield.

"The little fucker can't have gone too far," Mo said, as he flipped the wheel hard to the right and gunned the engine. They bumped down through a small ravine and up the other side, which took them directly behind the warehouse. Mo tapped on the brake and then pushed hard on the gas, plowing through the field in the direction of where Brian was now running.

Brian was jogging back through the field when he heard the sounds of the truck firing up, making his blood run cold. Dropping to his stomach, he pressed himself down into the dirt and waited. He could hear the truck revving, and then he heard it lurch forward.

Crawling on his belly, he kept his eyes straight ahead, looking for any signs of the truck and where it might be headed. It was hard to see anything through the tall weeds, and he knew that if they were looking for him, which they most likely were, they wouldn't use the headlights.

Lying there, trying to figure out what to do next, he suddenly remembered his cell phone. *Son of a bitch*, he thought, reaching his hand back to his back pocket. In the middle of all of the chaos, he had forgotten that he had tucked the phone in his pocket before he had entered the warehouse. He didn't know if he would be able to pick up a signal out here in the middle of nowhere, but he was hopeful. Hell, this was California; there had to be cell phone signals running over every square inch of this state.

Howie sat on the edge of the bathtub in his hotel bathroom, his hands shaking and tears pooling in his eyes. He knew that he had just heard the sound of death on the other end of the cell phone in his hand. Looking down at the phone, he quickly hit redial and was redirected into Brian's voicemail. Hitting redial again, he stood up and walked out of the bathroom into the master suite.

"Collette, get up!" he yelled as he walked around the bed, hitting redial over and over, hoping someone would answer.

"What?" she mumbled, as he threw back the covers, looking for the scrap of paper on which he had written down the address Leighanne had given to him.

"I need you to help me." He sounded desperate as he reached over to snap on the light on his nightstand. Just as he pulled his hand back, he connected with a glass of water, which was also on the nightstand. The glass tipped sideways as water splashed up and over the rim. Howie reached for the glass to stop it from falling, but it was too late. The glass rolled and smashed to the floor, sending water and pieces of broken glass everywhere. Looking down, Howie gasped as the water saturated the scrap of paper he was looking for that lay on the floor by the bed.

"Oh Jesus, Jesus, no!" He dropped to his knees, retrieving the paper from the floor, but it was no use; the words and numbers were a blur of black that was bleeding down the page onto his hands.

"What happened, baby?" Collette was lying on her stomach on the bed, looking over Howie's shoulder.

"Take this." Howie thrust the cell phone at her as he grabbed for the hotel phone on his nightstand. "Keep hitting redial; if anybody answers, give the phone to me." She took the phone from his shaking hand, a look of worry in her big brown eyes as she hit redial and put the phone to her ear.

Howie stood up, swiping tears from his cheeks as he waited for Leighanne to pick up the phone.

"Yes?" She answered on the second ring.

"Leighanne, give me that address again." Howie's voice was shaky, his words harsh sounding.

"What's going on?"

"Give me the fucking address now." He heard her set the phone down, and in seconds, she returned, reading the address off to him over and over as he scribbled it down on the palm of his hand.

"Howie, what's wrong, what's happening?" Her voice was hysterical, and he could tell she was also crying now.

"Nick is dying, Leighanne. I have to get him help. He's dying."

Leighanne let out a blood-curdling scream as she dropped the phone to the floor.

Nick lay on the floor of the warehouse, the cell phone dropped to the ground by his head, his body still. His mind slowly began to fade... He could see the angry waters, and he knew that he was all alone. A wave towered over his head, as he choked back tears. Then the wave came crashing down over him... and his mind faded to black...

Howie read off the address to the police dispatcher. He had already been rerouted twice and put on hold once. He pleaded in a desperate tone for them to get his friend help.

"He's dying!" Howie screamed into the phone at the calm woman on the other end. "Get someone out there now. He is Nick Carter, a singer in The Backstreet Boys, and he needs help."

"Okay, Sir, you are going to need to calm down," she replied in a flat, monotone voice, with absolutely no clue who The Backstreet Boys were. "I have sent an ambulance and some officers to the address you have given me. Can you tell me what your friend is dying of?"

"I don't know what the fuck he is dying of. What are you asking me such a stupid question for? If I tell you that he's dying, then that means he is dying and needs help. What the fuck difference does it make what he is dying from?"

"Sir, you need to calm down."

"Fuck you." Howie threw the phone across the room, watching it smash into a reproduction of Monet's *Waterlilies* that hung on the hotel wall. Glass shattered, spewing everywhere, as Collette let out a scream and dropped the cell phone to the bed.

"Howie, you're scaring me. Please tell me what's going on?" she begged, as he stormed past her to the walk-in closet.

"Don't stop hitting redial!" he shouted over his shoulder, as he threw open the closet doors and disappeared inside.

Collette scooped up the cell phone and hit redial again, frustrated as it took her repeatedly into the voice mailbox. "Who is dying, Howie? What is going on? Will you please talk to me?"

He came out of the closet, wearing a pair of jeans and tugging on a black turtleneck sweater. Running his hands through his hair, he stepped into a pair of black loafers by the bed and grabbed for his keys on the marble-topped dresser.

"Give me the phone." He held out his hand, waiting for Collette to hand it to him. She handed it over, her bottom lip trembling.

"Please don't go, Howie. Whatever it is, please let the police take care of it."

He shook his head as he turned and walked to the door, Collette on his heels. He hit redial over and over as he walked quickly across the living room and down the hallway to the front door of the suite.

"Whatever you do, don't open this door to anybody, do you hear me?" She nodded, her eyes pooling with tears. "I promise I will call you when I figure out what the hell is going on." Cupping his hand beneath her chin, he tilted it up to him and smiled. "I promise everything will be okay, Collette." Pressing a warm kiss to her forehead, he smiled and walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

The cell phone was gone. Brian was frantically searching through the weeds and brush around him, hoping that the phone had fallen from his pocket when he had hit the ground, but there was nothing.

And then, before he even had a chance to mourn the loss of the cell phone and think of another plan, the headlights to the truck flashed on twenty feet in front of him, blinding him as the car charged forward, flashing on its brights.

"Shit!" Rolling to his right, the wheel of the truck missed Brian by inches as it roared past him, kicking dirt up in its path. Opening his eyes, Brian fully expected the truck to turn around, come back, and run him down, but instead, it plowed forward towards the horizon in the direction he had first been running. Son of a bitch, they hadn't seen him. Scrambling up onto his feet, Brian stayed low as he ran towards the warehouse, a slight smile on his face.

Howie strode across the lobby of the plush Beverly Wilshire Hotel towards the concierge. "I need a car and a driver immediately!" he shouted, his words echoing off of the crystal and marble all around him. The man snapped his head up with a confused look, grabbing for the phone on his desktop.

Once at the desk, Howie stopped. Reaching in his back pocket for his billfold, he pulled out a wad of bills and peeled off two fifty dollar bills, pushing them across the small desk top to the man.

"Yes, Mr. Dorough, they are pulling a car around the front right now for you, sir."

"Do you have a pen and piece of paper?" Howie's hands were sweating, and he was worried that the address he had written on the palm of his hand would smear. The concierge handed him a hotel pen and piece of stationery. Howie quickly scribbled the

address down and tossed the pen back to the man. Then he walked to the front doors of the hotel and outside to the waiting town car that was idling at the curb.

Climbing in the car, he handed the driver the piece of hotel stationary with the address on it, telling him it was an emergency and he needed to get Howie there as fast as possible. The driver closed the door behind him, tipping his cap as he walked around to the driver's side door. Sinking back in the plush leather seats, Howie looked out the tinted window to the darkened streets and prayed for a miracle.

Leighanne sat on the floor of her loft, staring at the phone on the floor beside her.

Nick was dying.

And Brian was with Nick.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she grabbed for the phone and dialed Brian's cell phone number. She was directed into his voice mail,

"This is Brian. Leave a message, and I'll call you back."

"Brian, it's me. Baby, where are you? What's going on? Please call me back, please." She held the phone tightly against her chest, her heart pounding, her head spinning. She tried to picture his face the last time she had seen him... tried to remember what they had said to each other. In the midst of all of the fighting, had she told him that she loved him?

Images swirled through her mind, a million miles an hour. Images of the first time they had met, his sweet smile and quirky sense of humor. The way he held her hand when they walked down the street and the softness of his lips when he kissed her on the forehead. She thought back to their wedding, so grand and elegant, like a fairytale. The way he had held her when they danced and the sparkle in his eyes when he had told her that he loved her.

And now it was over, and she wished she had it all back.

Nanette had been a dispatcher for the police department for almost twenty years, and in those twenty years, she had heard it all. She was used to people praising her in one breath and berating her in another when they were upset, so this last call was no different than a million others when she logged it in her reports, shaking her head.

Her coworker Pauline walked up behind her, looking over her shoulder, as Nanette's hands flew over the keyboard, logging what info she had been given from the last call.

She was just entering the name “Nick Carter” and “Backstreet Boys” as Pauline sat down beside her, eyes wide.

"Is that call for real?" she asked, her eyes skimming over the details. Pauline had two young teenage daughters, so she was well-versed in boyband trivia. Who was the cutest, who was the ugliest, who sang the best songs, and who was dating whom.

"I guess. The man on the other end of the call was very upset. He ended up hanging up on me." Nanette finished her entry and submitted the report. "Why, do you know who this Nick is?"

"Of course." Pauline slid up a chair and sat down beside Nan. "He's in The Backstreet Boys. They're a singing group; they have had tons of hits. You haven't heard of them?"

Nanette shook her head. She had never had children, and at almost fifty years old, she had no need to watch MTV.

"Nan, I don't know if that was a crank call or not, but I think that you should send a few more policemen out. If what the man on the other end of that call says is true, we could have something major on our hands."

Nanette placed the call in to the department, requesting more backup. They had already sent out one ambulance and two uniformed officers. When Nanette relayed to them what she knew about the call and Nick's celebrity status, they agreed to send out more police officers and to keep her informed of what they found.

The police and ambulance were already on route to the address provided when the call came across the wire for more backup. They were about twenty minutes out from the site and had already figured, based upon the area of town they were headed into, that it was most likely a routine drug deal gone bad or something of that nature.

They had no idea.

Brian ran down along the side of the warehouse, picking up his speed as he hit the clearing. He glanced for a brief moment toward the warehouse doors, wondering if Nick was holding on. He just had to be, Brian thought, because the alternative was too painful to imagine.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw and heard no signs of the truck. They must still be cruising the land in the back of the warehouse, which gave Brian the motivation to run faster down the dirt road in front of him. He tried to keep his mind focused on getting to the main road. Once out there, he would just keep running until he saw a car. He would then flag it down and beg for help.

The sky had turned a shade lighter, as morning tried to push through, but Brian could see it was a typical overcast day and that no matter how hard it tried, it would be hours before he would see sunlight. He was trying to stay focused on the road ahead, but his mind kept drifting... He didn't even hear the sound of the truck as it pulled onto the dirt road, headlights dimmed, and gunned its engine.

"There that little shit is," Mo said through clenched teeth, pushing his foot on the gas, his knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel.

Gus reached for his seat belt; he had a feeling he was in for one hell of a ride.

Brian was thinking about the last time he and Nick had played Monopoly together. He didn't know why that popped into his head just then, but for some reason, it did.

They had been on tour promoting *Millennium* and were in some random hotel in Utah. A.J. and Howie decided to go clubbing, since it was going to be a two-night concert and they would be staying overnight. Kevin was in his room playing poker with some of the road crew, which left Nick and Brian trying to think of something to do. Brian knew that Nick wanted to go with A.J. and Howie, but in the end, he waved them off and shut the hotel room door behind them, leaning back against it with a sigh.

"So whadda you want to do?" he asked Brian.

Brian was sitting on the king-sized bed, remote in hand, flipping through the channels. "It's midnight; I figured I would just turn in."

"Bor-r-r-r-r-r-ring." Nick rolled his eyes. "I'm wired from the show; I wanna do something."

"Then why didn't you go with the guys?"

"I just felt like hanging out with you." Nick shrugged, walking across the room, hands jammed in the pockets of his well-worn gray sweatpants. "Do you want to play a game?"

"No video games; I'm not in the mood."

"How about a board game?" Nick leaned against the cabinet that housed the TV, as well as the liquor.

"We don't have any board games." Brian snapped off the TV and tossed the remote onto the bed. Nick smiled his lopsided grin, waggling his eyebrows as he headed for the phone.

Thirty minutes later, a bellhop arrived with a brand new Monopoly game, still in the shrink wrap. Nick gave him a \$100 tip for his trouble and went about setting up the game, whining, as always, that he had to be the top hat, as he sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed opposite Brian, who had settled for being the race car.

The game started out the same as always. Nick went around the board half a dozen times, collecting money, while Brian snapped up properties. After an hour and a half had passed, Nick owned Oriental Ave, Baltic, and St. Charles place, and he had about six hotels on each one. Brian owned just about everything else.

"I hate this stupid game," Nick said after landing on Go To Jail for the eighth time.

Brian just laughed as he placed another hotel on Park Place. As Nick moved the top hat down the board to the jail space, he ended up knocking all of Brian's hotels off of the yellow properties. "Sorry."

"No you're not; you did that on purpose," Brian said, picking up the hotels off of the bedspread and placing them back on the spaces.

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did. You're a sore loser."

"You're the loser," Nick snapped back, as Brian spread his arms out over the board as if to say, *Look at all my properties, and look at yours.*

"Yeah, you're right, Nick; I'm the loser. What have you got there? Three properties and about six dollars?"

Just as Brian finished his sentence, Nick picked up the racecar and threw it across the room. Brian picked up Nick's top hat and threw it in the opposite direction. Then Nick grabbed the board and flipped it in the air as hotels, houses, and money went flying, a hotel hitting Brian right between the eyes.

"Now that I did on purpose," Nick said, folding his arms over his chest with a snotty grin.

Brian's first instinct was to slap him upside the head and knock that stupid smirk right off of his face, but instead, he started to laugh. He started to laugh so hard, tears were streaming down his face. Looking around the room at the scattered Monopoly money everywhere and hotels and houses littering the bed and floor, along with the game board that was now facedown by the window on the far wall, only made him laugh harder. Nick looked at him like he was crazy, but then, suddenly, the laughter became contagious. The two of them laughed so hard, their stomachs hurt and they couldn't even talk...

Brian was trying to remember what happened next, when suddenly, the main road came into view. It was so close, he could feel the asphalt under his feet. Breaking out in a

wide grin, he was just starting to pick up his pace a little when the truck clipped him from behind, sending him up and onto the windshield with a loud thud.

Part 7: *Time's Up*

Mo slammed on the brakes of the truck, his head crashing into the steering wheel as the grill of the truck smashed into Brian's back, sending him up and over the hood and into the windshield with a loud thud.

Cursing, Mo grabbed at his bleeding forehead. Then, throwing the truck into park, he fumbled for the knob to turn on the headlights, flooding the woods with light, as he and Gus scrambled to exit the truck, leaving the engine running and the doors wide open as the chase began.

It only took Brian a split second to realize what had happened, as he rolled back down the hood of the truck and fell to the ground. Running on pure adrenaline, he quickly got up and started to run, veering off into the thick wooded area to his right, the headlights from the truck lighting his way. Bobbing and weaving, he made his way quickly around the gnarled tree trunks, well aware that Mo and Gus were making their way through the trees behind him, the sound of their heavy breathing echoing in his ears. As the three men wound their way further into the woods, Brian prayed for some kind of miracle....

Howie sat in the backseat of the town car, nervously tapping his legs, his eyes glued to the passing scenery outside. It was as if he thought he might see Nick standing by the side of the road, waiting for Howie to come and rescue him. Wishful thinking, he guessed.

The two words "I'm dying" played over and over in his head like a broken record. The last time he and Nick had even spent any substantial amount of time together was when the group was doing some promotion for "Drowning." Things had been tense; the single wasn't doing so well, and everybody was blaming everybody else. Howie and Nick had barely spoken two words to each other throughout most of the interviews and appearances. And when they did speak, Nick reverted to his old childish self of name-calling and mimicking Howie until he would walk away in disgust.

Howie wondered why their relationship had always been so strained and why he had never tried to do anything about it. Taking a shaky, deep breath, he pushed away at a tear that slid down his cheek, wishing he had the opportunity to change things now and knowing that if he didn't get to Nick in time, he would forever be haunted by Nick's final words, begging for help on the other end of the phone.

Collette paced nervously through the hotel suite, feeling sick to her stomach, as her mind ran wild with images of where Howie was and what he was doing. She wished that she would have forced him to stay or call the police or anything besides letting him walk out that door. She was desperately in love with Howie, and she knew that they were

destined to spend the rest of their lives together; all she had to do was convince him of that. His mind always ran wild with “what ifs.” What if they got married and they weren’t happy? What if they ended up wanting different things in life someday? What if there was someone better waiting just around the corner? She knew most of these things he said out of fear of commitment and not to hurt her feelings. But it did hurt, and last night, she had told him so.

The fighting had gone on and on and on. He would try to steer them off of the topic of long-term love, but she would steer them right back on course. She wanted to know where things were going with them. She wanted a promise that he would stick around. He had not been able to give her that promise before they fell asleep, exhausted from going around in circles.

Walking back into the bedroom, she threw herself onto the bed, dragging Howie’s pillow to her and inhaling his sweet scent, as her heart pounded in her chest that was heavy with dread. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something terrible was going to happen, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that Howie would somehow be involved.

Mo’s head was throbbing, and the blood that was dripping from the gaping cut in his forehead was now blurring his vision as he tried to focus on Brian, who was weaving in and out of the trees in front of them. The sounds of his own heavy footsteps on the ground echoed loudly in Mo’s ears, as he turned to see where the hell Gus was.

Gus had fallen slightly behind, out of shape and out of breath. In reality, neither one of them were much of a match for the kid, but lucky for them, the blow from the car had slowed him down some, and Mo could see that Brian was limping a little, which was good for them.

Smiling to himself, Mo’s mind was filled with all the ways that they could make the kid pay for making them look like fools, when, all of a sudden, the sound of sirens in the distance snapped him back to reality.

Brian’s prayers were being answered.

Two police cars turned onto the dirt road, their sirens screaming, as an ambulance brought up the rear. The two officers in the first police car quickly noticed an old pickup truck up ahead of them that was pulled off to the side of the road with its headlights on and driver’s and passenger side doors open.

“Should we pull over and see what’s going on?” Officer Park asked, gripping tightly to the steering wheel as they bumped along the dirt road at high speed.

“No. We have backup coming. We’ll radio them to check it out,” his partner Officer Martin answered, grabbing for the radio. “We were told it was important to get to the address that dispatch gave us ASAP. That warehouse is at least a mile or more down at the end of this road.” Looking over his shoulder as they flew by the truck, Officer Park gave it one last glance in his rearview mirror, wondering if that could somehow be the key to whatever the hell was going on.

Brian heard the sirens, and they were like sweet music to his ears. Throwing his head back in laughter, he raised his arms up and pumped his fists into the air.

“Fuck you! Fuck you, you dumb ass bastards!” Brian screamed, turning to run backwards so that he could watch the beautiful sight of the police cars and the ambulance, sirens wailing, lights flashing, as they sped down the dirt road towards the warehouse. Brian’s laughter echoed all around them, making Mo’s head spin even harder as they gained some more ground on him.

“We totally won. We won, and you lost!” Brian taunted. “They are going to save Nick, and then they are going to come and get me, and you stupid bastards are going to rot in jail for the rest of your natural born...”

BAM!

A single shot was fired from Mo’s gun, ripping a hole right through Brian’s heart.

Brian felt the searing pain as the bullet burned into his flesh.

And then he felt nothing.

Mo stopped, his finger still on the trigger, the smoking gun still aimed at Brian. Gus stopped beside Mo, trying to catch his breath, a slight smile on his face. Brian just stood there, eyes wide and full of confusion, his body teetering. He tried to speak, blood bubbling up in his mouth, choking him. He stumbled forward a few steps, arms outstretched, and then he fell face first to the cold ground.

Officers Park and Martin climbed from their squad car and approached the warehouse. They stood side by side, observing the large structure, as the second police car came to a stop beside their car, the ambulance hanging back with its engine running, waiting for word on what needed to be done next.

Park and Martin instructed the second set of officers to search the perimeter around the warehouse for signs of anything that seemed odd or out of place as they approached the garage door on the far left of the building, guns drawn. Park noticed that the garage door seemed to be slightly ajar, and he could also see a tiny sliver of light coming from

beneath the door, alerting him that someone had been or still was inside. He signaled to Martin to stand on the right side of the garage as he stood on the left. Then, pulling the door up quickly, Martin advanced in first, his gun drawn, as Park brought up the rear.

The two men moved quickly towards the Excursion, working their way around to the driver's side door. Park pulled the door open while Martin stepped in, gun pointed into the empty cab. They then moved around to the back door, going through the same motions, until they had worked their way around to the tailgate doors, satisfying themselves that the vehicle was empty, despite the brightly burning headlights casting eerie shadows on the wall.

Standing arms' width apart, the two officers then looked down towards the opposite end of the warehouse. It was dark and appeared to be empty on first scan, but on his second scan, Park noticed something on the floor, down towards the fourth or fifth garage bay. He motioned to Martin, who nodded that he, too, saw the figure on the floor. Moving in step with one another, they walked silently down the center of the warehouse, their eyes shifting around to the shadows on either side of them for any sudden movement or surprise.

"Hey!" Martin shouted, his voice echoing in the empty spaces. "Hey, can you hear me?" He thought that it could possibly be a dead animal that had wandered into the warehouse and had gotten trapped somehow and died. But the closer they got to the figure, the more it began to take the shape of a human.

"I said, can you hear me?" Park tried again, as he and Martin both aimed their guns at the figure lying on the floor. The closer they got to it, the thicker the air became with the foul, metallic odor of blood.

"It's the police. Put your hands where I can see them!" Park shouted, his right foot sliding forward. Trying to regain his balance, Park pulled his flashlight from his waistband and aimed it down at the ground where he had just stepped. A large pool of blood was spread out beneath his feet. As he moved the flashlight slowly along the floor, he could see that there was blood everywhere. All of it seemed to be coming from the body that was now a mere six feet in front of them.

Park approached the lifeless body first, his flashlight aimed down on the face, as Martin hovered behind him, his gun ready for any sort of movement. Sizing up the situation, Park could see that the body was that of a young man in his late teens, early twenties, with what appeared to be blonde hair and a semi-stocky build. He was dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, the color of which Park was unable to make out through the dark red blood that had seeped through the clothing. He also noticed that the young man was not wearing shoes or socks and that his legs looked to be bruised, cut, and coated with dirt. Kneeling down, Park reached a hand out and pressed it to the pulse area in the neck. The young man's features appeared to be strained, most likely with the pain from what appeared to be multiple gunshot wounds to the torso.

“Be careful,” Martin hissed, as Park began to press around the neck for a pulse. The skin was cold and clammy, but the blood was not completely coagulated yet, alerting Park that the body has most likely been shot within the last hour or so.

“Is he dead?” Martin asked, his eyes never leaving the body.

“I don’t know.” Park shook his head, pressing deeper into the fleshy parts of the neck. “I’m not getting anything. Go and get the EMTs.”

Martin shook his head. “No. I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“I’m fine; I have my gun. Besides, this kid isn’t going anywhere.”

Hesitant, Martin backed away from the scene, yelling over his shoulder as he picked up his pace towards the garage door that he and his partner had entered through.

“Get in here quick! We need help; a man’s been shot!”

“Shit, man, this is perfect!” Gus knelt beside Brian’s lifeless body, rolling it over and feeling for a pulse. “I’m pretty sure he is totally dead. We got rid of both of those little sons of bitches just in time. Now we just need to get the hell out of here, and it’s smooth sailing.” Wiping his hands on his jeans, Gus stood up and found that he was staring down the barrel of Mo’s gun.

“What the hell are you doing, man?” Gus asked, pushing the barrel away from his face, only to have Mo swivel it right back between his eyes. “This ain’t funny, Mo. We don’t have time for this shit; we have to get out of here. You saw those cops, and there are probably more on the way. We have to...”

BAM!

A single shot right between the eyes dropped Gus to the ground beside Brian.

Mo worked quickly. He knew that he didn’t have much time. Kneeling down beside Gus, he placed the gun in Gus’s right hand. Gus had not noticed that Mo had slid on a pair of leather gloves while they were bumping along the gulches behind the warehouse, searching for Brian. The plan had been in place before Brian had even escaped from the warehouse. Mo knew that he would have to do away with Gus. He couldn’t risk the outcome if his dimwitted friend was somehow left behind.

Placing Gus’s finger on the trigger, Mo aimed the gun into the ground, firing three shots, which he then covered with some dirt and leaves before standing up with a sigh.

“Sorry, old fella. I just couldn’t risk the chance of the cops pinning this on me. You always were a big mouth, Gus; you just couldn’t be trusted. So now they will think that there was only one man involved instead of two.”

Backing up from the two bodies, Mo swiped at the blood that dripped from the open wound in his forehead. Then, looking over his shoulder as more cop cars turned onto the dirt road, he smiled.

“Time’s up,” he said, stepping over the bodies with a chuckle as he picked up his pace and disappeared into the woods.

“I’ve got a pulse; I’ve got a pulse!” Park screamed as Martin returned, followed by the other two officers, as well as the EMTs dragging a stretcher. The EMTs worked quickly, dragging Nick’s body onto the stretcher, shouting instructions to each other.

They cut Nick’s shirt from his body and attempted to clear some of the blood away in order to find the source. Within seconds, he was hooked up to tubes and IVs, as one of the EMTs climbed onto the stretcher, straddling Nick’s chest, while the other EMT and Officer Martin quickly rolled the stretcher towards the open garage bay.

“We’re losing him; we’re losing him!” the EMT shouted, pounding on Nick’s chest with strong hands as they rushed the stretcher across the gravel to the idling ambulance.

Officer Park followed closely behind them, looking over his shoulder to the other two officers, who were securing the warehouse crime scene. Park knew that whoever had done this could not have gotten too far; everything at the scene was still fairly fresh. The blood, the headlights on the Excursion...

And then he remembered the truck.

Part 8:
Some Things Are Worth Fighting For

Ignoring the shouts of protest from his partner, Park ran across the gravel and climbed into his squad car. Throwing the car into drive, he peeled out, riding close on the bumper of the wailing ambulance as they both sailed down the dirt road. Nearing the end of the road that lead out onto the main street, both the ambulance and Park were forced to swerve to miss the oncoming police cars that raced one right after another up the dirt road towards the warehouse.

Park slammed on his brakes, sliding sideways, almost hitting the pickup truck that was still parked by the side of the road, headlights on and engine running. Exiting the police car, gun drawn, he could see that the last three police cars turning onto the dirt road were following his lead, coming to a halt near his own squad car.

“What’s the situation, Park?” Officer Mulroy, one of the officers from his unit, approached the truck where Park now stood.

“Man down at the warehouse from some pretty fresh gunshot wounds. He is on his way to the hospital, and I believe the suspect is still somewhere in the area.”

Two of the other officers advanced on the truck, allowing Park, Mulroy, and the other three other officers to continue forward into the woods.

Rain streamed down from the blackened sky as Nick burst up through the waves, choking and gasping for air before going back under again. His arms thrashed wildly, trying to grasp onto anything. He was fighting for his life; he didn’t want to die yet; he just wasn’t ready. Coming up again, he tried to scream, but the salt water filled his lungs, and he was forced down again.

Park made his way around the trees, observing the broken branches and footprints in the dirt. He followed the trail, knowing that whoever had been coming through these trees was being chased; otherwise, the person would have taken a more direct route, instead of the zigzagging pattern which he now followed. Leaning down, he shined his flashlight on the footprints, noting from the tread, as well as the size, that there were at least two different sets of prints.

Mulroy, the officer from Park’s unit, walked the trail behind him, as the other three men fanned out in different directions to survey the area and search for the person or people who had shot the kid in the warehouse. Moving his flashlight from side to side, Park stopped.

“Shit,” he groaned, as they moved into a small clearing.

The body of another young man lay face-up on the ground, a fresh, gaping bullet wound in his heart. Beside the younger man was an older man with a bullet hole between his eyes and a gun in his hand.

“Looks like some sort of a murder-suicide,” Officer Mulroy said, crouching down beside the older man. “The gun is still warm.”

Park dropped beside the younger man, trying desperately to find a pulse, as Mulroy felt around the neck and wrist of the shooter for a pulse.

“Mine’s dead, Park, what about yours?” Mulroy said in the calm voice of a police force veteran.

Shining his flashlight down into the face of the young man, Park silently apologized for being too late as he gently pulled Brian’s blue eyes closed for the last time and replied,

“Yeah... mine’s dead, too.”

Nick broke through the surface of the water for a third time, pinwheeling his arms through the waves in frustration, until finally, he hit something solid with the tips of his fingers. Forcing his eyes open against the rain and wind that temporarily blinded him, he expected to see the girl with the dark hair, but instead, it was Brian.

Brian’s face was serious, his eyes dark. Nick was thrashing about in the water, trying to stay afloat, while Brian was somehow able to stay shoulders above the water with no effort at all. Nick was screaming, while Brian said nothing. Nick feared the waves, yet Brian seemed to fear nothing at all.

“Give me your hand.” Brian’s mouth did not move, but Nick heard the words; he knew that he heard the words. Pausing for a second, Nick pulled his arm out from beneath the heavy water that ebbed and tided all around him and reached out to Brian. A wave attempted to overtake Brian from behind but instead broke around him, never touching his body. What the hell was going on? Shaking his head furiously, Nick pulled his hand away before their fingertips could touch.

“Get away from me!” he yelled into the raging wind. “Get away from me; you’re not Brian!” He turned and tried to swim away, but the undertow pulled him right back where he was.

“I’m here to help you.” Brian’s calm voice carried over the storm while his lips stayed pursed. “Just let me help you, you idiot.”

Nick stopped and turned, his legs working wildly underwater to keep him afloat. “What?” he asked, pushing the water from his eyes. “What did you say to me?”

“I said, just let me help you, you idiot. Sometimes you can be so stubborn, it pisses me off.” Again, Brian’s mouth did not move, but Nick heard the words so clearly, and they were wonderful words to his ears. Things only Brian would say to him.

“Brian?” Nick asked, as Brian reached out his hand, nodding his head in response.

“Yes, Nick, it’s me. You need to take my hand.”

So Nick took Brian’s hand.

The EMTs had already alerted the staff at a nearby hospital that they were bringing in a young man in his late teens, early twenties, with multiple gunshot wounds. When asked his condition, they radioed in that there was significant blood loss and a thready pulse. Condition critical.

The nurses and doctors that hovered in the lobby knew that there wasn’t a second to spare, as the EMTs broke through the emergency room doors with Nick on the stretcher, tubes dangling from his body, an oxygen mask over his face, and blood everywhere. Nick was quickly hooked up to machines, as doctors and nurses traded medical jargon with the EMTs, rushing Nick through the double swinging doors to the OR.

One of the nurses, who kept a quick pace, holding onto the metal bars of the stretcher as they turned left, walking towards the first operating room, was watching the young man’s face for any sign that he was alert as to what was happening. His skin was a pale, bluish white, and his eyes, which were closed, fluttered wildly beneath the long lashes. At one point, he sputtered something from beneath the mask, his chest rising and falling as he struggled to breathe. The nurse reached down as they continued walking and pulled the oxygen mask from his face.

“I think he is trying to say something,” she said, as they turned the stretcher into the OR room and stopped. Once in the OR, they wheeled the stretcher close to the operating table and, on three, they lifted Nick onto the table, wasting no time hooking him up to monitors, as nurses rushed about, readying things for surgery, and two of the hospital’s top surgeons entered the room.

“B-B-B-B-Brian... h-h-h-e-l-l-l-p... me.”

The nurse who had removed the mask looked up to one of the other nurses, as the surgeons stepped in to assess the damage. “Who is Brian?” she asked. The other nurse shrugged.

Again, Nick sputtered out Brian’s name. “B-B-B-Brian.” His chest rose and fell slowly, and then there was nothing.

“We’ve lost him,” one of the doctors said in a raised voice.
“Flatline.....”

New York

At the very moment that the bullet tore through Brian’s heart, Leighanne felt a pain in her own heart so sharp and so deep that she clutched her chest and screamed out loud. She was afraid she was having a heart attack, as she fell to the floor, unable to move or breathe. But as quick as the feeling of pain came, it was instantly gone.

And she felt so empty inside.

The police roped off the wooded area around the two bodies, as the EMTs loaded both the body of the young man and the body of the older man onto stretchers. Park had checked the pockets of both men, hoping for some key to their identity, but was unable to find a wallet or anything that would help.

The other officers up at the warehouse were going through the same motions, looking for some sort of clue as to who these people were and what had lead them to the warehouse where so much violence had taken place. There were no registration papers in the glove compartments of either the pickup truck or the Excursion. There was a set of rental agreement papers in the Excursion, but the name scrawled on the signature line was slanted and sloppy. They figured they could probably call the car rental company and request records on who had rented the vehicle, but for now, it was still a mystery.

Park was leaning back on the hood of his police cruiser, watching them load the bodies into the ambulances, when a call came through on his radio.

“Hey, we found a cell phone up here.” It was Martin, who was still up at the warehouse.

“Where?” Park asked.

“It was over to the side of where the body was. It was in the blood, so we must not have noticed it. The battery is dead on it, but it looks like the kid must have used it because his bloody fingerprints are on it. He must have tried to call someone. They are bagging it up for evidence right now.”

Park nodded to himself, as the back of the ambulance doors slammed shut with the dead bodies inside. “Didn’t Sergeant Cox say something about a call coming in from someone on a cell phone?”

“Dunno. Where the hell is Cox?” Martin looked around the warehouse, scanning the faces for their sergeant.

“When he radioed in to us, he gave us the warehouse address and said he got it from dispatch. I think I remember that he said something about the lead coming from a caller on a cell phone. Call in to dispatch and see what you can find out. Maybe whoever called them talked to the kid on his cell phone before he was shot and can tell us who he is?”

Mo ran fast and low through the woods, the Kentucky baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, his hands sweating beneath the leather gloves. Thank God for the California haze, he thought, looking up to the still pale sky that was trying to break with morning but chose instead to hold onto the night a little while longer. He figured he had gotten himself a good distance from the scene in a short amount of time, and now he needed a plan.

Running his hand over his back pocket, he checked for Brian’s billfold, which was still in place, along with the sunglasses. He wore the Rolex on his wrist and Brian’s gold wedding band on the pinky of his right hand. He thought of the things he had touched at the scene, leaving his fingerprints: the car door and glove compartment of the Excursion, and the chains to the garage doors at the warehouse. He also thought about the cut on his forehead from his collision with the steering wheel, and he wondered how much of his blood had spilled in the truck. He just hoped that he had left a convincing enough display in the woods that nobody would think twice that Gus had not pulled the whole thing off himself and there would be no need for further investigation.

Now he would need to find a ride and get back to his apartment, where he could gather up Nick’s items, get to the location where Gus had stored the BMW, change the plates, and get the hell out of dodge. Once he got to Mexico, he could sell the car, make a tidy sum, and just disappear into the sunset.

Moving out towards the edge of the woods, he ran parallel with the main road, watching for a passing car that he could flag down for a little help.

Howie checked his watch, nervously tapping the cell phone against his leg as he leaned forward over the driver’s shoulder.

“How much longer?” he asked, turning the cell phone over, trying to decide whether to call Brian’s cell phone again or Leighanne.

“Not much longer, sir. I would say another fifteen miles,” the driver said in a polite tone, as Howie sat back in the seat and punched in the digits of Brian’s cell phone.

Looking up ahead, the driver saw something by the side of the road. It looked like a person, but he couldn't be sure. As they drew closer, he could definitely tell it was a man. He was wearing all black and a baseball cap, and he was flagging the town car down with desperate, waving arms.

Mo saw the headlights down the road and made his move. Walking out onto the side of the road, he made his way into the middle of the road and began waving his arms wildly, hoping to convince some kind sap that his car had broken down and he was in need of a lift. As the car came closer, he could see it was a fancy, plum-colored town car with gold mag wheels and tinted windows, and he could also see that it was slowing down.

Howie could tell that they were slowing down. Leaning forward again, he tapped the driver on the shoulder.

“Why the fuck are we slowing down?” he said in a not-so-pleasant tone. “Did I not explain to you that this was a matter of life and death and that speed was of the utmost importance?”

“Yes, sir, but there is a guy in the road, waving us down. He looks like he needs help.”

Howie glanced up into the road, where he could see that there was indeed a man in the middle of the road, and he was walking right towards them.

“Brian, I can't do it,” Nick sputtered, as Brian tightened his grip on Nick's hand. “I'm too tired; I just can't do it.”

“You always give up so easily,” Brian replied, struggling against the current as he made his way closer to land, Nick in tow. “You have to learn that some things are worth fighting for.”

“You don't understand, Brian.” Another wave crashed over Nick, pushing him down and filling his lungs with water. Brian dragged him up above the water again with a grin. “Brian,” he coughed, grabbing for Brian's hand again. “You don't understand. I'm hurt.”

“That's right, Nick, you are hurt. You're hurt really bad. And like I told you, there are some things worth fighting for. So I am fighting for you, and you are going to fight for your life.”

The town car came to a stop in front of the man, who dropped his arms and ran to the back door, yanking it open.

“Thanks so much for pulling over. I’m in trouble; my car broke down a few miles back, and I really need a ride to the next town up. If you could just turn around and head that direction,” Mo said, sliding into the backseat beside Howie, who started to protest.

“Look man, I don’t think we can help you right now. I’m in a big hurry; a friend needs my help, and I can’t spare a second.”

Mo put on his best disappointed face and sighed. “Please man, you don’t understand. I’m all alone out here. You are the first car I have seen in miles.”

Sighing himself, Howie looked around. “Okay, look, if you want to come with us, we can take you where you need to go after I find my friend.”

Mo was pissed. This little son of a bitch was not going to tell him what to do. But he decided that it might be worth it if he could catch a ride and get off the road. Besides, if this guy took too long helping his dumbass friend, then Mo could just take the car and strand them in the middle of nowhere.

“Yeah, okay, man,” he said to Howie, trying to look sincere. “I really appreciate the help.”

Both men sat back in their seats. Howie looked over at Mo and noticed the Kentucky baseball cap on his head. “I have a couple of friends that are from Kentucky,” he said, making small talk.

Mo smiled at him, fiddling with the brim of the cap. “Well, isn’t that a coincidence,” he replied, as Howie gave him a small smile back.

As the driver started the car up again, Howie’s cell phone rang. “Hello?”

“Howie, it’s Leighanne. Something terrible has happened; I just know it.” She was hysterical and crying, and Howie could barely make out the words.

“Calm down, baby, it’s okay. I have the police on the way, and I am almost there. Everything is going to be alright.”

“Have you talked to Brian?”

“No, no, I haven’t been able to get a hold of him, but I am sure he is okay.”

“No, Howie, he isn’t okay. Nothing is okay. Something terrible has happened.” She was hyperventilating now.

“Leighanne, calm down, baby, just calm down. I am going to find Nick and Brian, and everything will be okay. I promise.”

At the mention of the names Nick and Brian, Mo’s blood ran cold.

Part 9:
So You Know Nick and Brian?

Howie pushed the end button on the cell phone, Leighanne's cries still echoing in his ears. She had sounded so upset and hysterical, Howie did not know what to do. He had begged her to call her mother or a friend and talk it out, anything to keep her occupied until he could find out more information, but she had been inconsolable.

"So you know Nick and Brian?" Mo asked.

Looking over at Mo, Howie could tell the man had said something, but he had not been listening. "I'm sorry, did you say something?" he asked, the cell phone still clutched tightly in his hand.

"I said, so you know Nick and Brian?"

"I know a Nick and Brian."

"Yeah, me too. I know a Nick and Brian, but I doubt if they are the same guys that you know." Mo sort of laughed to himself, while Howie just ignored him.

Leaning forward, Howie asked the driver how much further until they reached the address. Craning his neck to look out the window, the driver seemed to be lost.

"I'm sure that the Nick and Brian I know aren't the same guys you know." Mo continued the conversation he and Howie had been having, despite Howie's obvious lack of interest. "The Nick and Brian I know aren't from around here. They're from Florida."

Howie's head snapped up at the mention of Florida, as Mo continued on. "Two stupid little fucks, my Nick and Brian. One's a big guy, and the other one is sort of little, and both of them are as dumb as rocks." Mo laughed again, flipping out his wrist to check the time.

Howie's jaw dropped open ever so slightly, and his mouth went dry as the interior lights of the car gleamed off of the shining sliver and stunning blue cobalt blue of the Rolex watch on Mo's arm.

It had been a few years back, while on tour in Europe, that Howie and Brian had gone shopping, and Brian had picked out the special design Rolex, custom made by a jeweler in London. Brian had called the brilliant timepiece the "indulgence of a lifetime," and as far as Howie knew, he had not taken it off his wrist since the day he'd purchased it.

Looking at it now on Mo's wrist gave Howie a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. His eyes quickly shifted to the Kentucky hat on Mo's head, again to the Rolex, and finally to the gold wedding band perched on his pinky. Brian's gold wedding band.

Before Howie could say another word, Mo's fist shot out, plowing into Howie's face, his head rocketing back into the window, making him see stars, as his cell phone fell from his grip to the floor below.

At the sound of Howie's head hitting the window, the driver turned. He started to say something, but it was too late. Mo had already scrambled up between the seats, hands around the driver's neck. One quick snap, and it was all over, as the driver slumped down, dead in his seat, and the car veered off of the road.

Mo grabbed the wheel and spun it hard right, coming to an abrupt stop as it rolled down a hill and crashed into a tree. Kicking the car door open, Mo pushed the driver's body to the ground before he crawled out behind him. He moved quickly, grabbing the driver under both armpits as he dragged him around to the back seat and opened the door.

The kid in the back was passed out cold, lying on the floor. He must have rolled off of the seat when they made impact with the tree, which worked out just fine for Mo. Hefting the dead body up onto the seat, he laid it down and slammed the door shut. Then, climbing back into the car, he turned the key in the ignition.

"C'mon," he growled, as the car sputtered and died. Trying it again, Mo pushed the gas pedal to the floor, the car roaring and dying once more.

Climbing out, Mo pulled open the now dented hood from the collision with the tree and checked the engine. Fiddling with a few things, he climbed back in the car, twisted the key, and gave it the gas, the car coming to life as he popped it into drive and slowly started his way back up the hill. Giving it one last surge of gas, he burst up onto the road, the car weaving over the median, almost colliding with an oncoming white van that swerved to miss them. Then, wiping the sweat from his brow, he readjusted the rearview mirror and headed for his apartment.

Dan Fortis, a reporter with the local news crew, was on his way to another boring live remote about recycling when he and his cameraman were almost sideswiped by a burgundy town car that came out of nowhere, almost plowing headfirst into them.

"Stupid son of a bitch!" Dan yelled, as the cameraman cranked the wheel to the right to avoid being hit. "Probably some drunk on his way home from a night of partying."

Checking his watch, Dan was early to the remote, as always. He had begun getting tired of the same old live remote. They always sent him to craft fairs or restaurants or places where boring commentary was given over his lame attempts at jokes. He wanted something to sink his teeth into, a hard-hitting story that would get him some notice, but so far all he was was the morning news clown.

“Hey, check that out.” As they continued down the road, his cameraman Roger pointed to the glow of red and blue lights coming from the wooded area up ahead to their right. “Must be something big going on?” From the looks of it, there had to be at least two dozen police cars, and that was just what they could see from the road.

“Pull over,” Dan ordered, his hand on the door.

“But we have to get to recycling remote.”

“We’re early anyway, and besides, it could be something big. It could be the chance I’ve been waiting for.”

Forces of nature seemed determined to keep Nick and Brian from making it to shore. The wind howled, and the waves were angry, as Brian continued holding tightly to Nick, his arms now locked beneath Nick’s armpits as he struggled to keep the blonde head from disappearing beneath the water’s surface.

“Jesus, you’re heavy,” Brian muttered, as he pulled Nick up once more. “You eat too many freaking Twinkies.” He waited for Nick to laugh, but Nick’s body was dead weight in his arms. “You know I can’t do this without your help. I sacrificed everything for you, but if you won’t help yourself, then fuck you.”

When he got no response, Brian simply let go of Nick, wondering if the old saying “sink or swim” was really true. Thunder crashed loudly overhead, as Nick sunk below the water and did not reappear.

“Shit.” Diving under the water, Brian could see Nick’s lifeless body twisting downwards, his eyes closed, arms outstretched. And he realized, as he dragged Nick up again, that he was thinking about that stupid Monopoly game. He finally remembered what had happened after Nick had thrown the pieces and the board all over the hotel room.

The two had been doubled over on the bed laughing tears rolling down their faces when Nick yelled out, “You won, okay? I give up!” Instead of finishing the game and losing to Brian, Nick had just given up. Brian had known Nick long enough to know that whenever he was faced with difficult things, he always took the easy way out. And now, here Nick was, facing the most difficult challenge of his lifetime, and just like that night with the Monopoly game, Nick was giving up.

Dan slid out of the unmarked white van, which they had parked off to the side of the road in the shadows. Zipping up his dark blue jacket and placing Roger’s black baseball cap on his head, he walked quickly down the side of road and into the woods.

There was a lot of activity going on. He could see groups of officers roping off a perimeter with crime scene tape. He could also see more officers standing by police cars that were staggered all over the dirt road that cut through the center of the woods. Pulling his cap down lower, he jammed his hands into his pockets and tried to look as if he belonged.

Officer Park finally found Sergeant Cox working the outer perimeter of the crime scene in the woods where the two bodies had been found. He was speaking to one of the other officers and pointing to where he wanted the crime scene tape as Park walked up.

“Sergeant, can I speak with you for a minute?” His Sergeant shot him a dirty look as he waved the other officer away and stepped off to the side, Park following.

“I understand you have a problem with following rules, Park. You know you could have gotten yourself killed, coming down here without your partner or backup.” Cox reached for his radio, turning it down just enough so that he could still hear the mumbling hum from dispatch.

“If I would have followed my instincts in the first place and pulled over when I saw that truck, that kid in the woods would still be alive.”

“Maybe, maybe not. You don’t know that for sure. Besides, if you would have saved that one-” The Sergeant hitched his thumb in the direction of the ambulance that was pulling out onto the road with Brian’s body inside. “-then the other one at the warehouse would have died. You had to make a choice.”

“And what if he dies, too, sir?”

“Then you did your best, Park, and that’s all you can do.”

The two men stood silent for a moment, and then Park spoke again. “Sir, we have no information on the identities of the victims or the man who appeared to be the shooter. Martin said that you spoke to dispatch before you sent us out on the call.”

Cox nodded. “That’s right. Dispatch radioed us that there had been a call from a man on a cell phone. He told them he had information that a friend of his was in trouble and in need of assistance. After we sent you on the call, we got another call back from dispatch. They said that the call could be some sort of prank call, but that the caller said his friend was the member of some singing group called The Backstreet something or other.”

Dan Fortis stood ten feet from where Park and Sergeant Cox were speaking, his ears perking up at the mention of the popular boy band. Moving in a little closer, he picked

up a piece of the yellow crime scene tape that had dropped to the ground and pretended to secure it to a tree trunk.

Sergeant Cox reached down for his radio calling into dispatch, and within seconds, he had two names. Howie Dorough and Nick Carter. Dispatch had done some research, and these names were indeed the names of two of the members of the singing group The Backstreet Boys. Whether or not these were the two young men whose bodies had been found at the scene at this point was anybody's guess.

“Park, get on the radio to headquarters and see if you can round up any family members or friends who may know something about this Carter and Dorough. Where they're staying, if they're married, if they have families, whatever you can find out. If those two victims are high profile, we need to get on this before the press picks up the story.”

Dan heard the names as plain as day and was well aware of who Howie and Nick were from his time spent doing cheesy entertainment reports a few years back at a news station in Tulsa. Turning to walk away, he was planning on casually making his way back to the van, when he bumped into an officer carrying a roll of crime scene tape.

“Sorry,” Dan muttered, keeping his eyes down to avoid eye contact.

“No problem,” the guy said, as Dan kept moving. “Hey wait a minute.”

Shit. Stopping, Dan turned, the brim of his hat still low over his eyes.

“Do you guys need any more tape over there?”

Dan shook his head, giving the guy the thumbs up. “Nope, we've got plenty.”

“Okay.” The guy turned and walked down the hill. Smiling, Dan made his way back through the woods to the van, his heart pounding in his chest as he walked around to the driver's side and pounded on the window.

Roger was slumped down in the seat, eyes closed, half-asleep, when Dan banged on the window, scaring the shit out of him.

“Wake up, you fat fuck!” Dan yelled, as Roger opened the door. “We got a story, man, and it's a good one.” Grabbing Roger's arm, Dan pulled him from the truck, climbing over the driver's seat to grab his microphone and earpiece.

“Get the camera, and meet me around the back of the van. We’ll use the woods for the backdrop, and I want to make sure we can get all the flashing lights in there for dramatic effect.”

Roger followed Dan around to the back of the van. “We’re supposed to be doing a live remote about recycling,” Roger said, opening the back of the van doors to get out his camera equipment.

“Yeah, well, plans have changed.” Dan tossed the black baseball cap to the ground and shoved the earpiece in his ear. Once Roger had everything set up, he gave him the signal that everything was a go, and Dan then heard the familiar static as he connected into the news studio, followed by the sound of Anna, one of the morning news anchors, in his ear.

“And now we will be joining Dan Fortis on a live remote from The Adams Recycling plant, where he will be giving us tips on recycling. Dan...” Roger pointed to him, as the red light on the camera flashed on, and Dan was live.

“Thanks, Anna. This is Dan Fortis, and I am live from the scene of a gruesome double homicide that has taken place in this wooded area off of I-95.” Dan could hear the shuffling of papers and the voice of his news director calling him every name in the book as he continued on, “The victims appear to be Nick Carter and Howie Dorough, two members of the popular boy band The Backstreet Boys.”

Colette was lying on the bed in the hotel room, drifting in and out of sleep, as the TV played on in the background. The words seeped into her subconscious like some sort of horrible nightmare.

“The victims appear to be Nick Carter and Howie Dorough...”

Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes and walked to the TV, staring into the eyes of the young reporter on the screen.

“At this point, we don’t have a lot of details to report. What we do know is that the two were shot somewhere in these woods behind me...”

Word of the shooting spread like wildfire, and within the half-hour, it was being reported on every station from CNN to MTV. Pictures of Nick and Howie, along with old footage from their music videos, as well as the *Millennium* and *Black and Blue* tours, played behind the reporters as they went over and over the vague details they had about the shooting.

Kevin was on vacation – well, that was if you could call it a vacation. He had made plans to rent an old fishing cabin in Bear Lake, Utah for the whole month, figuring it would be a nice place for Kris and him to relax and spend some time together. Kris had been sweet about his idea, telling him she loved him dearly, but smelly fish and boring scenery were not her idea of a vacation. Instead, she opted for a more upscale retreat at a posh spa in Arizona. So they had lovingly gone their separate ways to relax with an agreement to meet in Maui at the end of the month for some romantic one on one time.

Kevin was sitting in the living room of the cabin, fiddling with some fishing lures and bait, when he saw the news about the shooting on the small black and white TV that sat on the coffee table. At first, it had been a muffled hum in the background, until he heard the names Nick Carter and Howie Dorough. Looking up, he expected to see them at the opening of some club or hanging out at a charity event. Instead, he saw images of the band flash across the screen, as a teletype ran across the bottom of the screen in white capital letters...

NICK CARTER AND HOWIE DOROUGH OF THE BAND THE BACKSTREET BOYS HAVE BEEN SHOT AND KILLED IN LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA. DETAILS AT NOON.

Kevin reached forward in slow motion, his head spinning as he turned up the volume knob on the TV. He listened quietly while the gray-haired news anchor reiterated what Kevin now already knew. Dropping the lures and bait to the ground, he fell to his knees and began to sob.

Part 10:
Because I'm Not Ready to Let Him Go

Mo drove along silently, checking over his shoulder every few minutes to make sure that the kid on the floor wasn't coming to, which he wasn't. Mo wasn't sure why he didn't just pull off to the side of the road, drag the kid out of the car, and kill him. But something told him to wait. He was obviously associated with Nick and Brian, and where those two were, there was money, so he was hoping that with this one, he would find more of the same.

Taking the Kentucky hat from his head, he tossed it to the passenger seat and turned out onto the highway, which was starting to build with bumper to bumper morning rush hour traffic. Blending into the traffic, he noticed a few people glancing over in his direction. Most likely, it was the sight of the shiny, luxury town car with a huge dent in the front from the impact with the tree that caught their eye. Besides, the windows of the car were tinted, so no one would be able to see the two bodies in the backseat, let alone make a positive I.D. of the man in the driver's seat if it came down to that.

Kevin crawled on his hands and knees to the table in the corner of the room, where the phone sat. Reaching up for the receiver, he pulled the phone to the floor and sat with his back against the wall, tears blurring his vision. He punched in the numbers to Brian's cell phone. He was praying that Brian would answer the phone and reassure him, in that calm and wonderful way that Brian possessed, that this was all just some horrible nightmare. But looking back over to the TV, which now flashed brightly-colored single photos of Howie and Nick, he had a feeling that Brian would not be able to help him.

As the phone continued to ring, he tugged at the neck of his faded denim shirt over and over; it felt like it was strangling him, as he struggled to breathe.

"Shit, Kev," he said, pushing the end button and dialing again. "Get a grip; you're okay."

Now the TV was showing images of Nick from their unplugged concert. Long ago images of him looking so young and innocent with his long, shining blonde hair and wide-open smile. They did a freeze frame on him singing "I Need You Tonight".

Standing up, Kevin dropped the phone and made his way to the TV. Picking the ancient black and white set up, he hurled it into the wall opposite him, watching it as it made a loud pop and then crackle down to its death.

And then, struggling to make his way back to the phone, he tried to call A.J.

A.J. was sitting on the deck of the new home he had purchased in Port Townsend, Washington, watching the sailboats move slowly across the water. He was positive that this must be the most peaceful place on earth, and he was so happy he had taken the advice of his real estate agent and purchased the Cape Cod style home on the water just the month before.

Sarah was the one who had drilled it into A.J.'s head that he needed a place far from the evils of the business. A place where he could come and get centered so that he could just be Alex. Smiling to himself, he could hear her whistling in the kitchen while she made them a pitcher of lemonade. Closing his eyes, he could see them when they were older, at this home, surrounded by their children and grandchildren. Drinking Sarah's nasty, bitter lemonade with smiles on all of their faces.

Standing up, A.J. walked to the edge of the balcony to get a closer look at a beautiful boat in the distance. He could hear the phone ringing.

"Hey, babe, will you get that?" he called over his shoulder.

"How about you put the chicken on the grill, and I'll get the phone."

A.J. laughed to himself at the not-so-subtle hint from his future wife. Turning, he walked over to the grill and tossed the two chicken breasts on with a satisfying sizzle.

His life was about as close to perfect as it could ever be, and nothing was going to screw that up for him now.

"A.J., you need to come quick. Kevin is on the phone..."

Dan Fortis was standing in the middle of what could only be called a media circus. Trucks, vans, and cars now littered the road outside of the woods where the shootings had taken place. There was a frenzy of activity and chaos, as reporters from legitimate TV News all the way to sleazy scumbags from the National Enquirer crawled around the scene, snapping pictures and sending live remote feeds back to their stations. Dan smiled to himself, so grateful to be in the middle of it all. So grateful to be the one who first broke the story.

The police, lead by Sergeant Cox, had roped off the whole road now. They had also called in reinforcements for crowd control as the Backstreet Boys fans began to swarm the scene, along with the same morbid onlookers who seemed to come out in full force to every crime scene they saw on the news or heard on their police scanners.

Dan walked around the crowd, listening to the various news stations' live reports as he checked his watch. He had managed to score a one-on-one interview with Sergeant Cox before the police gave a press conference to the growing crowd. This was in exchange for Dan shutting his mouth about the way he had just strolled into a secured crime scene

without any of the police officers or their Sergeant even noticing he was there. As he made his way around a bright blue van, a couple of teenaged girls spotted him and charged forward, mascara streaking their faces from fresh tears, fear etched in their youthful, wide eyes.

“Hey, you’re that reporter from the TV!” A girl with short, platinum blonde hair spoke first. Dan just nodded.

“Did you see them? Did you see Nick and Howie? Were they in a lot of pain?” Another of the girls came forward, choking out the words in between sobs.

Dan tried to speak, but found he couldn’t, as another girl with long, brown hair put her arm around the girl who had asked him if he had seen the bodies.

“I hope that they know that we came here. I hope that they know we loved them so much.”

Looking up, Brian could make out a figure on the shore. It was a girl with long, dark hair, standing with her arms outstretched, willing him to come to her, giving him the strength he would need to compete the task at hand. He locked eyes with her, never breaking the intense connection, and suddenly, what seemed impossible became possible, as he overcame the waves, wind, and rain and made his way to the shore.

The girl walked out into the water and met him, reaching down to grab one of Nick’s arms. The two dragged him from the water and lay him out on the now blackened sand.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Brian asked, his voice echoing all around them. She shook her head.

“No, Brian, he’s not dead.”

“But he’s dying. I know he’s dying.”

“Look at him, Brian,” she replied, bending down to run a soothing hand over Nick’s forehead. “You need to look at your friend.”

“No, I don’t want to look at him. I don’t want to watch him die.”

The girl reached out, taking Brian’s hand in hers. “Why won’t you look at your friend?”

“Because I’m not ready to let him go.” Thunder crashed, and lightening filled the sky with rage and light.

“Look at him, Brian. You don’t need to be afraid.”

But Brian was afraid. Looking down to the girl with the long, dark hair, he searched her face and her beautiful eyes, tears running down his cheeks. And in her eyes, he found courage.

Slowly, he knelt beside her and looked down at his friend.

Brian was shocked at the pale, bluish skin, the large gaping wound in Nick's stomach, and the pain etched on Nick's face. And then, suddenly, something strange began to happen. Brian watched as Nick's features slowly began to change right before his eyes. The pained features of a dying man became the youthful features of a boy.

A boy with shining, golden hair and tanned skin.

A boy with long fingers and big feet.

A boy full of hopes and dreams.

It was the Nicky Brian had first met all those years ago in Florida.

Brian reached out a hand and touched Nick's face. Nick's eyes flashed open, a radiant shade of blue as a bolt of light lit Brian's fingertips and sizzled up his arm. And then, as quickly as he had become a boy, Nick became a man again. The features aged before Brian's eyes to the twenty two-year-old with so much life left to live.

Nick blinked his eyes twice, and then he smiled up at Brian and mouthed the words, "Thank you." Brian looked down, amazed, as the wound in Nick's flesh began to heal, and his skin went from the pale color of death to the warm flesh tones of life.

And he didn't look like he was in pain anymore.

"Brian," the girl with the dark hair said, "you saved his life."

"BRIAN!"

Nick screamed the single name from beneath the oxygen mask, where he lay on the operating table. All of the nurses and doctors froze in silence, their eyes glued to the young man whom they had pronounced dead just seconds before.

He was still alive.

Mo pulled into the stall outside of his dump of an apartment and turned off the ignition. There was nobody around to question what he was doing. There never was. Glancing

up, he flashed back to the last time he had been here, less than twenty four hours before, when he had shoved St. Nick down the metal stairs to Gus and the waiting truck below.

Opening the back door of the car, he reached in and grabbed Howie by the arms, pulling him out, then dropping him to the pavement below. Rolling him onto his stomach, Mo then reached down and grabbed him around his waist, hauling him up to a standing position that made it easier for him to haul the kid up onto his shoulder. He took the metal stairs two at a time up to the apartment and unlocked the door. Walking quickly to the couch, he dropped Howie down onto it and went to the kitchen. Rifling through the drawers, he came up with a large roll of duct tape and a rag and went back to the couch.

The kid twitched slightly and began to moan, as Mo pulled off eight large pieces of duct tape and wound them tightly around Howie's wrists and ankles. Then, prying open Howie's mouth, he stuffed the rag in and walked across the room to the door. Glancing back, he opened the door, stepped out onto the landing, and pulled it shut behind him, locking it before heading down to the car.

Officer Park came out to the edge of the crime scene tape, searching for the stupid son of a bitch reporter that had broken the story. He spotted Dan standing in a crowd of young girls. Waving his arms, he got Dan's attention and called him over.

"Please tell us what you saw." The blonde girl grabbed at the sleeve of Dan's coat, her eyes pleading. "We need to know."

"I'm so sorry," Dan said, nodding towards the officer who was calling him over. "I-I have to go." The dark hair girl began to cry harder as he turned and walked towards the officer. Looking back at the girls, with their sad eyes and trembling hands, he wished there were something he could do or say to make things better. He had never seen anybody look as distraught as those girls looked. Or maybe he had just never paid that close of attention to people before. His life had become so much about finding the perfect story to get him recognition that he realized he had forgotten that there were real human beings behind the stories.

Sergeant Cox gave Dan ten minutes of his time, quickly going through the details he was allowed to give out. There were three victims. Two dead, one at a local area hospital, clinging to life. The identities of all three involved were unknown. There was the possibility of a link to the Backstreet Boys, but right now, it was speculation at best and was based on a call made to dispatch sometime in the early morning hours. Dan quickly scribbled the words on his pad of paper.

"Have you notified the families of the Backstreet Boys or the members themselves in order to determine whether or not they were involved?"

Sergeant Cox glared at Dan, pausing before he continued. "I've given you all of the information that I can give you right now, Fortis. Anything else you want to know, you can find out with all the rest of the asshole reporters out there when we are damn good and ready to tell you." Turning, Sergeant Cox walked, away leaving Dan speechless.

As the door shut, Howie blinked his eyes open and looked around the room. He had come to right around the time the rag was being stuffed in his mouth, but the pounding in his head, along with his own general confusion, made him slow to wonder what the hell was going on.

Looking around the room, he realized that he had no idea where he was, but how he got there, that was another thing. The flashback was furious, just like in the movies. Visions drenched in pale brown tones, with slow, dragging sound.

"H-help... I-I-I'm... d-d-d-ying..."

"Nick is dying, Leighanne. I have to get him help. He's dying..."

"Whatever you do, don't open this door to anybody, do you hear me?"

"But there is a guy in the road waving us down. He looks like he needs help..."

"I'm sure that the Nick and Brian I know aren't the same guys you know..."

"Two stupid little fucks, my Nick and Brian..."

Howie winced at the memory of the man's hand shooting forward into his face, slamming his head into the window before he passed out... and then he could remember nothing after that. It was as if time had stopped from that moment until right now.

Slowly, Howie tried to stand on shaky legs, his stomach lurching at the realization that both his hands and ankles were bound. He'd seen a million late night movies about this sort of situation, and rarely did they have a happy ending. Hopping forward, he lost his balance, tumbling into a table before he fell to the ground. He felt something bounce off of his head and then something else flutter past his face to the ground. Lifting his head up, he could see that the thing that had bounced off of his head was a worn, brown billfold with the letters N-C carved into the bottom left corner. And beside the billfold was the second item that had fallen from the table... Nick's Florida driver's license.

Howie tried to push himself up into a sitting position, his eyes glued to the picture of Nick smiling up at him from the driver's license. Shit, he had to get the hell out of there, and he had to get the hell out of there fast because wherever he was now was where Nick had been. And for all he knew now, Nick Carter was dead, and he was going to be next.

Just as he worked himself up to his knees, the front door burst open, a wedge of light breaking across the carpet where Howie was struggling desperately to stand.

And looking up, Howie knew he was staring into the eyes of a madman.

Part 11:
The New You

“Hey there.” Mo stood in the doorway of his apartment, a slight grin on his face. “Now, where are my manners?” He stepped over the threshold, slamming the door shut behind him. “Why don’t you take a seat.”

Leaning down, he hauled Howie up to his feet and then shoved him back into one of the chairs at the table. Walking around behind him, Howie then felt Mo reach into the pocket of his jeans and pull out his wallet.

“Son of a bitch,” Mo growled under his breath. The kid’s name was Howard Dorough, and he, too, was from Florida. “What the fuck are you guys, some kind of God damned circus act or something?”

Opening up the wallet, Mo expected to find at least a couple of thousand dollars to match the take in Nick and Brian’s wallets. “Holy Jesus!” he sing-songed, as he tossed the bills one by one onto the tabletop. Six thousand, four hundred, and twenty-two dollars. Six thousand-dollar bills secured with a money clip and the other four hundred and twenty two dollars in various bills were tucked in the billfold of the wallet. Looking down at the kid, he gave him a grin.

“You got a lot of money here, Howard.”

Howie looked down, nodding his head.

“Well, you know what? I want more. Do you have more money for me, Howard?”

Looking back up again slowly, Howie nodded.

“That’s what I thought, you little shit. Get up.”

Kicking the back of Howie’s chair, Howie stood up and waited while Mo came around in front of him, pulling the rag from his mouth.

“Howie, you and me, we’re going to have a little fun. But first, we need to get you ready because we got places to go and people to see.” Hooking a hand in the collar of Howie’s sweater, he dragged him roughly in the direction of the bathroom, a wicked smile on his face.

Leighanne sat in the back seat of the taxi, headed towards the airport. Everything was a blur and had been since she had heard the news.

A half an hour before, she had been curled up on the floor of her loft, the phone clutched tightly in her hand, when there had been a pounding at her door. Standing, she’d

walked in a daze to the door, wondering for a brief moment if it wasn't Brian. Maybe he had been on his way to see her in New York, and he wasn't with Nick after all? Maybe they would be able to talk and work things out? Opening the door with a hesitant smile, she was greeted by Amanda, one of her friends from the acting workshop.

"Leighanne, did you hear the news?" Amanda's eyes were sad, the corners of her mouth turned down in a frown.

"What news?"

Now she knew, knew that Howie and Nick were dead. Shot to death in Los Angeles.

And Brian was still nowhere to be found.

A.J. drove wildly in the direction of the ferry that would take him to Seattle. He had already placed a call to the airlines to book an immediate flight to Los Angeles. Sarah was going to wrap things up at the house take the dogs to the neighbors and meet him in LA on a later flight.

As he drove, he punched through the radio stations, looking for a station that would have some sort of update on the situation. The only info he had was what Kevin had told him, and the details had been sketchy. Kevin was going to book a flight from a small air terminal near where he was staying, and whoever got to LA first was going to go straight to the hospital.

Driving up to the tollbooth, A.J. paid the toll and pulled into a spot on the ferry just as it began to pull away from the dock. Climbing from his car, A.J. walked to the railing overlooking the water, the wind whipping at his face as he stared blankly out to the sea.

Gone were the signature sunglasses that he had used to shield him from the world. Gone also were the earrings and wild hats that he had placed in storage, along with his out-of-control youth. He now wore his hair a short, healthy shade of black, and the once meticulous goatee had given away to a clean-shaven face, tanned and free of blemishes. He was healthy and happy, and it showed. Looking down at the water as it ebbed and flowed around the slow-moving ferry, he thought about Howie and Nick.

The last time he had talked to Howie was about three weeks ago. Howie had called him on his cell phone. They talked about the weather, their families, Howie's plans to open a restaurant in Los Angeles, and A.J.'s stab at domesticity. The call had only lasted about ten minutes, but before they hung up, they had made promises to meet for dinner soon.

And Nick, Kid Nicky. He hadn't seen or talked to that little player in almost two months. A.J. smiled when he thought back to the chance meeting at the nightclub in Florida. Nick had wrapped A.J. in a huge bear hug with a goofy grin that made A.J. smile. No less than fifteen leggy blondes, brunettes, and redheads had surrounded Nick, all of

them vying for a position at his side. But Nick instantly was oblivious to them as he spoke to A.J., asking him about his mom, his plans to buy a new home, and his wedding plans with Sarah.

And for a single instance, it seemed like the old days, just the two of them laughing and talking about life.

Standing back from the ferry balcony, A.J. took a deep, ragged breath, fighting back the tears that swam in his eyes. He wished he would have stayed on the phone with Howie a little longer or sat down with Nick at the club and pounded back Coca-Colas while Nick did his shots. He wished he could go back and make one final memory with each one of them to last a lifetime.

The sounds of a car radio carried over the swishing of the ferry, interrupting A.J.'s thoughts. It was a stale news report with words like *death, shooter...* and *Backstreet Boys*. Looking to the light blue Honda parked behind his own car, A.J. walked towards it, waving a hand.

“Turn it up, turn it up,” he said, leaning down into the open car window. The guy behind the wheel gave him a nasty look as A.J. pulled open the car door and sat down in the passenger seat. “Turn it up, asshole, I need to hear this.” A.J. didn't wait for the stranger to obey his command. Instead, he reached down, flipped the knob, and turned it up himself...

“In a scheduled news conference, Sergeant Albert Cox went over the details of the bizarre shooting. He stated that there were three men involved and that, despite early reports that there were no survivors, they are now saying that two of the men are dead, and one is in surgery at a local area hospital, condition grave. We will have more news after the break...”

Pushing his fingers into his temples, A.J. sunk back into the seat, oblivious to the curses of the irate driver whose car radio he had hijacked.

“Two of the men are dead, and one is in surgery at a local area hospital...”

Which one, if either of his friends, was still alive?

Mo dragged Howie into the small bathroom and shoved him down hard onto the floor.

“Sit,” he commanded as he swung open the medicine cabinet above the sink and rifled through its contents. “Bingo.” Mo's lipped twitched as he came up with a pair of black-handled scissors and a devious smile. “Let's you and me play a game,” he said, slamming the cabinet door shut, his eyes locked on Howie.

Then, reaching forward, he grabbed at Howie's short black curls, roughly tugging them up before slicing them off in hunks.

"I call this game 'The New You.'"

Howie winced as the blades of the scissors skimmed off of his scalp, the shiny, silver tips digging into his flesh as drops of his blood, mixed with his hair, fell to the floor all around him.

Standing back, Mo admired his work.

"I like it, Howard. It makes you look much more manly than those curls." Mo dropped the scissors to the bathroom sink with a loud clang and then dragged Howie back up to his feet. "Have a look for yourself."

Standing in the bathroom mirror, Howie stared at the reflection looking back at him. The person in the mirror was pale and scared, with short-cropped hair baring patches of bloody scalp here and there. His eyes seemed wider and darker than he ever remembered, and his jaw twitched with a nervous tick.

"It's the new you, Howard." Mo hovered over his shoulder in the mirror like some sort of nightmare he couldn't wake up from. Clamping a hand down on Howie's shoulder, Mo spun him around so that they were face to face.

"I'm going to get you some clothes to change into. This shit-" He tugged at Howie's designer sweater. "-won't do at all if you are going to be my new sidekick."

Kevin made his way through the crowded airport terminal, a steely look in his red-rimmed eyes. He could feel the occasional stare of a passerby lock on him, a fan he was sure, but nobody approached him, and he was glad.

He had already contacted the police department in charge of the case and was immediately patched through to Sergeant Cox. The conversation between the two men was brief and to the point. Kevin's background would be searched and his identity established as a link to the victims in question. Upon confirmation that he was indeed Kevin Richardson of The Backstreet Boys, he would then be asked to make a positive ID of the two bodies, as well as the man in ICU who was currently listed in grave condition.

Pictures swirled through Kevin's head as he waited at the curb for the skycap to hail him a cab. Images of the two boys he had watched grow into men. Would Howie and Nick look the same in death as they had in life?

The sun broke through the clouds in bright, pearl-colored beams, shining down upon the three figures in the sand.

“What happens now?” Brian asked the dark-haired girl. They both looked down to Nick.

“He needs rest so that he can become strong again. So that he can live.”

Brian nodded, looking up to the sky, letting the sun warm his skin. “I want to stay with him... until he wakes up.”

The dark-haired girl shook her head, as she placed an arm around Brian’s shoulder.

“You can’t stay, Brian. You have to go now. There are people waiting for you.”

Brian pulled away from her, pushing a hand through his hair, his eyes clouding up with anger. “No, no. I’m not leaving him. Nick needs me.”

This time, when she put her arm around Brian’s shoulder, it was firm, but, at the same time, kind.

“You will always be with Nick, Brian. Always.” She tapped a finger over her heart. “You’ll be with him in here.”

Turning away from her, Brian looked out towards the bright blue sea that was calm and sparkling with light.

“Will you stay with him?” he asked the girl. “Will you stay with him until he wakes up? I don’t want him to be scared.”

“Yes, Brian, I will stay with him. And he won’t be scared anymore.”

Brian nodded to himself and then turned and nodded to her.

“Okay. I’m ready to go.”

Mo and Howie exited the apartment, walking down the stairs to the waiting BMW. The plates on the car had been switched out with some old plates Mo had in the storage shed out back. The old plates, along with the town car, had been placed in the shed and were awaiting the arrival of one of Mo’s associates, who would dispose of them, along with the IDs and wallets of all three young men.

Climbing in the car, Howie glanced around at his dingy surroundings, hoping for a face in a window to connect with before he disappeared. Someone who could see the fear in his eyes and know that he was in danger, but there was no one.

Mo slammed the door shut behind Howie and walked around to the driver's side, climbing in, the gun he had retrieved from his bedroom very visible to Howie as it gleamed from the waistband of Mo's jeans.

"Where are we going?"

"First stop is the ATM," Mo said gunning the engine. "And after that, we'll see."

Leighanne was curled up asleep in first class on a plane bound for Los Angeles. The dream hit her fast, exploding like fireworks in her head.

When the light cleared, she saw Brian standing in the center, wearing that old stupid Bubba Gump T-shirt that she hated and a pair of faded, baggy jeans. Smiling, she walked to him, letting herself sink into his chest, as he wrapped her in a warm embrace.

"Hey baby," he whispered into her hair.

"Brian, where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you. You had me so worried."

He pulled her closer, brushing his hand lightly over her hair to comfort her. "I know, but it's okay now. I'm here."

Pulling back slightly, she looked up into his familiar eyes and loving smile. "Yes, you are here. And I'm never going to let you go again. I was a fool, Brian. Can you ever forgive me?"

He traced his fingertip over her forehead, then down her cheek and around her jawline, like he had done so many times before.

"I forgive you, Leighanne. Now can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you for what?"

"I had to make a choice, and because of that choice, I can't come back to you."

Dropping her arms from around his waist she pulled back in confusion. "What do you mean, you can't come back? Brian, I love you, and I want to be your wife and the mother of your children."

His bottom lip trembled ever so slightly, as tears sparkled in his eyes. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say those words." He shook his head as he spoke. "But it's too late now. I had to make a choice."

She didn't know what he was talking about, but she was tired of the riddles. "Brian, stop it."

"I'm dead, Leighanne."

Her mouth parted without words, and this time, when she reached out for him, her hands seemed to go right through him.

"I had to make a choice, Leighanne."

Standing back, she looked at him, anger and hurt flaring in her eyes. "Take it back, Brian. Take the choice back now!" she screamed. "Take it back."

"I can't. I love you, but I can't take it back." He desperately wanted to hold her, to stroke her hair just one last time, but it was too late. "I made the choice, and now I have to go."

And then he was gone.

Death wasn't like Brian had imagined it would be. There was no firestorm of colors or bright lights. There weren't sins to be answered for or loved ones who had passed on before him to greet him with open arms.

It was just Brian and the water and the beautiful blue sky.

Walking into the water, he let it envelope him, welcoming him home.

It was so peaceful.

It was so perfect.

And as the last bit of water washed over his head... Brian smiled.

Part 12:
Viva Las Vegas

Mo hit the ATM with Howie's card in hand, ready to go. Rolling down the window, he slid it into the slot and looked over at Howie.

"Give me the code," he said with a smile, well aware that there were cameras recording his every move. "And why don't you try and smile?" Mo tapped the gun beneath his shirt as a reminder to Howie who was in control.

Plastering a phony half-grin on his face, Howie rattled off the four-digit code and then watched as Mo proceeded to drain his account. In most cases, ATMs would only allow an individual to remove up to \$200 a visit, but Howie had long ago signed papers with his bank that would allow him to withdraw an unlimited amount from any ATM. He was a world traveler and needed to have his funds available in case of an emergency, or a wild shopping trip in Europe, whatever the case may be.

Mo typed in some astronomical amount, wondering if an ATM could even disperse those kinds of funds. When the machine began rumbling as it processed the amount, he thought he would shit his pants. Who had that kind of money in their ATM? Who had that kind of money period?

"Jackpot! It's just like fucking Viva Las Vegas, baby." Mo grinned as the slot to the right of the machine slowly lifted and the crisp green bills shot down, one right after another. Five more stacks came down until, finally, the words "WOULD YOU LIKE ANOTHER TRANSACTION?" appeared on the screen. Mo lingered, his finger over the NO and the YES in bold, black letters. Should he be greedy, or should he learn from past mistakes? After what seemed like an eternity, he pressed the YES.

Kevin sat in one of the hospital conference rooms, surrounded by police officers, detectives, and various medical staff. They had established that he was indeed who he said he was and that he would be able to give them a positive ID of the bodies if any of the victims were members of the Backstreet Boys.

While waiting for Kevin to arrive, the detectives had received calls from the Dorough family, as well as the Carter family, who were on route, but would not be arriving until the following morning. Both families had given permission to the authorities for Kevin to make the ID of their sons.

"Are you ready to go?" Sergeant Cox sat on the table across from Kevin, not envying the position they had put the young man in.

"These guys are my friends, my little brothers." Kevin reached for the pack of cigarettes on the table and tapped one out. "Can I have one of these first?" he asked, gesturing for a light.

“You can’t smoke in the hospital.”

Leveling a look at Cox that could kill, Kevin placed the cigarette between his lips and grabbed the lighter from one of the officers at the other end of the table.

“You’re wasting time, aren’t you?” Cox reached out a hand for the unlit cigarette and the lighter.

“Wouldn’t you?” Handing over the cigarette and lighter, Kevin pushed back his chair, hands braced on the table, and sighed.

“The sooner you get this over with, the sooner we can close this case.” Sergeant Cox walked around the table towards the door. “Your friends wouldn’t want their families to suffer any longer than they have to.”

“You’re right.” Kevin stood, his heart beating wildly beneath his shirt, his palms damp with sweat. “Let’s get this over with.”

They rode the elevator down to the basement where the hospital morgue was. Getting off the elevator one by one, there were two detectives, Sergeant Cox, three policemen, the hospital administrator, and Kevin.

The hospital administrator led the way down the long hallway that was cold and dimly lit. The only sound was the echoing of their shoes on the tile floor and the impossibly loud sound of Kevin’s heart pounding in his ears.

As they approached the end of the hall, the hospital administrator stopped and pointed to the door marked “MORGUE ONE.”

“This is where the two bodies are being held, pending an ID,” he said in a flat, clinical tone that suited his position.

“I’ll escort Kevin inside,” Sergeant Cox said, waving the officers and detectives back from the door. “I don’t think he needs an audience right now.”

The administrator opened the door and moved to the side as Kevin tried to walk forward.

He stood there frozen in the open doorway, his hands braced on the doorjamb, his feet just short of crossing the threshold. It reminded Kevin of the haunted houses he used to visit as a kid on Halloween. He half-expected some guy in a hockey mask with a chainsaw to jump out and chase him down the hallway until he pissed his pants.

“Do you want me to go in first, Kevin?” Sergeant Cox asked, as Kevin shook his head no, then nodded yes, and then shook his head no again.

“I’ll go first, son.” Sergeant Cox placed an understanding hand on Kevin’s shoulder, moving him to the side so that he could enter the room first. The man reminded Kevin of his father, strong and firm, but with a kind undertone that didn’t make him feel stupid. Following behind, head bowed, Kevin hitched his thumbs in the pocket of his jeans and kept his eyes on the floor.

And then the door closed behind them.

“Take your time, Kevin.” Sergeant Cox looked up and down the rows of empty, steel-topped tables, his eyes settling on the two tables near the back that contained the bodies, covered by heavy white sheets, that Kevin would be identifying.

Kevin’s eyes followed Sergeant Cox’s gaze to the same tables.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he said, wishing very much for that cigarette he had held in his hands earlier. “I didn’t even see my dad after he died; I didn’t want to remember him that way.” He dug the heels of his hands into his tearing eyes. “I didn’t want to remember him lying there in a coffin, the life sucked out of him, his body pale and withered.”

“This is different, Kevin.”

“You’re damn right this is different. This is fucking worse. My friends were shot and killed like dogs. I don’t want to remember them in pain.”

“Maybe these bodies aren’t your friends, Kevin.”

“And maybe they are.” Kevin took a deep breath, locking his watery eyes with Sergeant Cox’s eyes, before he walked in the direction of the bodies, the sergeant following close behind.

“So what happens now?” Howie sat slumped in the passenger seat of the BMW, dressed in Mo’s oversized black and gray flannel shirt, his own jeans, and a pair of Mo’s work boots that were at least two sizes too big for Howie’s feet.

He felt like a little kid playing dress up, he thought, as he brushed a hand across the rough, pelting flannel, wondering why the hell anybody in California – or the rest of the world, for that matter – would even own a flannel shirt.

“So what happens now is,” Mo cut into Howie’s thoughts, “you and me are going to drive to Mexico.”

“And what, live as fucking man and wife?” Howie flipped nervously at the door latch as he stared out the window.

Mo laughed, slugging Howie in the arm, making him jump. “That was funny, Howard. You got a fucking funny sense of humor.”

Howie winced, grabbing at his throbbing arm.

“No, we won’t be living as man and wife, and come to think of it, you may not be living at all. But I’ll decide all of that once we get there. Once we disappear.”

Kevin shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, trying to ignore the heavy, foreign stench in the room. The stench of death.

Sergeant Cox stood on the other side of the table, his hands gripping the sheet, as he explained to Kevin that there had been three victims at the scene of the crime. One was a younger man in his mid-twenties who was deceased. The second was an older guy who they believed was the shooter, also deceased. And the third victim was in the ICU upstairs in a coma, hanging on to life. The first body Kevin would see was the body of the man they believed to be the shooter.

As Sergeant Cox pulled back the sheet, Kevin closed his eyes, his brain trying to find a happy place to hide as he prayed to God to give him strength.

“Okay, Kevin, you can open your eyes.”

Opening them, Kevin blinked twice, a shudder of relief going through his body as he realized that he did not recognize the man lying cold and dead on the table with a bullet hole between the eyes.

“Kevin, do you recognize this man?” Sergeant Cox asked.

“No... no,” Kevin said with a small grin. “I don’t have a clue who he is.”

Sergeant Cox smiled back at Kevin as he pulled the sheet up and over Gus. “Okay, son, one down, one to go.”

The two men moved to the second table.

Standing in the same position Kevin had stood at the last table, this time he decided there was no need to close his eyes. Maybe Sergeant Cox had been right. Maybe this all had been some big mistake. Maybe Nick and Howie were fine... maybe they were sitting in some bar in Cancun, unaware that the whole world thought they were dead... maybe...

Sergeant Cox pulled back the sheet on the second body.

Looking down at the pale, gray face of the man lying on the table, Kevin's eyes widened, and his body began to shake violently.

He knew that face like he knew his own. He had ruffled that hair a million times, had punched those arms in play, as well as in anger. He had thrown countless footballs and baseballs into those now cold and lifeless hands, and he was more than familiar with that scar that ran lengthwise over the heart from a surgery that had nearly taken his life years before.

"Oh Jesus, Jesus..." He repeated it over and over, his mind going to a place it had never been before, as tears spilled wildly down his face and his body continued to shake. Reaching out a trembling hand, he placed it on the forehead of the body on the table and stroked it lightly like he had when they were kids and his little cousin had fallen out of the big gnarled tree in Kevin's backyard...

"Oh Brian," he sobbed, "Brian... no."

"Kevin, who is it?" Sergeant Cox looked down at the body on the table. The names he had been given were Howie and Nick. Who the hell was Brian?

Turning, Kevin's eyes were like those of a caged animal as he searched wildly for someplace, anyplace to go, other than where he was. Making his way to the far corner of the room, he pressed his head against the cold, tiled wall of the morgue and sobbed uncontrollably.

"It's my fucking cousin!" he spat out, in between his gasps for air. "My fucking little cousin."

Kevin would never remember being lead upstairs to the ICU.

He would never remember pressing his hands to the glass as he peered into the white sterile room and declared the body hooked up to the machines to be that of Nick Carter.

He would never remember being taken by Sergeant Cox into a private waiting room, where he was joined by a hospital pastor. And he would never remember picking up one of the heavy orange plastic chairs, violently destroying the room, before passing out.

But what he would remember for the rest of his life was the overpowering feeling of emptiness he would have without Brian in his life.

Within a few hours, the calls had been made, and the families had been notified. Sergeant Cox gave another press conference in the parking lot of the hospital to a waiting crowd of reporters and fans. There was an audible gasp as he declared Nick

Carter to be alive but in a coma, Brian Littrell to be dead, and Howie Dorough to be missing.

Part 13:
I'm Going to Have to Kill You

The story hit the evening news, complete with bold commentary and flashing colors that swept the viewer into the strange saga that could easily be a TV movie of the week.

As the pictures flashed across the screen of Brian, Nick, and Howie, and even a few pictures from the police files of the alleged shooter, Gus Monroe, the calls and eyewitness accounts began pouring in to the police station.

There was the call from the salesman at a trendy Beverly Hills shoe store who remembered Brian and Nick in his store the afternoon before the murders, purchasing two pairs of expensive boots.

There was the cashier from a convenience store who had in-store surveillance tapes of Brian buying some items in the late afternoon, a few hours after the Beverly Hills shopping trip.

And there was the taxi cab driver that called to say that he remembered picking Brian up at the convenience store in the late afternoon/early evening before the murders. He said Brian was annoyed and had mentioned that "someone" had taken his car. The driver said he dropped Brian off at his home in Beverly Hills and that he was sure it was Brian because he could never forget a man who would leave him such a generous tip.

And last but not least, there was the foul-mouthed motel clerk, who had called in to the station to report that she had spoken to the "dead kid in all the news reports" in the early morning hours before the murder. She said he had come into the motel looking for directions, but she thought he was some "wasted little son of a bitch looking to score some weed." If she would have known the little "ass had some cash," she would have paid more attention to him.

Before she hung up, she asked if she was going to get some money as a reward for her information.

Sergeant Cox worked late into the night with the officers and detectives, detailing each eyewitness account, the most difficult being the interview with Brian's wife, Leighanne Littrell.

"When was the last time you spoke to your husband?" Sergeant Cox sat beside Leighanne at a table in the interview room at the station house.

He had been the one to contact her after Kevin's ID of her husband's body. When he had finally gotten a hold of her on her cell phone with the news, she was on a plane bound for Los Angeles. She was coming to console the family members of Howie and

Nick, whom she believed to be dead, as well as to find out information on Brian's whereabouts.

When Sergeant Cox told Leighanne that Brian had been shot and killed, she paused for the longest time before tearfully replying, "Deep down in my heart... I guess I knew he was dead."

He told her he would have a police escort meet her at the airport to bring her to the station house, where he had a few important questions he needed answered.

"Leighanne?"

"I hadn't talked to Brian in awhile," she said, kneading her hands in her lap as she slowly shook her head. "We were having some... problems."

"What kinds of problems?" Sergeant Cox reached for a box of tissues on the other side of the table, pushing them towards her, as she began to cry.

"We were going to get divorced."

"When I spoke to you on your cell phone, you told me that in your heart you knew he was dead."

She nodded, the visions of Brian telling her goodbye playing over and over in her head.

"I had to make a choice, Leighanne."

"If you hadn't spoken to your husband in awhile, then how did you know that he might have been in some sort of trouble, Mrs. Littrell?" Sergeant Cox pressed on, despite the tears pouring down her face. It was the part of the job he enjoyed the least, but it had to be done.

"He called and left this message on my voicemail. He said that he and Nick were in trouble, and he couldn't call the police." She slid her cell phone across the table, rattling off the number to her voice messaging system, along with her access code. "When I heard the message, I didn't know if it was joke."

Sergeant Cox wrote the info for her cell phone down on a notepad in front of him, his eyes never leaving her.

"But, I-I... I guess I knew that something wasn't right, though, because I called Howie."

"What did you and Howie talk about, Leighanne?"

Leighanne's eyes were glazed over and unblinking, as tears continued to spill down her cheeks. Cox knew the signs of shock when he saw them. Placing a hand on her arm, he leaned down and spoke in almost a whisper.

“Leighanne, we need to know what you and Howie talked about. He’s missing, and we need to find him. I’m not so sure that the dead man at the scene with your husband was the only man involved.”

“I gave Howie the address.” Her voice was flat, like a robot. “He told me Nick was dying and needed help, but he never said anything about Brian.” Grasping onto Sergeant Cox’s shirtsleeve, she locked her eyes on his. “Howie promised he would find them, he promised everything would be okay, and now he’s probably dead, too, because I gave him the address.”

“Leighanne, it’s not your fault. None of this is your fault.”

“But I gave him the address... I gave him the address.” She just kept saying the words over and over, until nothing made sense anymore.

The interview with Leighanne filled in many gaps from the story Collette Revi, Howie Dorough’s girlfriend, had given them.

Collette had come to the station house earlier in the afternoon, alone and afraid, asking to speak to whomever was in charge of the case. She told them that Howie had stormed out of their hotel room in the early morning hours of the murders, in search of Nick Carter. She wasn’t able to tell them much about what had prompted Howie to believe Nick was in need of help because she had been sleeping up until he entered the room in a panic, asking her to help him find a slip of paper.

She admitted she had been drinking the night before, but she clearly remembered Howie talking to someone on the phone and telling them that Nick was dying and he had to get him help. Then there was the heated argument with police dispatch, Howie telling her to not open the door to anybody...

And then he was gone.

Sergeant Cox sat alone in his office, going over the details of the case and trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together and make them fit. So many things were still gnawing at him, like where was Howie Dorough? And why would Gus Monroe, a career criminal whose biggest claim to fame was a few carjackings and a couple of convenience store robberies in the early 90s, shoot two kids in the middle of nowhere and then shoot himself?

Carjack them, maybe. Steal their money, probably. But drag two strong and healthy young men to that warehouse and kill them and then kill himself? Never.

The detectives were speculating that Gus knew that Brian and Nick were famous and worth a lot of money, but Gus Monroe barely knew his alphabet, let alone the members of some boyband singing group.

There had to be more to the story than meets the eye.

Mo rolled over, squinting into a streak of sun that made its way through the parted blinds.

“What the fuck time is it?” he mumbled to himself as he rolled over to grab for Brian’s Rolex on the nightstand.

7:00 a.m.

Son of a bitch, he had overslept. Pushing himself up, he strapped the watch onto his wrist and ran his hands through his hair.

The plan had been to drive for a few hours and then get a hotel room for a few hours to sleep and then hit the road again. Now he was behind schedule. Forced to drive in broad daylight, when any fool who had just killed three people, kidnapped one, and stolen money, as well as property and cars, knew that slipping in and out of the shadows of night was far more intelligent than doing it during the day.

Walking to the bathroom, he kicked open the door.

“Rise and shine, sleepy head!” he barked, making Howie jump. Before Mo had gone to sleep, he had tied Howie to the pipes in the bathroom with rope, securing the knots so tight, Howie’s hands had turned a faint shade of blue.

Mo had learned his lesson with Nick and Brian and knew not to trust a stupid face when he saw one, so this time, he made sure there would be no clever escapes.

“Did you get a good night sleep, Howard?”

“Go to hell, psycho!” Howie shot back.

Stooping down, Mo pulled a straight razor from his back pocket to cut the ties, slicing Howie’s flesh in the process, making drops of blood splatter onto the moldy tile.

“Sorry about that, Howard,” Mo said, “but my dad always said you needed at least five good scars on you before you die, so I just gave you number one. That means we have to give you at least four more in the next day or so, right?” He smiled.

“Fuck you,” Howie replied, never breaking eye contact. “I already have three scars, so you only need to take care of one more for me, you son of a bitch.”

Mo gave Howie a towel to wipe off his arm and then led him outside into the bright morning sunlight. The two walked across the parking lot and into the piece of shit diner that was connected to the equally shitty motel.

Mo explained to Howie, in whispered tones before they entered the diner, that if he made any kind of scene, Mo would shoot him in the head in front of everybody and never bat an eye, so Howie had better not give him any trouble.

The two men walked down the aisle to a booth in the back, Mo grabbing a newspaper off of the front counter on the way, as he motioned to a nasty-looking waitress that he wanted a cup of coffee.

Howie slumped down in the seat, staring blankly out the window at nothing in particular. He wondered why he didn't run or yell for help or just stand up and walk out of the place, telling Mo to go ahead and shoot him, since it looked like he was going to anyway.

But Howie knew that there was a part of him that hoped if he cooperated and did what he was told, the sick son of a bitch would let him go, sparing his family the agony of burying another child.

The waitress walked up, slumped-shouldered and bored with the world, as she slapped down a mug of coffee, spilling it everywhere, and some dirty silverware, before walking away.

"Fucking bitch. See if she gets any fucking tip," Mo growled, wiping the coffee spill from the newspaper with his hand "She better not have fucked up the sports section."

Unfolding the paper, he planned to flip right to the sports section and skip all the boring news of the world shit, when the headline in screaming bold, black letters caught his eye....

BACKSTREET BOY BRIAN LITRELL DEAD - FELLOW BANDMATE NICK CARTER IN COMA – AND THIRD BACKSTREET BOY HOWIE DOROUGH MISSING AFTER BIZARRE SHOOTINGS IN LOS ANGELES

His eyes widened as he shoved his coffee cup to the side and skimmed over the lengthy article, complete with pictures of Brian, Nick, and the man now sitting across from him, referred to in the article as Howie.

Slamming his fist into the table, the silverware jumped along with Howie, who was still staring out the window. Howie looked at Mo and then down to the newspaper spread out before him, just as Mo grabbed the paper, folded it up, and tucked it under his arm before standing up.

“Get up,” he said through clenched teeth. Howie just sat staring at him. “I SAID GET UP!” he screamed, grabbing at Howie’s flannel-clad arm.

Howie pulled away as Mo sunk his fingers into Howie’s flesh, dragging him across the booth, where he lost his balance as he tumbled to the floor.

Mo squatted beside him, cupping his hand around Howie’s mouth, as he whispered the words, “I’m going to have to kill you, Howie.”

Nobody in the diner batted an eye as Mo dragged Howie down the aisle and out the door, newspaper still tucked beneath his arm.

Once at the car, Mo led Howie roughly around to the passenger side, opened the back door, and shoved him in from behind. Howie’s head caught the top of the door as he wound up sprawled out facedown on the leather seats, the newspaper hitting him in the back of the head, before Mo slammed the door shut and walked around to the driver’s side.

Climbing in, he slammed the driver’s side door shut and jammed the key in the ignition.

“I couldn’t have just stumbled on some boys stealing daddy’s fancy car for a joyride, could I? Noooooo, I had to get involved with a couple of assholes that the world gives a shit about.” He pushed on the gas, peeling out of the parking lot, while Howie raised himself to a sitting position and glanced down at the newspaper headline.

“Your fucking friend Nick didn’t know when to die, did he, Howie? So I guess I’ll just have to make sure he learns his lesson the second time around.”

Part 14:
The World Just Kept On Turning

Nick Carter was in a coma, and the world just kept on turning without him.

Officers Park and Martin, as well as Sergeant Cox and the detectives, remained on the case, re-interviewing witnesses and hoping for a break that would solve this never-ending riddle.

Howie's family set up camp in Los Angeles, canvassing neighborhoods and businesses in the area where Howie had been last reported being seen, as tips continued to pour in from all over the country from over zealous do-gooders, wanting to believe that they had seen him. But so far, none of the leads had panned out.

Meanwhile, Brian's family made the decision to fly his body back to Kentucky, where they held a private funeral and burial for him attended only by family and a few close friends.

Brian was buried in a grand, mahogany coffin with pale blue, satin lining the color of his eyes and laid to rest beneath a large, bending shade tree that was dotted with fresh, fragrant, white blooms that would rain down over him like snow when the wind blew just right.

As the coffin was lowered slowly into the ground, everybody just stood there silently, unsure of what to do next, because it just didn't seem right to leave Brian there alone.

Finally, it was Kevin who made the break. His hands jammed in the pockets of his wrinkled dark blue suit, he pulled away from Kristen's comforting embrace and walked slowly down the hillside, away from Brian's grave, never looking back.

The day after the funeral, Leighanne, along with Kevin and A.J., returned to Los Angeles to support Nick's family in their round-the-clock bedside vigils at the hospital, as well as to help Howie's family with the search.

Family and friends took shifts at Nick's bedside, talking to him, singing to him, or just being there for him, in an effort to help him wake up from the coma that had taken over his body.

After a few days of getting into the routine of visiting with Nick, A.J. found it odd that Kevin was managing to stay away from the hospital as much as possible, instead opting to spend time with Howie's family or at the police station, asking questions about the case.

Finally, one afternoon, the two friends had it out.

“What the fuck is your problem, Kev?” A.J. yelled after Kevin, as he bolted out the door of Nick’s hospital room five minutes after his arrival. “You said you would take the two o’clock to five o’clock shift with him.” A.J. had purposely stuck around after his shift to see if Kevin would actually stay with Nick like he had promised.

“Wha, are you spying on me now, A.J. ?” Kevin said, picking up his pace down the hospital corridor.

“Get your ass back in there, Kevin! I’m serious!” Walking on Kevin’s heels, yelling at him, A.J. was oblivious to the stares and whispers of the hospital staff all around him.

“Shut up, A.J., you’re making a scene,” Kevin hissed pushing an arm back to shove A.J. away from him.

“You were in there for like five minutes, five lousy minutes. You know the doctors said that we all needed to talk to him, play him music, anything that might get him out of that coma.”

“I’m well aware of what the doctors said, but I got better things to do with my time than try and get that kid out of a coma.” Kevin’s voice was hard, his words biting.

Grabbing him by the arm, A.J. spun Kevin around, pushing him up against the wall. “What the hell is your problem, Kevin?” he yelled, pushing his face into Kevin’s face, determined not to back down.

“You wanna know what my problem is?” Kevin seethed, his eyes narrowing into hateful slits. “My problem is that I’m struggling here, A.J.”

“Oh, we’re all fucking struggling, Kevin. Do you think that this has been easy on any of us? What the hell makes you so damn special that you think you have it worse then anybody else?”

Kevin shoved his hands into A.J. ’s chest, pushing him hard and knocking A.J. to the floor.

“You want to know why I’m struggling, A.J. ?” Kevin stood over A.J., hand cocked, ready to fight if the need arose. “I’m struggling over the fact that that dumb kid is lying in that hospital bed, alive, while my cousin is buried six feet under the ground!” Kevin was yelling, his shoulders tensed, veins bulging in his forehead, as he continued, “I’m struggling because, despite the fact that I want to remember Brian as a healthy, happy kid with a big smile and an even bigger love of life, all I can see is him cold and dead, lying on the table with a hole in his heart!”

A.J. looked up at Kevin, his eyes clouding with sudden understanding.

“I’m struggling, A.J.” Kevin’s voice caught as he blinked back tears. “I’m struggling because I wish that Nick was the one that died instead of Brian... and I know that isn’t the right way to feel.”

Dropping his hand, Kevin leaned against the wall, staring up at the ceiling.

“I wish Nick was dead, A.J. I wish he was dead... so please don’t tell me that I need to help him come out of his coma, because I just can’t do it.”

The doctors couldn’t say how long Nick would be in a coma. They had predicted it could last anywhere from two months to twenty years, so it came as a shock to everybody when, seven days after the violent shooting, Nick Carter opened his eyes.

It was Aaron’s turn to keep Nick company. He had been talking nonstop for hours about the dumbest things. He talked about girls, comic books, X-Box games, and *Yu-Gi-Oh*. He laughed about stupid things the two of them had done as kids, and he told Nick how much he wished that they had spent more time together over the years, without the constant interruptions of their careers.

At some point during the one-sided conversation, Aaron had drifted off to sleep, slumped low in the hard plastic chair, a hand lightly covering Nick’s hand, as the monitors hummed and beeped all around them.

At first, the words were nothing more than a mumble, something Aaron thought he had dreamed. “We... look cool...”

“Hmmm,” Aaron mumbled, lost in a dream that involved him hooking up with two hot girls from Sweden.

“I was just... having some fun.” The words spilled from Nick’s mouth in slow motion. “One pair... was... for you.”

“Shut up, Nick, I’m in the middle of a cool dream.” Aaron shifted in his seat, eyes still closed, thinking that he was tucked away in bed at home, Nick talking in the bunk above him as he tried to sleep.

“I... want some beef jerky... and a Mountain Dew.” Nick’s hand twitched beneath Aaron’s as the words Nick spoke became clearer. Aaron’s eyes snapped open, as realization slowly sunk in.

“I want beef jerky and some... Mountain Dew,” Nick repeated in a raspy voice. Wide-eyed, he pulled his hand from beneath his brother’s trembling hand as the machines began to go wild.

“Nick? Nick, who are you talking to?” Aaron asked, standing up quickly, his chair tipping over as he tripped over it, trying to get to the door.

“You’re... not... Brian,” Nick said. His eyes were closed, his body jerking slightly, as his brows tipped inward with concern.

“You’re... not... Brian.” He repeated the words again and again, his eyes suddenly flashing open.

“YOU’RE NOT BRIAN.”

Aaron’s heart shot into his throat as he spun on his heel and ran for the door, screaming, “Somebody come quick! My brother is awake!”

Just as Nick Carter was opening his eyes for the first time in seven days, Howie Dorough was struggling, bound and gagged in the closet of a second-story bedroom in an abandoned house in hell. Not literally Hell. No, the real Hell would have been a lot warmer than the place where Howie now was stashed, but it seemed to him like it had to be pretty close.

Beating his feet, which were tethered from his ankles to his knees, furiously against the door, Howie screamed into the gag, the sound echoing around in his mouth, before bouncing back down his throat. He still didn’t understand much about what had put him in the situation he was now in, but he knew it revolved around Nick and that Nick was still alive. But, according to Mo, not for long.

Mo went on day after day about Nick, angry that he hadn’t finished the job in the first place and just shot him between the eyes. He would sit across from Howie every afternoon, laying out a greasy hamburger and fries for Howie to eat while he talked about ways to kill Nick and make it look like an accident. Since their return to the city, Mo had made numerous trips to the hospital to try and get the job done, but the security was tight, and extra guards had been posted on Nick at the request of his family. So finally, Mo decided the only thing to do was to wait. Wait until the story died down or until Nick awoke and stirred things up again with his memories of the fateful evening. Only then would everybody’s attention turn in the opposite direction, leaving Nick wide open for Mo’s attack.

So now they waited.

Why Mo didn’t just kill Howie and get it over with, Howie was unsure. At this point, death seemed a welcome option, compared to the hell and torture of being locked in a dark closet day in and day out, bound and gagged, with nothing to do but slowly lose his mind.

Lying limp on the closet floor, Howie thought about screaming again, but finally came to the conclusion that it was no use. There was nobody around to hear his cries, even if the sounds could make it past the gag.

If he was going to live, he would have to find another way to break free, and he would have to figure it out on his own before he eventually rotted away and died.

It was early evening, and Mo was sitting in the back of the bowling alley as he had been every evening for the last seven days, watching with great interest the news playing on the TV overhead.

Throwing back another beer, he smiled as the reporter recounted the tragic tale of the Backstreet Boys' three members who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Damn straight, they were," a fat guy in a tank top at the next table mumbled as he dug into the bowl in front of him, pulling back a fistful of peanuts. "Dumb fucking rich kids."

"You said it," Mo shot back, signaling the waitress for another beer.

"Stupid kids got what they deserved. They had no business in that part of town." The fat guy tried to focus on Mo through blurry, red-rimmed eyes.

"Yeah, you know, that guy should have done the world a favor and killed them all," Mo said.

The guy laughed, turning his attention back on the news, as the words UPDATE flashed across the screen.

"It seems there is a bit of good news today involving Backstreet Boy Nick Carter. It has been reported that, earlier today, he awoke from his coma. Whether or not he has spoken to police or detectives about the case remains to be seen, but we will keep you informed on this interesting story as it develops."

Leaning back in his chair, a slow smile spread across Mo's face.

Ho, ho, ho, St. Nick was awake.

Part 15:
The Twilight Zone

Kevin was lying in his hotel room, a plate of cold chicken on a tray by his side, a bottle of warm beer in his hand, as the TV played low in the background.

He'd spent the better part of the day with Howie's family, recanvassing the area around the crime scene, looking for clues to Howie's whereabouts. The police had given up on the area days before, but Howie's mother had been having strong premonitions that Howie had been in the area, so they continued to search.

Kevin had returned to the hotel late and exhausted from the long day, so he was half asleep when the anchor broke in with the news...

"And now, with an update on the ever-evolving saga of the Backstreet Shootings, is our own Dan Fortis."

"Thank you, Carl. I'm here, live, at a local area hospital, where Backstreet Boy Nick Carter has been lying in a coma since the violent shootings seven days ago that left fellow bandmate Brian Littrell dead and Howie Dorough missing."

"Family, friends, and fans have been showing loyal support for Carter with their round-the-clock vigils, both in Florida and here at this Los Angeles hospital, in hopes that he would awaken from the coma that has silenced him for a week..."

Kevin rolled his eyes, swirling the beer around in the bottle.

"Well, it appears, Carl, that those efforts have paid off. Moments ago, it was reported that Nick Carter awakened from his coma, and, while we have no info on his condition, hopefully he will be ready, willing, and able to assist the police in their efforts to find fellow Backstreeter Howie Dorough, as well as to clear up any questions the police may have of whether or not career criminal Gus Monroe was the only shooter involved."

"Whatever the case, Carl, there is going to be more to this story than meets the eye. But for now it seems that indeed... Backstreet's Back."

"Jesus," Kevin said sarcastically at the stupid Backstreet reference as he reached for the remote, instantly zapping the annoying reporter away with a click of the button.

The phone on the nightstand began to ring.

Shit. He knew it was going to be A.J., or Kristin, or Leighanne, or any number of people who assumed he would care that Nick was back in the land of the living. Reaching over, he plucked the phone off of the cradle and slammed it back down. Then, picking up the phone again, he called the front desk.

"Yes, this is Kevin Richardson in room 401. Please hold all of my calls."

Nick tried to still his trembling body beneath the pale blue sheet as he glanced nervously around the sterile blandness of the room, a slight scowl on his face.

Between the machines, IV poles and generic pictures on the wall, he was pretty sure that he was in the hospital, but why exactly he was there, he couldn't really say.

"What's... going on?" When he spoke, his voice was unusually slow and hoarse. "Can someone... please talk to me?"

Nobody would look him in the eye.

Nobody would speak to him.

It was like being in some freaky ass episode of *The Twilight Zone*, as doctors and nurses moved quickly around him, speaking to one another in hushed tones as they checked vitals, twirled the knobs on the monitors, and tapped at his veins before sliding needle after needle into his flesh.

Swallowing hard, Nick looked to his left, his mother's face suddenly appearing in the door window. And he could tell from the worried look in her eyes that something was desperately wrong.

Holding still, Nick tried to stop the room from spinning, as his heart beat furiously in his chest. Pulling on the shirtsleeve of the nearest nurse, again, he spoke. "I... need to know... what's going on?"

The nurse standing beside him, going over the detailed notes on his chart, leaned down and whispered in his ear, "Please don't say anything, Mr. Carter, until the police arrive."

Nick twitched and then froze.

Police?

Sergeant Cox made his way down the hospital corridor, Detectives Mason and Jones close on his heels. He flashed his clearance badge at the front desk, continuing down the hall towards Nick Carter's room.

He immediately spotted Nick's mother, Jane Carter, standing outside of the door to her son's room, hands on her hips, as she peered impatiently through the small glass window.

At the sound of Sergeant Cox's footsteps, Jane Carter turned a most unpleasant look on her well-worn face. "What in the hell is going on?" she spat, completely oblivious to her younger son Aaron, standing beside her, tears rolling down his face. "I would like to go in there and see my son, but they-" She pointed to the two armed guards standing on either side of the door. "-say I can't see him. And do you know why they said I couldn't see him? Because they said they are acting on direct orders given by *you*, Sergeant Cox." She lunged forward, shoving Cox in the chest.

"Mom." Aaron reached a hand out, trying to pull his mom back, but she merely shrugged him off.

"Stay out of this, Aaron; it doesn't concern you!" she shouted, pushing at her wild mop of bleach blonde hair.

"Mrs. Carter." Sergeant Cox waved off the two guards, who had stepped forward in anticipation of having to restrain the irate woman. "Our main concern right now is for the quick recovery of your son, as well as the for the safe return of Howie Dorough. We feel that Nick will be able to give us vital information to let us know if we are on the right track with the investigation into the shootings and Mr. Dorough's disappearance."

Jane Carter turned away from Sergeant Cox, dramatically huffing out air in disgust as she peered back through the window at Nick. "I don't see what me seeing my son has to do with any of that."

"Your son has been through a traumatic experience, Mrs. Carter, surviving an ordeal that left another young man dead." Jane stiffened at the mention of Brian Littrell's death. "We feel that it is important for us to be the first people to speak with Nick, so that we can question him about what he remembers. We would like to get as much information as we can from him before it is tainted by conversations he may have with family, friends, or the media."

"You mean you want to grill him before he can even get his bearings, before he has a chance to breathe." She glared over her shoulder at Sergeant Cox and the two detectives.

"Whatever it takes to solve this case, Mrs. Carter."

Aaron leaned back against the wall, pushing his long blonde bangs from his eyes as the tears continued to slide openly down his face.

"Son." Sergeant Cox turned his attention to the young man, ignoring the obvious glare from Jane Carter. "The nurse who called us said that you were with your brother when he was coming out of his coma?" Aaron nodded. "The detectives are going to wait here with your mom while the doctors finish checking Nick over. I was wondering if, in the meantime, I could have a word with you?" Sergeant Cox folded his arms across his chest with a warm fatherly smile.

“Yeah... okay,” Aaron said, pushing off of the wall. But before he could take a step, Jane Carter’s arm flew out, blocking Aaron’s path.

“My boys will speak to you and your detectives, Sergeant Cox... but not without their lawyer.”

Mo walked from the bowling alley, moving slowly so as not to draw too much attention to himself as he made his way down the street towards the abandoned house, stopping on the way at a little fast food shack to pick up a greasy cheeseburger and fries for Howie.

Once back at the house, he climbed through the hole in the barbed wire fence, picking his way through the overgrown brush to the back window that had been long ago smashed out. Pulling himself through the window, the bag of food in his hands, he made his way around the rotted floorboards to the front entryway.

The closer he got to the stairs, the louder the pounding became from the upstairs closet where Howie was stashed. Walking upstairs with a smile, Mo went into the bedroom and pulled open the closet door, Howie’s legs tumbling out, still bound tightly, just the way Mo had left him.

Leaning down, Mo set down the bag of food, rolling Howie over onto his stomach before dragging him out into the middle of the room.

“I have some good news, Howard,” he said, ripping the electrical tape from Howie’s face before plucking out the rag that was stuffed in his mouth. “We’re almost done here, my friend. Our time together is coming to an end.”

“What do you mean?” Howie asked, coughing into his hand, as Mo unwrapped the foul-smelling burger, pushing it towards Howie’s face.

“Your friend Nick is finally awake.”

Nick watched silently as the doctors and nurses filed from the room, one right after another, like tin soldiers in a line, the last one out closing the door tightly behind them. He waited a single beat before trying to sit forward, wincing at the tight pull around his stomach as he lunged forward in an attempt to snag the chart from the hook on the foot of the bed.

Grazing his fingertips off of the clipboard, he lengthened his body again, trying to grip his fingers around the chart, when the door to the room pushed open. Sitting back, Nick watched his lawyer Mr. Talbot enter the room, followed by three official-looking men, one of whom was wearing the much-maligned uniform of the LAPD.

“Hello Nick, I’m Douglas Talbot, your lawyer.” Nick nodded, well aware of who Mr. Talbot was, but not why he was speaking so loudly, as if Nick had suddenly gone deaf or something. “This is Sergeant Cox from the LAPD and Detectives Jones and Mason. They have a few things they would like to talk to you about.”

Eyebrows arching, a slightly amused smile on his face, Nick shifted around in the bed, trying to get comfortable, as the Sergeant Cox pulled up a rolling stool to sit on and the other two men, along with Mr. Talbot, leaned against the wall.

“Hi, Nick. How are you feeling?” Sergeant Cox asked in a pleasant, interested voice.

“I dunno, I guess fine.”

“Do you know where you are, Nick?”

Looking around the room, Nick smiled. “I’m assuming a hospital,” he said with a small laugh that made Sergeant Cox smile.

“That’s right, Nick, you are in the hospital. Do you know why you are in the hospital?”

Fiddling with the IV tube that ran from his hand to the pole beside the bed, Nick began to speak and then stopped. That should be such an easy question, right? Everyday, people would ask him, “What did you do today, Nick?” Or “Where have you been lately, Nick?” And he’d always been able to answer them.

“Take your time, Nick,” Sergeant Cox said softly, aware of the stern look of concentration on Nick’s face as he mulled over the question again.

“Do I know why I’m in the hospital?” Nick asked, looking over the faces of each one of the men in the room, hoping for some sort of hint that none of their stone faces would give.

Nick’s mind turned slowly, like a rusty wheel desperately in need of oil.

“No... no, I don’t know why I’m here,” he finally answered, the once slightly amused look on his face wiped clean.

“Nick, do you remember getting hurt?”

Nick shook his head. “No, what happened, did I get in a car accident or something?” Nick wasn’t really enjoying the game he and Sergeant Cox were playing.

“Nick, you were injured, and you’ve been in a coma for the past seven days.” Sergeant Cox chose his words carefully, noticing the blood pressure on the monitor above Nick’s head beginning to rise.

“Seven days? What... what happened to me?” How could seven days have escaped him without his knowledge?

Cox paused for a moment before answering. “Nick, you were shot.”

Nick’s hands instinctively moved to his stomach, as Sergeant Cox continued his questions.

“Nick, do you remember going shopping in Beverly Hills?” The key to getting info out of a witness who had lost their memory was to keep the pace flowing. If they were unsure of a question, you moved quickly to the next question, never lingering for too long.

“Shopping?”

As his heart beat faster, the rusty wheel in Nick’s mind slowly began to turn...

“Those look fabulous on you! I can’t believe you have never owned a pair of cowboy boots. It’s definitely a good look for you!”

“You know that you make the clothes; the clothes don’t make you.”

“I completely agree.”

“Yeah, I remember shopping. I bought some cowboy boots.” Nick’s hands fell from his middle as he locked eyes with Sergeant Cox in an effort to remember.

“Was anybody with you when you bought the boots, Nick?”

The wheel continued to advance, one cog at a time...

“Okay, you know that you are never going to wear those.”

“No, I don’t know that.”

“In twenty-two years, you have never had the need to buy a pair of cowboy boots. What would make you think you’d need a pair now?”

“Brian.” Nick looked down, whispering the name before looking up again. “Brian was with me.” Sitting forward, Nick smiled. “Where is he? Where’s Brian?”

“Nick, can you tell us what happened after the shopping trip? Can you tell us where you and Brian went after buying the boots? Were you thirsty or maybe hungry?” Sergeant Cox hit him quickly with another question, prodding him slightly with the information he had been given by Aaron.

And the wheel turned some more...

“I want some beef jerky and a Mountain Dew.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. I want some beef jerky and a Mountain Dew.”

“Well, you know there isn’t any beef jerky in the house, and the only drinks I have are Coke, water, and milk.”

“So let’s go and get me some jerky and a Dew.”

“Go get yourself some jerky and a Dew, you dork.”

“But we’re already in the car, Bri. All you have to do is put it in reverse, back up, and drive until we find someplace that has beef jerky and Mountain Dew.”

“In Beverly Hills, that could take forever. We would have to go down more into the city.”

“Bri.”

“Fuck, Nick. You know, you piss me off sometimes.”

“Oh hell, Brian, I piss you off all the time. Why should today be any different?”

“I told Brian that I wanted beef jerky and some Mountain Dew.” Nick pushed at his temples. “Hey, where’s Brian? I want to talk to Brian.”

Sergeant Cox sat forward, his gaze shifting to the two detectives before settling back on Nick. “Nick, I need to ask you some more questions.”

“I want to talk to Brian.”

“Nick, Brian isn’t here.” Mr. Talbot put an arm on Sergeant Cox’s shoulder, warning him that he was treading into dangerous territory.

“Well, where is he? Somebody go and get him now. I want to talk to Brian.”

“Nick.” Sergeant Cox looked down at the ground. “Brian isn’t here because Brian was shot, too... Brian is dead.”

And then the wheel stopped turning.

Part 16:
All In Good Time, My Friend

“Back off, Sergeant, you’re going too fast,” Talbot warned, as Nick began to sway.

“Nick,” Sergeant Cox pressed further. “Nick, who shot you and Brian?”

“Shit... oh shit.” Nick couldn’t swallow. He pawed at his throat, the room spinning.

“Nick, focus on what I’m saying.” Sergeant Cox grabbed at Nick’s wrist, tugging him forward slightly.

“Security!” Mr. Talbot yelled for hospital security, while the guards outside of Nick’s door, on strict orders from Sergeant Cox, turned a deaf ear to his calls for help.

“Leave... leave me alone.” Nick tried to pull away his body, weak and in pain, his mind twisting with confusion.

“Get away from him, Sergeant.” Mr. Talbot pulled on Sergeant Cox’s shoulders as the two detectives stayed put in the background.

“I... I want to wake up,” Nick sobbed, his hands pushing through the open slits in the hospital gown to his stomach that was wound with surgical tape, gauze, and criss-crossing tubes, pumping fluid in and out of his body.

It was true. He had been shot.

“Please.” He looked into Sergeant Cox’s eyes, pleading, “Please let me wake up.”

“You are awake, Nick, and you have the answers we need. We’ve waited long enough, Nick. We need your help.”

“Sergeant, I’m warning you,” Mr. Talbot roared, as Sergeant Cox turned, shoving him backwards, the lawyer stumbling and knocking over a monitor cart before hitting the ground, as Cox resumed his questioning.

“Nick, where is Howie?”

Nick continued to shake his head, pushing his eyes closed tightly, tears rolling down his pale face. “Howie? ...I don’t know what you’re talking about... Why... why are you doing this to me?” Nick’s stomach began to burn, and his head began to pound, as his body slowly caught up to being in an awakened state, the trauma of the last seven days settling into his bones.

“Look, we need answers.” Cox pulled Nick’s face into his hands. “Look at me, Nick!” he shouted, Nick’s eyes popping open. “What happened in those woods?” He searched Nick’s wild blue eyes. “Nick... Nick.”

Nick's eyes fluttered as he swayed slightly, suddenly arching his back before pitching forward into the metal guardrails of the bed, setting off the monitors at the nurse's station.

"SHIT!" Cox yelled, as Mr. Talbot scrambled to his feet, grabbing for the door, opening it and shouting for security as he took off down the hall.

"Damn, Cox." Detective Mason lunged forward. "The kid's been in a god-damned coma for seven days, and you're acting like he fell off a skateboard at the mall. Why don't you leave him alone, give him a chance to breathe?"

Sergeant Cox reached out, securing Nick around the shoulders as he and Mason tried to sit him back up in bed. He could feel Nick's heart slamming around in his chest beneath the thin cotton gown, his skin covered with a layer of cold perspiration.

Mr. Talbot burst back into the room, followed by two nurses, anger apparent in their eyes as they pushed the two men out of their way. "Get out, all of you!" one of the nurses snapped, tapping a needle before inserting it into the IV tube.

"Please, please let me ask him a few more questions," Sergeant Cox pleaded from the foot of the bed, as the first wave of hospital security came through the doors. "This is a crucial time."

"Do you want to kill him?" the other nurse yelled, pushing the call button to alert the staff that they were in need of more security assistance.

"What are you putting in his IV?" Detective Jones asked, shooting a look to Cox that said if they were giving the kid painkillers and doping him up, the questioning was all but over.

"Gentleman." Mr. Talbot had to bite on the words he really wanted to use to describe the barbaric men in front of him. "On behalf of my client, I am asking you to leave this room now. He will not be able to answer any more questions for you today."

Shuffling to the door just as more security arrived, Sergeant Cox glanced over his shoulder to his sole witness.

Nick's eyes fluttered open, looking up at Cox through long, damp lashes. He and Nick made eye contact for a brief moment, a look of clarity passing through Nick's eyes before the medication kicked in and he drifted off to sleep.

After he finished his news update on Nick Carter, Dan Fortis wound up the cable to his microphone, tossing it to his cameraman Roger with a smile.

“What’s up with that shit-eatin’ grin?” Roger asked, placing the mic, along with the rest of their equipment, in the van.

“What shit eatin’ grin?”

“Oh, fuck you, Fortis, you know you been walking around with that smile plastered on your smug-ass face since this Backstreet story broke.”

“You mean since *I* broke it, Rog. And besides, so what if I have been walking around with a shit-eatin’ grin?” Dan asked, pulling his well-worn Orioles cap from the back of the van and plopping it on his head before climbing into the passenger side.

“I’ve known you for a long time, Fortis, long enough to know that you’re up to something.”

Dan smiled, flicking the brim of his cap with his index finger.

“So, are you gonna tell me what you’re up to or not?”

“All in good time, my friend. All in good time.” Dan settled back as Roger put the van in drive and pulled away from the hospital, leaving a crowd of reporters and fans in their dust.

“Get out of my hospital.”

Hospital Administrator Bill Connor and Sergeant Cox stood toe to toe behind the closed doors of Connor’s fifth floor office, engaged in a shouting match over the rights of Nick Carter versus the rights of the police department. Also in the room were Nick’s lawyer, his mother, his doctors, and the detectives, each one pleading their case of why they should be allowed or disallowed access to the young man in question.

After an hour of constant battling between all of the parties involved, a call was placed to the Police Commissioner by Mr. Connor.

Following a stern reprimand over the phone from the Commissioner, Sergeant Cox and the detectives were escorted from the hospital by police security with a warning. If they were to set foot back in the hospital before getting clearance from Mr. Connor, they would be brought up on charges by the hospital, as well as the Carter family, of endangering the life and well-being of Nickolas Gene Carter.

Escorted by security, Sergeant Cox and Detectives Mason and Jones made their way out of the back entrance of the hospital into the dimly-lit alley, the three men discussing the case and which direction to go next with the vague information they had on hand.

“God damned prick of a lawyer,” Cox grumbled, as the three men headed for their car. “If Nick’s mother wouldn’t have been so hot to trot on having that dickhead in the room, I know I could have gotten the kid to remember something.”

“Yeah right,” Mason said with a small laugh. “That kid wasn’t going to remember a god damned thing with the way you were all up and in his face. Did you see how shitfaced scared he was when you told him he’d been shot?”

“Jesus,” Jones piped up, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. “I thought he was going to go into cardiac arrest when you kept pumping him about what happened.”

The three men didn’t even notice the man dressed in black loading the sack of garbage into the dumpster to their right, listening to every word they said. He looked like any one of a hundred employees at the hospital that served up slop, mopped the floors, or swept the parking lot all times of the day and night.

“You know, maybe we have been overanalyzing this shit from the beginning.” Jones leaned against the trunk of the car, blowing smoke rings into the darkened sky. “Maybe Gus Monroe did kill those kids and then kill himself. ‘Carjacking gone wrong.’ Wouldn’t be the first time that a crime blew up in some dumbass criminal’s face.”

“And what about the stories the tabloids are reporting, that Brian and Nick were druggies and Gus was their dealer? They could be onto something with that.”

“So where does Howie Dorough fit into all of this?” Sergeant Cox glanced over at the guy by the dumpsters, tipping his head to him, as the three men continued talking.

“What do you mean, where does Howie fit in?” Detective Mason signaled for a cigarette from Jones. “Look, a lot of younger people in the limelight need a break every now and then. Maybe Howie Dorough decided to take a little time off.”

Cox shook his head. “Why would he just take time off and not call anybody, not his girlfriend or even his mother? Especially in light of the fact that he knew something was wrong with two of his friends and he said he was going to get them help. Not to mention, nobody has seen the town car from the hotel or the driver of that town car.”

“So maybe that night, Dorough and the driver set out for that address, but they can’t find Nick or Brian, and so Howie decides that while he is out, he might as well keep going, take a break. His girlfriend said they had been having disagreements over a long-term commitment. This was the guy’s chance to get away from her pressure. And as far as the driver goes, a big enough tip can buy silence and a town car ride to anywhere, Cox.”

Sergeant Cox resisted the urge to ask for a cigarette, a bad habit he had given up ten years before but still craved every day of his life. “I want the guy who did this brought to justice.”

“Listen Cox, why is it so hard to believe that Gus Monroe acted alone? All the facts at the crime scene point to that. If it weren’t for Howie Dorough, we would have never questioned if Gus was our man.” Mason flicked his cigarette on the ground, grinding it out with his heel.

“I think that we need to start looking at the possibility that Howie Dorough left the country and is unaware that we are looking for him. Or maybe we need to start looking at the possibility that Gus killed Howie and the town car driver, too, and we just haven’t found their bodies? Either way, it is going to be up to us, because that kid up there isn’t going to tell us anything until his brain wants to remember.” Jones tapped out the last cigarette dropping the empty pack to the ground.

“Where are your fucking manners, Jones?” Cox moaned, stooping to retrieve the empty pack. “I’m gonna go and throw this out.”

The three men broke apart, Mason and Jones climbing in the car as Cox headed for the dumpster, where the man in black was still standing, the bag of garbage in his hands.

“I’ll throw that away for you, Sergeant,” the man said, signaling for Sergeant Cox to hand him the wadded-up cigarette pack, which he took and stuffed in the garbage bag at his feet.

“Thanks.” Sergeant Cox turned to leave, his gaze falling to the shining black leather boots on the guy’s feet. “Those are some pretty fancy boots there,” Cox said, turning back around to admire the intricate tooling that was peeking out from the cuffs of the man’s black jeans.

“Thanks.” The guy hiked the leg of the one of the jeans up to reveal a large bird on the side of the boot, like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. “I won ‘em in a poker game.” He tapped the heel of the boot on the ground until his pant leg fell back down.

“Must have been one hell of a poker game if those boots were in the pot,” Cox said with a small chuckle.

“Oh man, you have no idea.” The guy heaved the garbage bag over his shoulder, slinging it into the dumpster with a smile.

“Hey Cox, you coming or what?” Mason called out of the window of the car that was idling by the chain link fence.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming.” Cox cocked his head to the guy as he turned to leave. “Duty calls,” he said, making his way across the alley to the car.

“You bet, sir. And hey, thanks for all you do to protect us citizens.”

Walking in the opposite direction of the police cruiser, Mo smiled, the details of the conversation between Sergeant Cox and the two detectives still fresh in his mind.

Nick lay on his side in his hospital bed, knees drawn up to his chest, eyes closed, snoring lightly. A.J. sat in a chair beside the bed, watching his friend, a slight frown on his face. It was a few hours ago that he had received the call from Aaron that Nick was awake. A.J. drove faster than he ever had in his life to get to the hospital, making it to Nick's floor just in time to see Sergeant Cox and the detectives being lead from Nick's room by security, everybody screaming and yelling as they were herded onto the elevator, Nick's mother and lawyer in tow.

A.J. proceeded to try and find out some answers about Nick and his condition, but the doctors as well as the guards at the door rebuffed him, so he was forced to turn on the charm if he was going to find anything out. Doing some heavy flirting with a sexy little nurse at the front desk, he was able to find out that Nick was indeed awake. And while he had been questioned by authorities about the case, he had no memory of why he and Brian had been shot or where Howie was.

It was close to midnight now, as A.J. sat beside Nick, willing him to remember something, anything, of the events of that night.

In the days since the shootings, the press had become wicked, even going so far as to characterize Brian and Nick as vile drug addicts who had been involved in some underground, seedy world of drug dealers and drugs that no one was aware of. They said that Brian and Nick had been involved a drug deal with Gus Monroe and that the deal had gone wrong due to money issues. It was at that point, the press was speculating, that Brian and Nick had lured Howie to the warehouse. Lured him there to take his money to repay their drug debt, at which point they had planned to kill him and blame the whole thing on Gus. The tables eventually turned, culminating in a free for all gun battle in the woods.

A.J. shook his head now, as he thought about the ugly words and speculation. He guessed it made for a good story, but it hurt to see his friends' names smeared so horribly on the front pages of the stupid tabloid rags. And it hurt even more when his own mother called him to ask him if it was true.

Raking a hand through his dark, spiky hair, A.J. glanced at the clock on the wall. Another day had come and gone, and they were no closer to the truth than they had been seven days ago.

"A.J." A.J. jumped at the sound of his name. Looking around the room, he finally looked to Nick, who seemed so small and helpless in the big hospital bed, a cloudy look in his sad blue eyes.

“Hey buddy,” A.J. whispered, leaning into Nick so he could get a better look at him through the metal side railings of the bed. “You scared the shit out of us, little man. We didn’t think you were going to make it.” A.J. smiled.

“A.J.” Nick’s voice was a small whisper. “A.J., is Brian really dead?” Nick’s hand reached out to clutch one of the railings. “Did somebody kill him?”

A.J. placed his hand over Nick’s hand, nodding. “Yeah, buddy, Brian is dead.”

“And is Howie really missing?” Nick sounded like the little kid A.J. had first met back in Florida all those years ago, always full of endless questions.

“Yes, Howie’s missing,” A.J. answered. He hadn’t ever lied to Nick before; he wasn’t going to start now.

Nick nodded, slowly releasing his grip on the railing. “It’s all my fault, isn’t it, A.J. ?” Nick asked.

“Nick, can you try and remember what happened that night? It is important that we know what happened. Can you remember?” A.J. asked in a gentle voice, as Nick pulled his hand away.

“No, A.J., I can’t remember.” He paused, rolling onto his side, facing away from A.J. “And I don’t want to,” he whispered, before closing his eyes.

Mo stood at the security fence of the Belhurst Storage Units, yelling for help. He shook the fence a few times for good measure, watching as the skinny little rent-a-cop who guarded the units came around the corner, his hand poised on the gun on his hip. “What do you want?” the security guard yelled, sliding a flashlight from his belt loop that he shined on Mo from ten feet away.

“I need some help. My girlfriend has gone into labor in our car down the road, and I need to use your phone!” Mo yelled, his voice tinged with just the right amount of desperation.

“Well...” The guard paused, walking a few feet closer. “Why don’t you just tell me where you’re located, and I’ll call the cops and have them meet you at your car.”

Little shit, Mo thought. He should have guessed that he would get a clever little minimum wage fucker. But Mo could be cleverer than some stupid security guard.

“Look, we don’t have time to call the cops. When I left her, I could see the baby’s head coming out,” Mo pleaded, looking over his shoulder. “You have to help us. I can’t deliver the baby all by myself. Please, she can’t wait much longer.”

The guard continued to be suspicious, so Mo went the full nine yards, squeezing some tears into the corner of his eyes as he screamed, "Please, sir, don't let my baby die!"

That did it.

The guard tucked his flashlight in his belt loop, grabbing for his keys as he hurried to the security gate, quickly unlocking it and leading the way down the driveway.

"Which way to your car, sir?" he turned to ask, just as Mo jabbed a knife in his throat.

Part 17:
Don't Bother Waiting Up For Me

It was 2:00 a.m.

Dan Fortis drove through the seedy underbelly of Los Angeles in his beat-up Honda Accord, looking for information. He had spent the better part of his four years at UCLA doing investigative journalism for a local underground newspaper, so it seemed like a good idea to tap into those old skills when it came to the story at hand.

For the better part of the last seven days, he had been cruising the streets, digging for dirt and paying off foul-mouthed scum for any info they could give him about Gus Monroe and his comings and goings the days before the shootings. He'd managed to learn a few vague things about what Gus was up to the weeks leading up to that fateful night. But nothing that was going to crack the case wide open, win him a Peabody Award and the corner office on the fifth floor that he so desperately desired.

Pulling the car over to the side of the road, Dan signaled to a woman dressed in a leopard-skin halter top and black hot pants to come to the car to talk. Pasting a phony smile on her crimson-colored lips, she sashayed over to his car, leaning down through the open window, gagging him with the smell of cheap, dime store perfume.

“What’s up, baby?” she drawled, her eyes wide and darting.

“Did you know a guy named Gus Monroe?” Dan backed up from the window, glancing in his rearview mirror for any signs of cops that might bust him for “solicitation.”

“Baby, I’ll know whoever you want me to know.”

Dan reached for the police file photo of Gus that had been running in all of the national papers for the last week. “This guy.” Dan tapped on the picture. “Did you know this guy? Or do you know anybody who would know this guy? Word on the street is that he frequented this corner for some action.”

Grabbing the paper from Dan’s hands, she looked it up and down, tossing it back through the window into his lap. “So what if I did know that guy?”

“What can you tell me about him?” Dan reached for his billfold, sliding out two crisp ten-dollar bills. One thing he learned was that it didn’t take much for these types of people to turn on their own kind. They would stab their own mothers in the back for few bucks to buy themselves beer, cigarettes, or drugs.

“He was a moron,” she said, glancing over Dan’s car at a white Lincoln Continental that slowed down to check out what was available. A woman in all red stepped out of the shadows across the street. “Damn, man, you totally made me lose that John. He would have probably gave me at least fifty bucks.”

Reaching in his wallet, Dan slid out three more ten-dollar bills. “Okay, look, I’ll match his price if you can give me some more info on Gus Monroe. Who did he hang out with?” Everybody Dan had talked with up until tonight had pretty much stuck to the story that Gus was a real loner. Pulled off most of his jobs on his own and kept to himself.

“He hung out with some guy.”

Sitting up a little straighter, Dan smiled. “He hung out with a guy?”

“Yeah, some big guy with muscles and a square face. Kind of okay-looking, in a creepy sort of way.” Popping her gum, she knelt down a little lower, resting her chin on the car door. “Gus always wanted to impress the guy, so he brought him to me a few times for some fun. Paid for the guy and everything.”

“What was his name?” Grabbing for his notepad, Dan wrote down the vague description she had given him of the man.

“I dunno; I can’t remember.”

“You slept with the guy, and you can’t remember his name?” Dan said with a small laugh.

“Hey, they don’t pay me to remember their names.”

Tossing the rest of the money out the window, Dan smiled. “Too bad. There was another fifty in it for you if you could have come up with his name. But thanks anyway, miss, you’ve been a big help,” he said as he started to pull away.

“Hey, wait!” she yelled, dropping to her knees to pick up the scattered bills on the pavement.

Sticking his head out the window, Dan waved around a fifty-dollar bill as enticement for her memory to make a sudden return.

“I think he said his name was Mo.”

When Nick awoke the following morning, he expected to see A.J. at his bedside, but instead, he was greeted by the sour face of his mother, sitting in the chair, thumbing through a magazine and humming some random song from the 70s that he couldn’t quite remember the name of.

“Mom?” Jane blinked twice at the word like Nick was speaking Japanese and then glanced up.

“So?” was all she said to him, her eyebrows arched high over her heavily-lined eyes.

“So?” Nick shrugged in confusion.

“So, are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?” she asked, dropping the magazine to the floor beside her chair.

“What do you mean?” Nick shifted in the bed, wincing from the pain in his gut as he tried to sit up.

“It’s all over the news,” she said, reaching for the remote and clicking on the overhead TV. But at that moment, the story of Nick and Brian and Howie wasn’t all over the news; instead, there was a story about a security guard disappearing from his graveyard shift at the Bellhurst Storage Units. “Well, it *has* been all over the news.” Jane sighed, clicking off the TV. “Tell me the truth: were you and the saintly Brian buying drugs?”

“I was shot, so my stomach hurts, and I’ve been in a coma for like a week, so I’m a little tired, but other than that, I’m fine... thanks for asking,” Nick mumbled.

“Were you and Brain buying drugs?” Leaning down, she grabbed Nick’s face in her hand, digging her long, pink fingernails into his cheeks.

“Mom, knock it off.” Nick pushed at her hand. “No, we weren’t buying drugs.”

“How do you know?” she asked, her stupid questions making Nick’s head hurt.

“I... I don’t know,” he replied honestly.

“If you two little shits were out there buying drugs, and that is why Brian and that other guy were killed and Howie is missing, then you are going to be in deep shit.” She paced the room, looking back at Nick with raging disapproval.

“Mom,” Nick started, but she quickly cut him off.

“You better hope to hell you get your memory back, Nick, and you better hope you get it back fast, because if it turns out that somehow this whole thing was your own fault, and it goes to trial, the press is going to eat you alive.”

Mo scrubbed at the security guard’s uniform with a wet towel, pissed at himself that he had not aimed the knife high enough to keep blood from splashing all over the collar. He knew he should have just choked the guy to death instead of using the knife.

As always, the stupid news media had been Mo’s biggest help with figuring out which way to go next with his plan. After his little “chat” with Sergeant Cox in the hospital alley the night before, Mo returned to the bowling alley to catch up on the news coverage of the Backstreet Boys case. Leaning against the back wall, a cold glass of beer in his

hands, he watched some loser news weasel informing the public that, due to Nick's current condition, the cops had been tossed out of the hospital until Nick was able to be questioned. Which meant that the hospital would hire some stupid-ass security company to watch over St. Nick, getting rid of the LAPD guarding his doors. So it seemed only fitting that Mo pay a little visit to the Bellhurst Storage Units to get himself a fancy security guard uniform that would look so nice on him when he paid Nick a friendly visit to give him his best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Inside of the closet where he was now sharing close quarters with a corpse, Howie tried not to move or breathe, his mind wandering as the stench of blood permeated the musty air.

Mo had dragged the body into the room sometime after sunrise, throwing open the closet door and waking Howie from his deep sleep by leaning down and dragging him by the wrists out of the closet.

"I brought someone to see you," Mo said, pointing to the body crumpled in a ball on the floor beside Howie.

"Shit," Howie moaned from beneath the gag. He could see that the neck of the person had been punctured, fresh blood coating the man's neck and shoulders. Was it Nick? Howie swallowed hard, fighting back the nausea that pitched around in his gut as Mo rolled the body over, face-up.

"Fooled you." Mo laughed at the classic look on Howie's face when he realized the dead man before him was not Nick. "You thought I brought your buddy to keep you company, didn't you? Nope, sorry to disappoint you. I killed this guy because I needed his uniform, but I guess he can keep you company, too."

Howie watched in confusion as Mo stripped the dead body down to its boxer shorts, tossing the clothing to the pile in the corner of the room, before dragging the guy into the closet. He then stooped down to tighten Howie's gag, pulling off a second strip of electrical tape that he secured over the top of the first piece that held the gag in place, making it nearly impossible for Howie to breathe.

"Okay buddy, you're in next." Grabbing Howie under the arms, Mo hauled him up to his feet, walking him back towards the closet. Howie struggled against Mo's weight, trying to break free of the horror that was unfolding, but Mo just laughed. "Howard, look at you. Do you really think that you are any match for me? Hell, you aren't even a match for that dead guy right there." He pointed to the still and twisted body on the closet floor. "Now, c'mon, your new friend is lonely, so get in there and keep him company."

Picking Howie up off of his feet, Mo hauled him, kicking and flailing, to the closet, where he proceeded to shove him inside, making him fall in a heap on top of the dead security guard, before shutting and locking the closet door behind him.

“Hey Howard, how you doing in there?” Mo asked, banging on the door to the closet. “I was feeling bad that you were so lonely. I hope you like your new friend.”

Laughing, Mo shed his clothing, pulling on the uniform that was slightly small in some places but, overall, would do just fine.

“Okay, well, I’m going out for awhile,” he said, pounding twice on the closet door on his way out of the room. “Don’t bother waiting up for me.”

It was lunchtime, and instead of digging into his wife’s leftover meatloaf and mashed potatoes, Sergeant Cox sat in his office, staring at the corkboard where he had posted each and every detail about Nick Carter’s case for the last eight days. Shaking his head, he tossed his pen at the board in frustration, as his phone began to ring.

“What.”

“Sergeant.” It was Corbin, one of the officers he had posted outside of Nick Carter’s hospital room. “The hospital administration is ordering us to leave the hospital grounds.”

Sighing, Sergeant Cox rubbed at his throbbing temple with his free hand. “I figured they would pull that. Fine, do what they say for now and get back to the station. I’ll put you two back on street patrol until we can figure something out.” Slamming the phone down, he pulled Bill Connor’s phone number down off the corkboard and dialed.

“Yes, this is Mr. Connor.”

“Listen, Connor, you’re making a big mistake taking my guards off of Nick Carter.”

“Hello, Sergeant Cox. I appreciate your concern, but Nick Carter’s family does not want this turned into any more of a circus than it already is. In light of his medical condition and the fact that you don’t seem to care what your interrogations can do to his health, his family does not feel comfortable with you or any persons employed by you to be in contact with their son at this time. You may take the matter up with their lawyer if you’d like. I have his number right here.”

“Who is going to be watching the kid?” Cox hissed through clenched teeth, wishing he could put that sissy hospital dumbass in a headlock and pummel him until he screamed like a woman.

“Not that it is any of your concern, but we have hired some extra security men to guard his room. When and if he has his memory return and he is able to talk to you without there being a threat posed to his health, the family will notify you.”

“Fuck you, Connor!” Cox shouted into the phone, just as Officer Park walked through the door.

“And a good afternoon to you as well, Sergeant Cox,” Mr. Connor said, before slamming down the phone.

Leighanne walked through the door of Nick’s hospital room, a huge vase of yellow roses in her arms, a smile on her face.

“Hi Nicky,” she said, looking for a place to set down the flowers.

“Hey.” Nicky? She had never called him Nicky before.

“How are you feeling?” She finally set the vase of flowers down on the floor, before sitting in the chair by Nick’s bedside.

“I dunno,” he answered honestly. His chest was tight, his head foggy like he had been sucking on helium, and his body throbbed all over, making him wish that he could just go back into the deep sleep of the coma.

“I brought you these.” Leighanne motioned in the direction of the flowers as she spoke. “I thought they might make the room more cheerful or something.”

Nick looked around the room, trying to settle his eyes on anything but Leighanne’s face.

“Did you want some water?” she asked, looking over her shoulder to the glass of water on the counter.

Nick shook his head. “You hate me, don’t you? I’m sure that everybody hates me, so it’s okay if you do, too.”

“Why would anybody hate you, Nick?”

He smiled sadly. “Because I’m alive.”

“Brian did what he had to do, Nick. It was his choice to make, not yours. He wanted you to live.” Tears spilled down her cheeks as Leighanne said the words.

“How do you know that for sure?” Nick whispered, reaching out for her hand.

“Because he told me so,” she said, lacing her fingers through his and squeezing his hand tightly.

Part 18:
You Don't Have To Say It

Leighanne's visit left Nick feeling strange and unsettled, as he kept going over what she'd said in his mind.

"Because he told me so... Because he told me so... Because he told me so."

What did that mean? He guessed that it was supposed to make him feel better to think that Brian had given up his own life in order for Nick to live, but in reality, it only made him feel worse.

The rest of the day was filled with visits from family and close friends that were only allowed to see Nick one at a time. Most of them brought flowers, stuffed animals, or food that he couldn't yet eat, and all of them approached him with phony smiles pasted on their faces, patting his arm like he was some delicate piece of china that they didn't want to break.

Even Aaron acted strange, laughing in this stupid loud laugh that made Nick's ears hurt. "Shut up," he finally said, as Aaron rattled off the punch line to another stupid joke that Nick didn't get.

"Oh c'mon, bro, that was funny!" Aaron waggled his eyebrows at Nick.

"No, it wasn't; it was stupid and retarded, just like you are."

Aaron's face fell at his brother's unprovoked attack. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to cheer you up."

"Yeah, well, you're not, so shut up." Nick paused. "Hey, I heard the nurses talking; they said you were in here with me when I woke up?" Nick tried to make eye contact with Aaron as he shifted around uncomfortably in his chair. Each visitor had been instructed by Nick's lawyer, as well as his mother, to not mention anything to Nick about the case.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You *guess* so, or you *know* so, Aaron?"

"I don't know."

"You're lying." Nick pointed a finger at his little brother. "You're lying to me, you little shit."

"Nick-" Aaron sputtered, just as their mother poked her head in the door, an annoyed look on her face.

“Aaron, time’s up. Give somebody else a turn to visit with Nick.”

Standing up, Aaron glanced over his shoulder at Nick on the way out the door, wanting to say something to let his brother know that he was sorry. But it was too late; the pain medication had already begun to take effect, as Nick’s eyes slowly closed, and he fell into a deep sleep.

Nick was grateful when he awoke from his afternoon nap to find A.J. sitting in the chair beside him, a black baseball cap pulled down low over his eyes as he fiddled with the dials on the big clunky watch on his wrist.

“Hey, am I glad to see you.” Nick rolled over on his side with a groan.

“Yeah, well, you should be because I’m a sexy sexy man.” A.J. laughed, pushing up the brim of the baseball cap so that he could see Nick better. “You know, they got some new guards out there on your doors. They look like fucking Barney Fife or something. If anything happens to you, buddy, you’re screwed if those are the guys that are supposed to protect you.” Nick was relieved to hear the sly, sarcastic tone of A.J.’s voice. It made him feel like everything would be okay.

“How come I have guards on my door?” Nick reached out, signaling for A.J. to hand him his water.

“You mean the cops didn’t tell you?” A.J. said, handing him the water, not giving a shit about what Nick’s mom thought Nick should or shouldn’t know regarding what had happened to him.

“Nobody has really told me anything except that Brian is-” Nick stopped.

“You don’t have to say it, man,” A.J. said, as Nick paused.

“Well, anyway, all they told me is that Howie is missing and that some other guy was killed.” Nick took a long drink of water, propping the glass on his chest.

“Well, according to the news, they think there might be someone else involved. They think that he might be the one who has Howie, and I think they’re afraid that he might come after you because you are the only one who knows what happened to you, Howie, and Brian.” A.J. swiveled his cap backwards, as Nick studied his hands in his lap.

“You know, I was having this weird dream before I woke up. It was about Brian.” Nick spoke softly. “I could see him plain as day. It was almost like I could reach out and touch him.”

“Did he say anything?” Tears stung A.J.’s eyes. He’d been trying to be strong, but it was so hard with Brian’s voice echoing around in his head every time that he closed his eyes.

“He didn’t say anything, he just... looked at me.” Nick had tried desperately to save the image of Brian in his head, but when he opened his eyes, it faded like a distant memory. “A.J.” Nick swirled the water around in the glass. “Were Brian and I doing drugs?”

A.J. let out a loud laugh, sitting back in his chair. “No way.”

“Well, if I can’t remember what happened the night he was killed, then what if there are other things about my life that I can’t remember?”

“Nick, you’d remember if you and Brian were doing drugs.”

“But my Mom said-”

“I don’t care what your fucking mom says, Nick. And I don’t care what the fucking papers say or the guys on the news or even Kevin-” A.J. stopped himself, but not soon enough.

“What does Kevin say?” Nick mumbled.

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

“No, I want to know what ‘Mr. High And Fucking Mighty’ has to say about the whole thing.” Nick knew he was talking loud, and he didn’t care. “It’s not like I didn’t notice that he hasn’t come by, A.J. It isn’t like I couldn’t figure out for myself that he thinks this is all my fault, just like he always thinks everything is my fault.”

“He’s fucked up, Nick. He doesn’t know what he thinks or why he thinks it, so screw him.”

“Yeah, well, I’m fucked up, too. I mean, look at me!” Nick yelled, pointing at his stomach and the mass of tubes and hospital machinery all around him. “If he thinks that I did this on purpose-”

“He doesn’t think you did it on purpose, Nick, just calm down.”

“Then what does he think, A.J.?”

“Nick, you have to calm down; they’re going to throw my ass out of here if you don’t calm down.”

“What does he think, A.J.? Tell me!” Nick’s frustration was peaking.

“Let it go, Nick.” A.J. considered getting up and leaving, but Nick continued baiting him.

“No, seriously, I want to know, A.J. What does he think? WHAT DOES KEVIN THINK?” Nick’s face was flushed red as he hurled the glass of water across the room, making A.J. jump as glass shattered all around him.

“HE WISHES YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN THE ONE TO DIE!” A.J. yelled back, slamming his fist into the guardrails on the bed, instantly regretting the harsh words he’d let loose into the air.

Nick took a sharp intake of breath like he’d been slapped hard across the face, pausing for a beat before replying, “Yeah, well, fuck him, man, because I wish I were dead too.”

Dan pulled into his driveway shortly after 7:00 a. m., dragging himself up the three flights of stairs to his apartment. Walking inside, he was too tired to even care that he’d left his keys in the door as he stumbled into the bedroom, dropping face-first onto the bed and falling asleep, visions of a mystery man named ‘Mo’ dancing in his head.

The info he’d gotten from the hooker had been golden, giving Dan a name and a vague description of a man who had been known to hang around with Gus Monroe. Dan knew from his inside source at the police station that the cops sure as hell didn’t know about any guy named Mo. They were actually going to start working on the angle that Brian, Nick, and Howie had been into drugs and that Gus was their drug dealer, which totally made Dan laugh, considering that that whole theory had been first introduced by some tabloid rag.

After his chat with the hooker, Dan had done some more digging around, mentioning the name Mo to a few stray street people here and there. Some of them shrugged him off, asking for money, but there was one guy that stood out in Dan’s mind. He kept telling Dan that he knew Mo.

“So you know who he is, then, this guy Mo?” Dan stood an arm’s length away from the guy, trying not to inhale the foul stench of body odor mixed with cigarette smoke.

“Nobody really knows Mo,” the old man replied, scratching at his chin before grabbing at some unseen thing in the air.

“What does that mean?” Dan rubbed at his eyes, wondering what the hell time it was and how much longer he was going to have to play quiz games with the great unwashed on the Los Angeles city streets.

“Well, nobody but the kid; maybe the kid knows Mo.”

“What?”

“The kid would probably know him better than anybody.”

At the mention of a kid, Dan grabbed for his pen and notepad. “You keep saying there is a kid. What, like a little kid, or a big kid?”

“Yeah, the kid had that spooked look in his eyes, so he definitely knows Mo more than you and I know Mo.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Dan snapped his fingers in the guy’s face as he started to wander away, mumbling something to himself as he disappeared into the shadows.

Dan was still dreaming of the foul-smelling homeless guy when the afternoon sun peeking through the blinds woke him up. Rolling over, he slowly opened his eyes, his head pounding like he’d been on a three-day drunk. Glancing at the clock on the wall, he pushed himself up on one elbow and grabbed for the phone, dialing his work number.

“I’m sick,” he said, as soon as his producer picked up the phone.

“No way, Fortis. Get your ass in here; you already missed your 12:00 set up. You’ve got another live feed from the hospital at 3:00.”

“I can’t. I’m sick,” he explained again in stuffy-nosed, scratchy-throated voice that could have won him an Oscar. “It must be some sort of twenty-four-hour something or other.”

“Twenty-four-hour something or other, huh?” his producer said with an irritated sigh. “You got twenty-four hours to get your ass out of bed and feeling better, or you’re fired.”

Smiling as he placed the phone back in the cradle, Dan sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and raking his hands through his hair, before he grabbed for his pager and cell phone mixed up in the bedsheets.

He knew he was running out of time. He had to get his ass back out on the streets and look for Mo because he was almost positive that where Mo was, there would be information.

“Get out, A.J.!” Nick continued yelling at A.J., as he pointed at the door.

“Nick, you don’t mean what you’re saying. Everybody is confused right now. We all just want shit back to normal.” A.J. stood up, pacing the hospital room, as security burst through the door, observing the shattered glass and water all over the room.

“You need to leave Mr. Carter’s room.” The guard signaled for A.J. to follow him, but A.J. set his jaw, glaring at the guy.

“Hey, fuck you; he’s my friend, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“C’mon.” The security guard walked through the glass on the floor, reaching for A.J.’s arm.

“Why don’t you fucking make me, you little dick?” A.J. pulled his arm from the guy’s grip as the second security guard came through the door.

“Do you need some help?” he asked, as the first guard grabbed for A.J.’s arm again.

“No, we’ve got things under control here, right?” he said, pulling on A.J.’s forearm.

“Nick, tell them that you don’t want me to go.”

“Nothing is ever going to be normal again,” Nick mumbled, more to himself than to anybody in the room.

“What?” A.J. shot a confused look in Nick’s direction, shaking the security guard off of him for the second time.

“You want things back to normal. Well, nothing is ever going to be normal again.”

“Nick, you don’t know what you’re saying; you’re upset.”

“Just get out, A.J. I don’t want you here anymore. I just want to be alone.”

After A.J. had been escorted out by security and housekeeping had come to clean up the mess of glass on the floor, Nick lay in his hospital bed, counting the ceiling ties and thinking about what A.J. had told him.

“Well, according to the news, they think there might be someone else involved. They think that he might be the one who has Howie. I think they’re afraid that he might come after you because you are the only one who knows what happened to you and Brian.”

Turning on his side, he picked up the telephone and rang the nurse’s station, asking for the phone number for Sergeant Cox. Repeating the digits over and over to himself, he hung up and dialed again, keeping an eye on he door.

“What.”

“Is this Sergeant Cox?”

At the sound of Nick Carter’s voice, Sergeant Cox stood up and closed his office door.

Part 19:
You Can't Stop A Speeding Fate Train

Nick held the phone gripped tightly in his hand, listening carefully to what Sergeant Cox had to say.

“We haven’t got much time, Nick. The statistics on kidnappings are not good. Usually, if the person is not recovered within twenty-four hours, the likelihood that the victim has been killed and the body dumped is your best bet. Couple that with the fact that you were shot and left for dead, and Brian Littrell was killed, well, then Howie Dorough’s chances of survival at this point are slim to none.”

Sergeant Cox spoke quickly, stopping every so often to ask Nick if he understood what he was telling him, to which Nick only answered with a slightly annoyed, “Yes.”

“In most amnesia cases that involve homicides, we work with the doctors, as well as the patient, to help them get their memory back. But, in your case, that is not possible because your mother has declared you off-limits. She is more concerned about your image than your friend Howie’s life. Is that how you feel as well?”

“No, sir.”

“I don’t have time to work with the system on this, Nick. I don’t have time to sit back and wait for you to get your fucking memory back.”

“Everybody is saying that we were doing drugs.” Nick cupped his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone as he spoke to make sure nobody passing by would hear him.

“I don’t buy that. Not for a minute. I think there is someone else involved. And I believe that someone else is the one who shot you, killed Brian as well as Gus Monroe, and kidnapped Howie.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?” Nick heard voices outside of his door. Quickly dropping the hand which held the phone, he dangled the receiver off of the side of the bed and lay back on the pillow, closing his eyes, until whoever was outside of the door passed by. Then, dragging the phone back up and over the side of the bed, he pressed it again to his ear. “Sorry, there was someone outside of my room.”

“Here is what we are going to do, Nick. I’m going to tell you what I think happened, and you are going to tell me if any of that rings a bell. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember shopping with Brian for shoes on Rodeo Drive?”

“Yeah, I remember that, I guess.”

“Do you remember going out after you got home from your shopping trip for something to eat?”

“Yeah.” Nick nodded his head, smiling slightly at the faded image of him begging Brian to take him for beef jerky and Mountain Dew. “We went to some piece of shit gas station because I wanted something to eat and drink.”

“Do you remember what happened at the gas station?” Cox pursed his lips together, tapping his pencil on his forehead with his free hand, hoping for the dam in Nick Carter’s head to burst.

“No.”

“Do you remember Brian going inside to get your food?”

“Sometimes.”

“Nick, you were all alone in the car when Brian went inside. Do you remember someone getting in the car with you? Maybe someone that was pretending to ask for directions or spare change, maybe someone with a knife or a gun who wanted your car?” Cox knew he was going against the rules of interrogation of an amnesia witness. In court, it would have been called leading the witness. But at this point, he didn’t care. The police commissioner was pushing them to drop the carjacking angle, instead deciding to let Nick take the blame for everything that had happened based on some stupid idea that he and his friends were doing drugs.

Nick shook his head, glancing up at the door as a nurse passed by. “I don’t know, maybe I remember that? Is that what really happened?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know, Nick, is it?” Sergeant Cox was hoping that what he was saying would trigger some sort of a memory, no matter how faint, of this “someone else” he believed was involved.

“Look, I’ll remember whatever you want me to remember. If you say there was another guy, I’ll remember another guy. If you say that this guy had red hair, green eyes, and two heads, I’ll remember him that way. I’m not going to fucking fry for this whole thing just because I’m the only one who is alive.”

“Look,” Cox continued, not missing a beat, “it isn’t going to do anybody any good if you remember things that aren’t true. What I’m trying to do is plant the seed, Nick. You are the one who is going to have to make it grow.”

Nick nodded, tapping the receiver lightly against the side of his face. “Okay, Sergeant Cox, so what if there was some other guy involved?”

“If I’m right, and there is another guy involved, we have to catch the bastard before he comes back to finish off what he started. It is obvious that you were not supposed to live,

Nick, not when you were left bleeding to death on that warehouse floor, and not now. With the way this story has been covered in the press, this guy is well aware of who you are and that you are very much alive, making Howie's chances for getting out of this with his life almost zero, which is why we need to work fast."

"So I'll tell my Mom that I want the police back on the case. I'll tell her that I want your guys on my door instead of those morons that are out there now. I'll tell-

"My officers and I were banned from talking with you, Nick, until further notice from the hospital and your legal counsel. Your Mom can't know that we have spoken, Nick, and your lawyer can't know that we have spoken. If you are going to protect yourself, you are going to have to figure out how to do it on your own. And we just have to hope to hell in the meantime you come up with the information we are looking for."

"So that's it, then? You are just going to leave me to twist in the fucking wind with a madman on the loose?" Nick fought his urges to throw the phone across the room, instead hoping for some sort of comforting words from the man on the other end of the receiver.

"Yup," Sergeant Cox said flatly.

"Yup?" Nick repeated in an exasperated tone.

"I'll do everything I can on my end, Nick."

"And what the fuck am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Get your memory back, and try and stay alive."

Howie struggled for air, but was finding it more and more difficult to keep his mind clear and focus on breathing when all he wanted to do was to just fall into a deep sleep. The second piece of duct tape that Mo had stripped off and placed on his mouth was too tight, some of it covering the lower half of his nostrils. He knew that was probably the whole point, a slow, miserable death as opposed to a bullet to the brain or the duct tape wound tightly around his whole God damned head so that he would just black out from lack of oxygen and die.

Strange visions began to fill his brain, and at one point, he swore that the dead man's body beneath him twitched, making him wonder how long his own body would twitch after he suffocated to death in the closet. Two hours, four hours, maybe a week? Was there a record for how long a body twitched after you were dead?

And then, suddenly, he found himself thinking about his life and wondering if he would be in the situation he was in now if he were just plain old Howard Dorough, instead of Backstreet Boy Howie Dorough.

His grandmother used to say, “You can’t stop a speeding fate train.” Everybody thought she was clever for the play on words. Howie just thought that she was just tongue tied and meant to say 'freight' instead of 'fate.' But now he wasn’t so sure.

Was your fate your fate no matter what, or did the life you lead dictate your fate? Would he have still known Brian, A.J., Kevin, and Nick if he hadn’t bumped into A.J. all of those years ago at various local Florida auditions? Would they all have been college buddies, or worked together at a restaurant, or been lawyers employed at the same firm? Were their lives destined to be intertwined? Instead of being in a chauffeur-driven town car looking for Nick that fateful evening, would Howie have been sputtering along that deserted road in a Honda Accord trying to help his friend?

Was all of this destined to be his fate?

If it was, then there was nothing he could do to stop it. So, closing his eyes, he decided to just give in and let fate take him where it may.

Kevin sat on the balcony of his hotel room, drinking beer and watching the haze burn off over the city. He had decided not to go looking for Howie today with the Dorough family, instead opting to just sit in his hotel room, get drunk, and throw bread at the seagulls that circled overhead.

He knew that Kristin was disgusted with his behavior, and he didn’t really care. She begged him to deal with the overwhelming feelings he was having. Pissing her off even more when he chose to laugh at her use of the phrase “overwhelming feelings,” mocking the words until she threw an empty beer bottle at him in disgust, missing his head by mere inches.

“Getting drunk isn’t going to bring your cousin back!” she shouted at him.

“I’m not drinking to bring my cousin back,” he slurred, watching the long neck bottle spin around on the floor, surprised that it had not broken when it hit the wall.

“Then why are you drinking, Kevin?”

“To get drunk.” He annunciated each word like she was a small child who couldn’t understand the simplest of words, which made her scream at the top of her lungs and shake her fists at him.

“You need some professional help, Kevin.”

“No, what I need is another beer, Kristin.”

“You’re a fool, Kevin. A damn fool,” was the last thing she said before storming out of the hotel room, slamming the door behind her.

Nick lay there with the phone in his hand long after he had hung up with Sergeant Cox, going over the scenario laid out before him by the man and trying to make it work with the memories he had in his head. He kept getting to the part where Brian went inside of the gas station...

“Okay, I am going in there alone, and I am going to get you Mountain Dew and beef jerky. If they don’t have Mountain Dew and beef jerky, then I am getting you Coke and Twinkies. If they don’t have Coke and Twinkies, then I am getting you freaking root beer and a ham sandwich. Whatever I bring out of there, you will drink it and eat it, and you will shut the hell up and like it, do you understand?”

“You betcha, buddy. I read you loud and clear.”

And then his mind coasted off track, blacking out everything up to the moment he woke up screaming Brian’s name in the hospital.

“Hey!” he shouted, leaning over to drop the phone receiver back in its cradle. “I said, HEY!” he shouted again, a little louder, until the door to his room opened and one of the security guards poked his head inside.

“Yeah?” The guy looked annoyed at the mere site of Nick.

“Can you come in here for a second?” Nick motioned the guard into the room with one of his sweetest smiles.

“What for?”

“Just come in. I’m bored, and I want somebody to talk to.”

“I’m the only guard on duty right now, and I can’t leave the door.”

“Aw, c’mon. Just for a minute.” Nick watched the guy look up and down the hallway before he pushed the door open a little further.

“Okay, but just for a minute.”

Part 20:
A Matter Of Life And Death

Nick lured the security guard into his room with his innocence and pleas for company, but he kept the guard in his room with quick wit and endless tales of “Girls Gone Wild On A Cross Country Tour Bus With Five Guys.”

At first, the guard just leaned in the doorway of the room, chuckling mildly as Nick told a story about the time two sets of twins boarded the tour bus after a concert one night. “I was so damn drunk, I couldn’t even see straight,” he said, rolling his eyes around with a goofy smile. “But man, those chicks could have cared less. They grabbed my hands and headed us straight for the big room in the back of the bus, whispering sweet nothings in my ear.”

By the end of the first hour, the guard had slowly worked his way over to the chair beside Nick’s bed. Sitting there, elbows on knees, he stared wide-eyed at Nick, listening as he told him about the time A.J. and Howie had taken two hot girls up on top of the tour bus, traveling eighty-five miles an hour down a stretch of highway in the middle of nowhere U.S.A., to do the deed. “I would have gone up there, too, but I was scared shitless that I would end up roadkill!”

“I would have gone up there in a second,” the guard said, slapping his leg.

“No way.” Nick shook his head.

“Bet me, man.” The guard stuck his hand through the railing as he and Nick shook hands. “I mean, how often do you get a chance to say you had sex on top of a moving tour bus?”

By the end of the third hour, the guard had his feet kicked up on the guard rail of Nick’s bed, roaring with laughter, as Nick recalled the time he and A.J. came back to the bus after a show in Phoenix – or was it Los Angeles? – to find three blonde girls in ponytails, covered in nothing but head to toe pink glitter, with huge grins on their ditzy faces.

“They said their names were Taffy, Sugar, and Cookie.” Nick waggled his eyebrows at the guy with a wink as the guy winked back. “And man were they sweet!”

Okay, so none of those things had ever happened, at least not on any tour that Nick had ever been on, but hey, at least it was getting the guard to stay and keep him company for awhile, which was step one of his plan.

“I’m starving.” The guard tapped on his stomach, glancing around Nick’s room for some sort of snack.

“You already ate everything I have in here,” Nick said, pushing his bangs out of his eyes and dropping his head back to the pillow, as the guard surveyed the floor around him,

littered with empty boxes of chocolates, cookies, and candy that people had brought as get-well presents for Nick.

“Damn, you’re right. I’m going down to the cafeteria then. Do you want anything?” he said, sliding his chair back and standing up.

“Nah, I can’t eat real food yet.” Nick motioned to the IV bags on poles beside his bed. “But thanks, man.”

The guard walked towards the door, tapping his hand on the gun on his hip.

“Hey!” Nick called out. “You’re coming back, right? I mean, to hang out and all?”

“You betcha, buddy. You tell me some more stories like that, and I’ll hang out with you all fucking night.”

Working on a tip from a woman Dan found walking by the same gas station where Nick and Brian had been seen the day of the shooting, Dan was now pulling his car into the parking lot of the Bowl N’ Beer. Sliding into a spot between two semis, he shoved his cell phone and notepad in the pocket of his jacket and headed for the entrance of the place.

Walking across the parking lot, he could see that there was a fairly rough crowd milling around outside. And everybody seemed to look him over twice in his Ralph Lauren golf shirt and dark pressed jeans as he made his way inside, ordering a beer and sitting at a table in the corner of the darkened lounge.

The woman he had spoken with earlier at the gas station said that, while the name Mo did not ring a bell, the description Dan gave her did. She had been more familiar with Gus Monroe, although on the streets, most people knew him as ‘Monty.’ And she did recall seeing ‘Monty’ several times with a “a guy with big muscles and a square jaw.” She also thought that she remembered seeing that same guy coming out of the bowling alley a few times since ‘Monty’ had been killed.

“Hey there.” Dan winked at the waitress, who now stood wiping down his table with a big, dirty rag that he was sure harbored fifty kinds of airborne illnesses that could kill him.

“Hey.” She slapped down a bowl of peanuts on the table and cocked out a hip. “Do you want another beer?”

Dan looked down at the full bottle of beer in his hands and smiled. “Not quite yet, thanks. Do you-?” She turned and started to walk off. “Um, yes, yes, I’ll have another beer!” Dan shouted. “If you’ll come over here and talk to me for a few minutes.”

The woman walked back to his table, narrowing her eyes at him. “This ain’t one of those kinds of places. I’m not some stupid whore that will give you a lap dance for a couple bucks and a beer.”

“I never said you were.” Dan set down his beer, raising his hands in the air. “Honestly, Miss, I just wanted to ask you a few questions.”

“Are you a cop?” She was talking to Dan, but her eyes were darting around the bar, scanning for the bouncer who was probably in the bathroom taking a piss. He was never around when she needed him.

“No, I’m not a cop. I’m a rep... a writer. I’m a writer.”

“So what the hell do you want to ask me questions for? I don’t got nothing to say that is worth writing about.”

“Well...” Dan reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out the photograph of Gus. “Actually, I am doing a story on this guy.” Dan slid the picture across the table.

“Monty?” She tapped a hand on the picture. “He was a real nice guy. It’s a shame what happened to him.”

“Did you know Gus- I mean, Monty?”

Dan noticed her facial features soften when she spoke about Gus. “Yeah, I knew him. I knew him really well. And I’d probably still know him if he hadn’t have gotten mixed up with that big fuck.”

“What big fuck?”

“I don’t know his name. He was just some guy Gus hung with.”

“When was the last time you saw this guy, the ‘big fuck’?” Dan could feel his pulse quicken. He was getting closer; he could feel it.

“I dunno. The other day, I guess. I usually work the early shift, but I traded with Cecelia ‘cause her daughter was having a baby, and he was here that night. Sitting right here at the same table you’re sitting at now.”

Sitting up a little straighter, Dan shoved the photo of Gus back into his jacket pocket and grabbed for his notebook. “Did you talk to him?”

“No, I ain’t got nothin’ to say to him. Besides, he’s all fucked up. Somebody said they saw him hanging around with some little Latino kid after Monty died. It’s like he had to go and hurry up and replace Monty or something.”

“A little Latino kid?” The homeless guy’s words played over and over in Dan’s head.

“So you know who he is then, this guy Mo?” Dan stood an arm’s length away from the guy, trying not to inhale the foul stench of body odor mixed with cigarette smoke.

“Nobody really knows Mo,” the old man replied, scratching at his chin before grabbing at some unseen thing in the air.

“What does that mean?” Dan rubbed at his eyes, wondering what the hell time it was and how much longer he was going to have to play quiz games with the great unwashed on the Los Angeles city streets.

“Well, nobody but the kid. Maybe the kid knows Mo.”

“What?”

“The kid would probably know him better than anybody.”

At the mention of a kid, Dan grabbed for his pen and notepad. “You keep saying there is a kid. What, like a little kid, or a big kid?”

“Yeah, the kid had that spooked look in his eyes, so he definitely knows Mo more than you and I know Mo.”

“Well, I mean, he isn’t really a kid, I guess. People said he was maybe in his twenties or something, so I guess that can still be a kid?” The waitress shifted her weight from one foot to the other, impatient with the whole conversation.

“Who saw him with the kid? I have to know.” Dan grabbed for her wrist, but she pulled away.

“Hey, you gotta calm down, man, or I’ll have you thrown out of this place.”

“Look, you have to tell me who saw this guy and the Latino kid, and you have to tell me right now. It could be a matter of life and death.”

“Okay, do you know how to play poker?” The security guard returned to Nick’s room with a tray of fried chicken and mashed potatoes, ‘hospital style.’ Which meant it smelled like total shit and probably tasted about the same. But the guard didn’t seem to care, as he gnawed the chicken down to the bones, licking his fingers, as Nick dealt the cards out onto his lap.

“I kind of know how to play.”

“Okay, well you either know how to play, or you don’t. There isn’t a ‘kind of,’” the guy said, swiveling his security guard cap backwards on his head.

“HmMMMM.” Handing the guy his cards, Nick laid the deck on his food tray. “Okay then, I guess I know how to play.”

“Okay then, let’s play five card stud, aces wild.”

Mo pulled his car into the underground hospital parking lot, pulling into a sweet spot that was close to the elevators before killing the engine and the headlights and placing the security guard cap on his head.

Running a hand across the faded dash of the Ford Escort he now drove, he sure missed the fancy BMW, with its CD player and plush leather seats.

Despite the fact that he had long ago changed out the license plates, it had gotten too risky to drive after reports hit the news regarding the missing vehicle that Brian Littrell had been driving the night he was killed. So Mo had been forced to sell the car for a nice price to a guy he knew that fenced stolen cars in Encino.

Stepping out of the car, straightening the collar of the generic security guard’s uniform he now wore, Mo headed to the elevators, nearly bumping into a young man who reached out to push the up button at the same time he did.

“Sorry.” Kevin backed away from the button, signaling that Mo could go ahead and push it.

Mo pushed the button, standing back and folding his arms across his chest as he tapped the heel of his boot on the ground.

“Nice boots.” Kevin nodded to the shiny black leather boots with the intricate tooling peeking out from beneath the cuffs of the man’s pants.

“Thanks.” Mo nodded with a smile, as the elevator doors opened and both men stepped inside.

Part 21:
Small World

“What floor?” Mo asked, pushing the number four button.

“I’m going to four, too,” Kevin said, slumping into the corner of the elevator as the doors slid shut.

“Small world,” Mo mumbled to himself, staring straight ahead.

Closing his eyes as the elevator surged, Kevin felt like he was going to throw up from his wicked-ass hangover that could’ve killed a horse.

After Kristen had left their hotel room in a huff, he’d ended up drinking so much that, eventually, he passed out in his own puke on the balcony of their room, covered in seagull shit and surrounded by empty bottles of beer and chunks of bread that he had been throwing at the birds.

Once he’d come to and dragged his sorry ass to the shower, he realized that Kristen was right. He was a damn fool. A damn fool for thinking that his self-destructive behavior would bring Brian back. Brian was gone, and he was going to have to find a way to live with that, and maybe that way was going to make peace with Nick?

As the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, both Mo and Kevin stepped out and headed to the front desk, where a nurse sat twirling a strand of hair around her index finger and giggling on the phone to a friend. Looking up at the two men standing in front of her, she said a quick “hang on” into the receiver, setting the phone down on the desk and looking up at the men with a smile. “Can I help you?”

Mo signaled that Kevin was welcome to go first.

“I’m looking for my friend’s room.”

“Who’s your friend?” she said, pulling out the patient list from beneath a stack of folders.

“Nick Carter.”

“What time is it?” The security guard shuffled the deck of cards, looking around Nick’s room for a clock.

“Almost 10:00 p.m.,” Nick answered, pointing at the small, round clock above the door.

“Shit, man, someone was supposed to come and take over for me at 10:00. I wonder where the hell he is?”

Mo stood back listening to the exchange between Kevin and the nurse.

Son of a bitch, there weren't supposed to be any visitors at this time of night, so he hoped that the nurse would do her job and get rid of the guy trying to get in after visiting hours.

Hearing the ding of the elevator, Mo checked his watch and glanced over at the guy in the security guard uniform stepping off of the elevator.

"Hey, can I help you?" Mo stepped away from the front desk, walking over to the guy.

"Yeah, I'm looking for Nick Carter's room. I'm supposed to relieve the guard who is on duty right now."

"Oh man, didn't they call you? I guess they scheduled two of us tonight, and they only need one guard until morning."

"Well shit, man, if you've got the shift, then I'm outta here." The guy slapped Mo on the back. "I got better things to do than guard some punk-ass kid from a boyband."

"I'm with you, buddy." Mo chuckled, adjusting his hat. "But, you know, duty calls."

Mo watched the guy get back on the elevator, smiling as the doors slid shut. It had been pure genius of him to call the hospital earlier in the day to find out what time the shift change for security on Nick's room would be taking place. The girl he had spoken to was more than happy to accommodate him with the information, once he had explained that he was from the security company and needed the info so he could schedule his guards for the remainder of the shifts.

Everything seemed to be falling nicely into place, he thought, as he turned and headed back to the front desk, passing Kevin, who was on the way down the hall to Nick's room.

Dan had an address, a fucking address. He could hardly believe his good luck at running into that waitress, who, in turn, had introduced him to the woman who worked behind the counter of the bowling alley and went by the name of Dawn.

"Hey, Dawn." As they approached, the woman looked up from the newspaper spread out on the shoe rental counter. "This guy is looking for that big fuck that hung around with Monty."

"Who?" Closing the paper, Dawn ignored the ringing phone on the counter beside her.

“You know, that big square-faced fuck who hung out with Monty. Didn’t you say that you saw him hanging around with some Latino kid?” Dan’s waitress leaned her hip into the counter as she spoke, not bothering to introduce Dan, who hovered nearby.

“Oh you mean Mo? Yeah, me and Roger saw them driving around in a BMW a few days ago.”

“You said the guy’s name is Mo?” Elbowing his waitress out of the way, Dan took over the questioning.

“Yeah, or at least that is what Monty called him.”

“And he was driving a BMW? What color of BMW?” Dan had been the first one to report that Brian Littrell’s black BMW that he and Nick had been seen driving in the day before the shootings was missing.

“It was black.”

“When was this? Have you seen them together since, Mo and the Latino kid?” Dan’s heart was pounding wildly in his chest as he scribbled down the info on his pad of paper.

“No, I haven’t seen them together since that day we saw them in the car, but I have seen Mo in the bowling alley since.”

“When was the last time you saw this Mo?”

“Last night, he was in the bar, watching the news and drinking a beer, like he has been practically every night for the last week. He always sits in the corner, drinks until the news is over, and then leaves.”

Glancing around the bowling alley, Dan could feel beads of perspiration forming on his upper lip at the excitement of what he was about to uncover. “Has anybody ever seen where Mo goes when he leaves this place?”

Dawn shrugged, as the phone began to ring again. “When I was driving home from my shift the other night, I passed him walking. I’m pretty sure he turned onto Demont Street, but that’s all I know.”

Leaning across the counter, Dan grabbed Dawn’s face into his hands, planting a big fat kiss square on the woman’s mouth before turning and exiting the bowling alley with a big, shit-eatin’ grin on his face.

Standing outside of Nick’s room, Kevin watched through the small window in the door as Nick tossed cards back and forth with a guy in a security guard uniform who sat on a chair beside him.

Smiling at the stumped look on Nick's face as the guy slapped down his cards on the food tray with a chuckle, Kevin knew that card games of any kind had never been Nick Carter's forte. Hell, Kevin had even beaten him at Go Fish when they played, so he could only imagine how badly Nick was getting whomped right now at whatever game he and the guard were playing.

Kevin watched Nick flip his bangs out of his eyes, trying to concentrate on the new hand of cards he had been dealt. And he realized how desperately he wanted to open the door to Nick's room and walk inside with a warm, brotherly smile on his face, cracking lame jokes to lighten the mood as he enveloped Nick in a big bear hug, telling him everything was going to be okay.

But he found he couldn't do it.

Pushing at his temple, images of Brian pounded in his brain like a jackhammer on concrete, making him wince. Images of a childhood spent in one another's company, intertwining with images of their adult years together, becoming the men they had always wanted to be.

He realized that no matter how much he wanted to, he just wasn't ready yet to take that step and to reach out to Nick.

And he didn't know if he ever would be.

So, turning with a sigh, he walked to the elevator, pushing the down button and stepping inside, just as Mo was in the process of convincing the night nurse to go downstairs and get herself a bite to eat.

"Oh c'mon, you know you must be hungry."

"But I'm the only nurse on duty right now. We're so short-handed that they staggered our shifts out so that I have to be here an hour all by myself."

Mo nodded; this was information he already knew from his phone call to the hospital earlier in the day, when he asked about the security guard shifts on Nick's room.

"Listen, I'm here. If any of your patients need help, I can page you." Mo leaned on the counter, smiling at the girl, who batted her eyelashes at him before looking down.

"Well... I have checked on all my patients, and everybody is doing just fine. And I am kind of hungry."

"See, there you go." Mo patted the back of her hand.

“If I do go and get something to eat, do you want anything?” Her voice was soft and flirty as she giggled lightly into her hand.

“You bet.” Mo winked. “You just get me some of what you’re having, and we can eat out here together when you get back.”

Nodding, the nurse stood up, glancing to her right and left before coming out from behind the counter and heading for the elevator.

“Shit, it’s 10:15, and I gotta get my ass home before the wife has to go to work.” The security guard in Nick’s room gathered up the cards and stuffed them back into the box. “She works a shitty graveyard shift at a factory, and she gets pissed off if I don’t get home to put the kids to bed so that she can have a break before she leaves.” Standing up, the guard tossed the cards to the counter. “I’m gonna go and see if the next guard is here yet, so you sit tight.”

Nick smiled at the guard as he opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

“Hey buddy.” The guard spotted Mo at the end of the hallway. “Are you my replacement?”

“You betcha.” Mo smiled, walking up and extending his hand. “Sorry I’m late, man; it’s been a crazy day.” The two men shook hands.

“Well, as long as you’re here now. Listen, I’m gonna go and say goodbye to the kid.”

Mo nodded, as the guard turned and walked back into Nick’s room.

“Hey Nick, my replacement’s here, so I gotta go. But I’ll be back tomorrow around noon.”

Nick nodded, smiling at the guard. “Thanks for keeping me company and all. I really appreciate. Hey wait!” Nick called out, as the guard turned to leave. “Don’t I get a hug or something? I mean, I feel like we’ve known each other forever, what with you being the only person I haven’t banned from my room today.”

The guard laughed, pushing back his cap and scratching his head as he glanced around the room. “Well... I guess I can give you a hug?” he said, walking back to Nick’s bed.

Leaning down, the guard pulled Nick into an awkward bear hug, slapping him on the back as Nick slapped the guard on the hip, before they both pulled back, Nick tucking his hands beneath the bed sheet with a smile.

“Okay, well, thanks for hanging out with me, and I’ll see you tomorrow.” Nick gave the guy his best grin, as the guard turned and walked from the room, tossing a wave over his shoulder as the door closed behind him.

Nick waited a beat before pulling his arm from beneath the sheet, raising his hand and twisting the shiny, silver gun that he had swiped from the guard’s hip around in the air, feeling confident in the knowledge that part two of his plan was now complete.

Part 22: Guess Who?

Dan parked his car beneath a broken-out street light on the corner of Demont and Rush and climbed out, surveying the scene around him.

Walking to the east, he couldn't figure out why anybody would be walking down this street, with its burned-out buildings and piles of rubble from discarded homes of the past. Aside from the fact that it would be a great place for hookers and drug dealers to hide out and conduct business in the darkness and shadows of night, there really was nothing else of much interest around.

Stumbling on the uneven sidewalk, Dan flinched, looking over his shoulder, as a shiver ran up his spine.

"What are you afraid of, Fortis?" he mumbled to himself, wishing he had brought a flashlight. "Are you afraid of the dark or something?" Laughing, he stopped looking to his left and right, trying to figure out which way to go next.

Placing the gun back beneath the sheet, Nick listened to the second hand of the clock making its way around the dial, meshing with the steady swish of the machines and the click that occurred every so often from his IV machine. He realized that he didn't miss the crazy noise from the big screened TV at his house or the beeps and corny music of his favorite video games or even the pounding of the bass in his ears from the headphones in the studio.

He found that he was quite enjoying the sounds of nothing more than simple silence. Lying his head back on the pillow, he was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. He was tired and feeling more than a little uncomfortable from lying in the damn hospital bed day after day. Not to mention the stress of what the world around him had become in nine short days.

Closing his eyes, he gave into the exhaustion, letting his body slowly relax. And before long, he found himself drifting into a deep sleep.

Mo leaned against the wall outside of Nick's door, craving a cigarette. Tugging up the sleeve of his uniform, he flipped over the Rolex and checked the time before peering through the window in the door of Nick's room.

"He's asleep," Mo whispered, tapping lightly on the glass to see if it would make Nick flinch.

Nothing.

“This is going to be easier than I thought,” he said, pulling the gun from his waistband as he slowly opened the door.

Dan stopped walking, squinting into the darkness at the outline of a house tucked back behind some wild underbrush and a chain link fence with barbed wire looped clumsily along the top. Walking up to the fence, he tapped on the chain link, interested in the fact that out of all the places on the street, this seemed to be the only one that could possibly be of any use to anybody. Sure, the roof was caved in, and it was obvious that, at some point, vandals had set fire to it. But aside from those things, most of the structure still remained intact.

Following the fence around the side of the house, Dan pushed at the branches that scratched at his arms, following the fence as it curved around into the pitch black at the back of the house. Using the fence as his guide, Dan could no longer make out the house from his place in the bushes. Taking two more steps forward, he leaned into the fence and found that the section he was leaning into was missing. Falling sideways, he tripped through the hole in the fence, a stray chain link catching on the sleeve of his shirt and tearing it as he landed on his side in the dirt.

“Shit.” Pulling up onto all fours, he crawled forward, his instincts telling him that the hole was there for a reason.

And Dan Fortis’s instincts were rarely wrong.

Kevin got out of the elevator on the wrong floor and had to wait while two nurses pushing patients in wheelchairs got on.

“Do you want us to hold the elevator?” they said, as Kevin turned to get back on, hesitating at the close quarters inside when his stomach was still queasy from the over-consumption of beer earlier in the day.

“Nah, it’s okay. I’ll get the next one,” he said, waving them off and letting the elevators slide shut before pushing the down button again.

Crawling forward, Dan went slowly, not knowing what kind of garbage could be on the ground around a shithole like this. Then, slapping his palm down, he soon found out, as a piece of glass sliced into his skin, making him wince.

“Son of a bitch!” he hissed, shaking his hand before wiping his palm, which was now dripping with fresh blood, on his shirt. Sitting back on his heels, he tried to inspect the

wound, wondering if it would need stitches, but it was impossible to see his own hand in front of his face, it was so freaking dark.

“Fuck,” Dan moaned, grabbing at his hand. “I’m out of my God damned mind, crawling around this shit heap.” He was talking out loud as he slowly rose to his feet.

“I mean, what if, for once, my instincts are totally wrong, and this Mo guy isn’t in this house? Better yet, what if there is no Mo at all?”

He realized then and there that he had to make a decision. He either had to go forward or backwards, because sitting in the same spot wasn’t getting him anywhere. So he began walking forward, swatting stray branches out of his face.

“This whole thing is messed up,” he moaned, just as he smacked right into the side of the house.

Mo kept his hand poised on the gun on his hip as he walked slowly across the room, the heels of his cowboy boots clicking on the white tiled floor.

Looking at Nick now, it was hard to believe that the little shit had survived what he and Gus had put him through. And Mo realized that he would miss the game of cat and mouse that had been going on between he and Nick since the moment he crawled into the shiny black BMW over a week ago. He was going to miss the Kid once the bullet left his gun and splattered Nick’s brain matter all over the nice, clean hospital room.

Leaning down, Mo hesitated for a split second, as Nick’s eyelashes fluttered lightly, his mind tangled up in some pleasant dream.

And then he whispered the words, “Hey St. Nick, guess who?” in Nick’s ear... setting in motion the wheel in his mind that Nick had given up hope of ever turning again.

“I don’t buy that. Not for a minute. I think there is someone else involved. And I believe that someone else is the one who shot you, killed Brian as well as Gus Monroe, and kidnapped Howie.”

“That’s right, Nick, you are hurt. You’re hurt really bad. And like I told you, there are some things worth fighting for. So I am fighting for you, and you are going to fight for your life.”

“We need help; a man’s been shot.”

“H-help... I-I-I’m... d-d-d-ying...”

“Nick, answer the phone...”

“SON OF A BITCH, THE KID IS GONE!”

“Everything is going to be okay, Nick. I’m going to make sure of it. You just need to hang on. You saved me back there, and I’m going to pay you back.”

“How do we know he isn’t going to get away? Well, we know that because he has been shot twice in the gut, and he is barely breathing.”

“Are you okay, Nick?”

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

“It’s me, you idiot, stop squirming.”

“Where the fuck are you, you little jackass...?”

“St. Nick knows our names, he knows what the car looks like that we drive, and he knows where my apartment is.”

“Look, Kid, give up. You know I’m going to win.”

“...if you’re good and your friend does what I told him to do, I might let you go.”

“Nickolas. That’s like Santa Claus, isn’t it? I think I will call you St. Nickolas.”

“Bri, I’m in trouble.”

“You try something like that again, and I will have no problem blowing your brains out all over the interior of this fine car. Now drive.”

“Did you hear what I said to you? I said I liked your boots.”

“You’re not Brian... You’re not Brian... You’re not Brian...”

Nick’s body jerked twice, as his eyes shot open, and he whispered a single name.

“Mo.”

Part 23:
This Is Your Reality

Pulling himself up on the window ledge, Dan scraped his shoes on the side of the house, trying to get enough of a toe hold to boost himself through the broken window.

Once he had his leg up and over the ledge, he was able to pull himself through the window, before landing with a thud on his back to the rotting floorboards below. Pausing, he waited a beat before rolling onto his stomach and making his way, commando-style, across the room.

Every shadow made his heart jump, while each creak of the floorboards made him stop, wide-eyed, anticipating the big-ass, square-faced Mo coming around the corner to kick his ass into next week.

But there was nothing.

Nothing but the sound of Dan's heart pounding in his ears.

Making his way through the room, it appeared that he had reached some sort of hallway. Once to the end of the hallway, he glanced to his left to see a flight of stairs leading up to the second floor. Taking a deep breath, he knew that he had gone too far to turn back now, so, pushing himself up into a crouched position, he made his way slowly up the stairs, slivers of moonlight pushing through the burned-out ceiling above him, lighting his way.

Stepping back onto the elevator, Kevin hit the button for parking level 2, waiting for the doors to slide shut before giving in to the grief that was threatening to eat him alive. Leaning against the elevator wall, he slid to the floor, head in hands, as sobs wracked his entire body.

He had never felt so confused and utterly alone in his whole life.

"I miss you, Brian," he moaned, dropping his head back over and over against the wall, as the elevator stopped and the doors broke apart.

Looking up through his tears, Kevin swiped a hand across his face as he pushed himself to a standing position, laughing at the irony that he would have to break down in an elevator when he only had a few floors to go, instead of some big high rise in New York. "You're a fucking pussy, Richardson," he moaned, dragging a shaking hand through his hair as he walked slowly from the elevator to the car. "A fucking pussy who needs a drink."

Trying to remember where the nearest bar was located, Kevin looked up to see that the piece of shit Ford Escort parked beside his Lexus had parked practically right on top of him.

“Great,” he hissed, turning sideways to scoot down the narrow gap between the two cars in order to climb in the driver’s side door.

Glancing over at the Escort, a scowl on his face, Kevin was considering leaving the asshole a note on the finer points of parking when he noticed a faded blue Kentucky baseball cap, just like the one Brian had always liked to wear, sitting on the passenger seat.

How ironic.

“What is this, some sort of sign, cuz?” Kevin said softly, glancing upwards, tears spilling freely down his face. “A sign that I’m a shitty person for not being able to forgive Nick. A sign that you want me to stop feeling sorry for myself? A sign that you want fucking Kentucky to win at the State Championships this year. What, Brian? What are you trying to say?”

Pushing his key into the door of his car, Kevin pulled it open, roughly ramming a half-dollar sized dent in the door of the Ford Escort.

“Serves you right for parking so close, asshole,” he mumbled, glancing over one last time as he was sitting down, something interesting in the backseat of the car catching his eye.

“What the fuck?” Standing up, Kevin got out of his car, slamming the door shut. Turning, he leaned down, hands braced on either side of his face as he peered inside the backside passenger window of the Escort. Sitting on the middle of the seat were a pair of bright red cowboy boots.

Everybody knew that Nick had purchased two pair of cowboy boots on the afternoon before the shootings, a pair of black boots for himself and a pair of red boots for Brian. A thorough search of the home Brian had been renting never turned up any cowboy boots. And when Nick was found in the warehouse, he had not been wearing any shoes at all.

According to the media reports, the boots Nick had purchased for himself and Brian had been one of a kind, so there had been no photographs available. But Kevin distinctively remembered reading that, according to the sales clerk at the posh Beverly Hills shoe store, the boots were highly polished, intricately tooled leather boots with two different designs of birds on the side. Just like the pair Kevin was looking at now.

“*Nice boots.*” Standing back from the window, a flash of the boots worn by the security guard that Kevin had ridden with in the elevator up to Nick’s floor popped in his head.

“*Nice boots.*”

Black boots with intricate tooling peeking out from beneath the cuffs of the man's pants.

"Nice boots."

"Holy shit." Kevin turned, making his way quickly back towards the elevators.

"Mo."

"That's right, Nick. Did you miss me?"

Blinking his eyes open, Nick was looking into the familiar eyes of the man who had caused him so much pain. "Not really, you son of a bitch."

Mo smiled. "Yeah, well, I guess I really didn't miss you either. Too bad you couldn't have just died the first time around; it would have saved us both a lot of trouble."

"Maybe if you would have shot me in the head or something, but I guess your aim with that thing sucks." Nick nodded towards the gun on Mo's hip.

"I don't think Brian would agree with you." Mo reached for the gun, pulling it slowly from the holster. "Do you?"

Nick winced at Mo even speaking Brian's name.

"After I read about you in the newspapers, I thought about letting you live." Pacing the room, Mo slapped the barrel of the gun in his open palm. "I figured maybe you deserved to be alive, after fighting your way back from the coma and all. But then I decided that I couldn't risk your memory coming back and you turning me in."

"Where's Howie?" Nick's hand lightly caressed the gun that he had hidden beneath the bed sheet.

"Dead. Howie is dead." Mo smiled again.

"You killed him?" Nick's chin trembled slightly.

"Slowly, but surely." Mo flipped over his watch to check the time. "If he isn't dead yet, he will be soon."

Reaching the top of the stairs, Dan stayed crouched low as he walked along the wall to the first room on his left.

The place smelled like wet dog and shit. It was all he could do to keep from gagging, as he made his way into the center of the room, shadows twitching on all four sides of him. Squinting, he could see that there was a door in the far corner of the room.

Walking slowly across the room, he pushed his hand out, feeling for the door handle. Then, counting to three, he prepared himself for whatever may lie on the other side, as he slowly pulled the door open, moonlight spilling down through the caved-in roof to reveal the outline of what appeared to be two bodies.

“Fuck.” Jumping back, Dan was overcome by the heavy, metallic stench of blood wafting from the closet. Jesus, were they dead or alive? Was this some trick by this Mo guy to lure him into room to kill him?

Then one of the bodies moved.

Ignoring all of his survival instincts, Dan lunged forward, dragging the top body out of the closet and dumping it on the floor as he felt around for a pulse.

The mouth and nostrils of the man were bound heavily with duct tape, and his arms and legs appeared to also be tightly bound. Dan fumbled around with his free hand to rip the layers of tape from the man’s mouth and pull the wadded up gag from between his teeth, still trying for a pulse.

Looking down into the face of the man, Dan reached for his cell phone in his back pocket, as the man’s eyes opened, and he choked out a single word.

“Nick.”

Mo still paced Nick’s hospital room, babbling on and on, making Nick’s head hurt.

“You know, St. Nick, I read all the shit about you in the papers. About all the fame and fortune and popularity you achieved at such a young age. I bet sometimes it didn’t even seem real to you, to have so much for doing so little.”

“I don’t know,” Nick said softly, shaking his head.

“Some people work their asses off their whole lives and don’t get even a quarter of what you have, and that is their reality. And here you got some fucking reality that most people could never even dream of just for singing songs and looking pretty. If you ask me, that’s fucked up.” Mo glanced at the clock on the wall, aware that he was running out of time. Soon the nurse would be returning to find that her star patient was dead, and the security guard was nowhere to be found.

“This has been a great reunion and all, and I’d love to stay and chat longer, but I’ve never been one for long good-byes.” Gripping the gun in his hand, Mo raised it, cocking back the trigger as he aimed it directly at Nick’s head.

“This is your reality now, Nick... are you scared?”

Raising the gun from beneath the sheet, Nick leveled it right at Mo’s heart.

“No, Mo, I’m not scared... are you?”

A slight smile tugged at the corner of Mo’s mouth, as both men pulled their triggers.

BAM!

Part 24:
Just Let Me Go

Howie's sight faded in and out, as he tried to make out who the figure was hovering above him, speaking his name.

"Are you Howie Dorough?" Dan's fingers fumbled on the cell phone keypad for the familiar digits of the police station, as he tried to keep Howie awake. "Hey, stay with me, buddy."

Howie's body began to shake. Jesus, he was so cold.

"Hello," a familiar voice grumbled other end of the line.

"Sergeant Cox, is that you?" Dan yelled the words into the phone, adrenaline racing through his veins.

"Who the fuck is this?" Cox tipped back the last gulp of coffee, listening intently to the man on the other end of the line.

"Howie, Howie, stay with me." Dan leaned down into Howie's face, slapping his cheeks with his free hand. "Sergeant, it's Dan Fortis-"

"Fortis, I thought I told you, I don't have anything to say to scum reporters like you. I-"

"I found Howie Dorough." Despite the short-cropped hair, weight loss, and pale gray complexion, Dan was one hundred percent positive that the man before him was Howie Dorough.

"Is this some sort of a joke, Fortis?"

"No, this isn't some fucking joke, Cox." Dan continued slapping Howie's cheeks, his eyes rolling back into his head before trying to re-focus again.

"Nick..." Howie was shaking his head back and forth as he grabbed for the front of Dan's shirt.

"What? What did you say?" Dan held the phone away from his ear, leaning in to better hear what Howie was trying to say, as he pulled the frail young man into his lap.

"Nick.... he's-" Howie stopped choking on his words. "He's going... to... to kill Nick." Pausing, Howie's body stiffened before falling limp in Dan's arms.

"Cox, get me a fucking ambulance to the burned-out house on Demont and Rush Street, and you get your ass over to the hospital."

“Why should I believe anything you have to say, Fortis?”

“Because as we speak, the guy who killed Brian Littrell is on his way to the hospital to finish Nick Carter off.”

Tossing the phone to the floor, Dan lay Howie down and quickly began administering CPR.

Taking a deep breath, Nick slowly opened his eyes.

Had he been shot?

Looking down, he could see that there was a light blood spatter on the sheets, as well as his forearms, but as far as he could tell, he was in no pain.

Tossing back the sheet, the gun still clutched tightly in his trembling hand, he looked at his chest, arms, and legs. Everything appeared to be intact and bullet-free.

Leaning forward, he peered over the side of the bed.

“Shit.”

He saw the blood first, dark and shiny as it spread slowly across the white tiled floor. And then he saw Mo’s crumpled body lying on the floor at the foot of his bed, still holding his gun in his right hand.

“I killed him,” Nick whispered, tears pooling in his eyes. “I fucking killed him.”

Closing his eyes, a shudder ran through his body as he tried to catch his breath. “Brian... what do I do now?” Shaking his head back and forth, he half-expected Brian to come to him in some sort of vision and show him the way out of the mess his life had become.

But there was nothing.

He was all alone.

Looking around the room, Nick knew he had done what he needed to do. He’d taken the life of the man who had taken the life of his best friend.

And now it was time for him to join Brian on the other side.

Closing his eyes, he raised the gun slowly to his head, pressing the gun into his right temple, just as the door to the room burst open, and Kevin appeared in the doorway.

“Nick!” Kevin shouted, making his way into the room, a frantic look in his eyes. “Nick, what are you doing?” Stopping as the door closed behind him, Kevin surveyed the grisly scene before him. The security guard’s body on the floor, covered in blood, and Nick lying in the hospital bed, a gun pointed to his own head.

“Ha.” Nick let out a loud laugh at the irony of the moment. “Now you decide to come and see me? You got lousy timing, Kev.” Chewing nervously on his bottom lip, Nick opened his eyes, digging the gun hard into his temple.

“What happened, Nick? Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” Kevin asked in a soft, low voice.

“I killed him.” Nick pointed with his free hand to Mo’s body on the ground. “I killed that motherfucker, and now I’m going to end this nightmare once and for all... for me, for you, for everybody.”

Mo’s eyes fluttered slightly as he watched the scene playing out before him.

He knew that he had been shot; the searing pain in his right arm was enough to make him want to puke. Son of a bitch, he’d never expected that miserable little shit to actually pull the trigger. So he had not been prepared when the bullet from Nick’s gun tore into his right arm, jerking his hand at the precise moment he pulled the trigger on his own gun, the bullet plowing into the wall behind Nick’s head, missing him completely, before Mo fell to the ground.

“Jesus, Nick.” Kevin raked his hands over and over through his hair, his eyes glued to the gun at Nick’s temple. “You don’t want to die, too.”

“Don’t I?” Nick raised his eyebrows in amusement, a smile spreading across his face.

“Nick, please.” Kevin held out his hand, gesturing for the gun. “Give me the gun.”

“Why, so you can shoot me yourself? No fucking way. I earned this privilege, not you, Kev.”

“I don’t want to shoot you, Nick. I want to help you.”

“You wanted me dead, Kevin, so I’m giving you your wish.”

“Jesus, Nick.” Kevin took a step forward. “Don’t do this. Is this really the way you want it all to end?” Kevin took another step forward, reaching a hand out to Nick, both men oblivious to Mo moving on the floor below.

“Yes.” Tears pooled in Nick’s eyes as he nodded his head, a desperate look on his face. “Yes, Kevin, this is how I want it all to end. Please just let me go.”

“Nick-”

“Please, Kevin, please,” Nick pleaded. “Let me go.”

Slowly sitting up, Mo readjusted the gun in his slick, bloody hands, just as Nick’s finger began to depress the trigger of the gun pointed at his own head.

“Surprise, boys,” Mo whispered.

“NO!” Lunging forward, Kevin grabbed the gun from Nick’s hand, as he turned and began firing...

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

Pulling the trigger over and over, Kevin emptied the bullets, one by one, into Mo’s body, until there was nothing left but the hollow clicking of the trigger pushing on the empty chambers in the clip of the gun.

Stumbling backwards, Kevin dropped the gun to the floor, just as Sergeant Cox and his men burst through the door.

Part 25:
Not A Day Goes By

ONE YEAR LATER

“Not a day goes by that I don’t think about him.” A.J. pulled a blade of grass through his thumb and index finger, watching a group of birds flying overhead in a V-shaped pattern.

“Me too.” Kevin sat on the ground beside the speckled gray and black marble headstone that bore Brian’s name, studying his hands in his lap as he spoke. “It’s hard to believe that it’s been a whole year since he’s been gone.

“Isn’t Nick coming?” Howie turned, shielding his eyes against the sweltering hot, summer sun. “You’d think he could get his act together and be on time for once.”

“Some things never change,” A.J. said, smiling, as Nick’s yellow Jeep came barreling down the narrow Cemetery Street, coming to a crooked stop in the middle of the road. “That kid will be late to his own funeral.”

“Geez, A.J.” Howie slugged A.J. in the arm, trying not to laugh at the bad pun, as Nick climbed from his car.

Adjusting the faded Abercrombie and Fitch cap on his head, Nick jogged up the hill, a bright smile on his tanned face as he carefully avoided stepping on the headstones protruding from the ground.

“Hey buddy, we didn’t think you were going to show.” Howie laughed as Nick cupped an arm around his shoulder, pulling him into a hug before doing the same to A.J.

“I wouldn’t miss this; you guys know that.” Leaning down, Nick reached for Kevin’s outstretched hand, as Kevin pulled him to the ground, enveloping him in his strong, familiar arms before administering a noogie to Nick’s head.

“You okay?” he asked, as Nick rolled to the side, lying on his back in the grass.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

So many things had changed since that fateful day exactly one year ago. The day Brian Littrell had lost his life.

Twenty minutes after Dan Fortis had placed the phone call to Sergeant Cox, an ambulance, accompanied by six police cars, sirens wailing, turned onto Demont Street, prepared to expect the unexpected.

The group, lead by Officer Park, converged on the house with guns drawn, the EMTs bringing up the rear, as they pushed single-file through the hole in the fence.

Once upstairs, they entered the first room on their left, beams of light from their flashlights illuminating Dan's terrified face as he hovered helplessly over the young man lying on the floor beside him.

"Help him!" Dan shouted, as Officer Park waved in the EMTs, who quickly assessed the situation before loading Howie onto the stretcher and carrying him from the room.

"This one's dead," one of the officers shouted, crouching beside the body on the closet floor, his fingers struggling to find a pulse on the man's blood-encrusted neck, as the other officers looked on.

"Shit. Well, let's just hope the other one makes it, or we'll have another double homicide on our hands," Park whispered, dragging a hand across his brow, as he turned and walked out the door, following his fellow officers as they fanned out to do a search of the entire property.

Howie was admitted to the hospital and kept under close supervision as he was treated for, among other things, dehydration and shock, as well as a concussion he had sustained when Mo had delivered the initial blow to his head in the backseat of the town car.

As the days went on, he'd been hesitant to answer questions from police officers, wanting to leave the memories of his ordeal locked away in the closet of the abandoned house where he had nearly lost his life, but he knew things could never be that simple. And so he told them his story.

After two weeks in the hospital with Collette and his family by his side, Howie was released with strict orders from the doctor to take it easy, as well as to seek out a mental help professional to assist him in his recovery.

As his nurse wheeled him through the front doors of the hospital, surrounded by his newly-hired bodyguards and Collette holding his hand tightly in hers, Howie was caught off-guard by the bright camera flashes and cheering crowds that greeted him. It seemed as though everybody was moving in slow motion as they lunged forward, shouting questions and screaming his name over and over again until he felt like he might pass out.

He tried to put on a brave face, waving to everybody as he was quickly shuffled into the limo waiting at the curb. But more than one fan noticed that he didn't have any of the old, familiar twinkle left in his flat, brown eyes.

Collette moved with Howie into his Miami home, keeping a close eye on him as he recovered, accompanying him to his appointments with his psychiatrist, and watching over him as he slept, wiping his sweat-drenched brow when he woke up screaming Mo's name.

She didn't ask questions when Howie had triple locks installed on all of the doors or when he began sleeping with the lights on. And she supported him when he made the decision to have a construction crew come and reconfigure all of the walk-in closets in the house, taking off the doors and adding skylights and windows, where it was possible, to make them more open and airy.

One evening, as he and Collette sat by the pool, sipping Margaritas and watching the sun go down, Howie decided to ask her to marry him. There was no big, flashy ring or him getting down on one knee. There was just the question spoken in a whisper, as the sun dipped below the horizon, to which Collette replied to with a soft, "Yes."

They were married six weeks later in a small, island ceremony in Maui, attended by their families, a few close friends, and Kevin, Nick, and A.J. serving as Howie's best men.

Slipping the platinum and diamond band on Collette's finger, Howie wasn't sure if he was making the right decision. In fact, he had not been sure of anything since the night he had given up on his life at the hands of a madman, and he didn't know if he would ever again be the man he had once been, but he knew one thing for sure.

He would never stop trying.

"Okay, so who wants to go first?" Kevin asked, sitting back and letting the sun warm his face, as Howie sat down in the grass beside Nick.

"I'll go first." A.J. sighed, pushing his sunglasses up onto of his head as he stepped forward. "Hey, buddy, it's me." As he spoke, he tugged nervously on the hem of his gray, sleeveless t-shirt. "You know, I heard this joke today that I thought you would like. A guy walks into a bar..."

In the weeks following Howie and Nick's release from the hospital, A.J. had flown back to Florida with them, doing his duty, shuttling himself back and forth between the homes of his two friends while they recovered, cheering them up with his lame jokes and wild tales that only A.J. could spin and make you believe they were true.

At night, when he could come back to the house that he and Sarah shared, he would quietly sneak upstairs, making sure she was safely tucked beneath the big satin duvet in the master bedroom. Then, grabbing a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of wine from the

wine rack in the kitchen, he would climb the stairs to the rooftop patio, sitting until the wee hours of the morning smoking cigarettes and watching the stars with the unopened bottle of wine by his side.

Sometimes, Sarah would awaken to find A.J.'s side of the bed empty, and she would go to the roof, standing, arms folded across her chest, in the doorway, watching silently, an ache in her heart for the man she loved.

One evening, she approached him without a word, laying a hand on his shoulder. He hadn't even flinched; it was as if he had known she was there.

"A.J., I'm afraid," she whispered.

"I am too." A.J. exhaled, tears spilling down his face.

"I'm afraid for you, A.J., and I'm afraid for us."

"I'm taking things one day at a time, and I'm doing the best that I can, but if you want me to guarantee that I won't fuck things up, Sarah, I can't to it. I just can't."

"Then... I can't stay." She dragged a hand through his hair, leaning down to plant one last kiss on his head before turning and walking away from him for the last time.

She got the engagement ring, the lemon yellow Porsche, and the dogs, and A.J. got the houses in Miami and Port Townsend and a lifetime of memories of a true love lost at the hands of a man named Mo... a man whom A.J. had never even met.

In the months following Sarah's exit from his life, A.J. retreated to his home in Port Townsend, trying to make sense of the direction his life was going. He spent most of his days on the deck of the house, watching the sailboats and talking on the phone with Nick, twice a week venturing into Seattle for an iced mocha and to attend the local AA meetings.

Slow and steady wins the race, his Mom had always said. And maybe in the race he was running, he wouldn't be the fastest runner or the guy who broke the ribbon at the front of the line, but by God, he was going to finish... if it was the last thing he did.

"So anyway, Brian, I hope things are cool where you are. And I hope you know how much I miss you, man." Backing away from the grave, A.J. turned to wipe a stray tear from his cheek, as Kevin rose, wiping his palms on the front of his shorts before stepping forward, a peaceful smile on his face.

"Okay, well, I guess I'm next," he began, clearing his throat...

After the shootings, Kevin had virtually gone into hiding, holing up in the guest cottage behind his Florida home, where he struggled with debilitating bouts of depression, while questioning the meaning of life.

After two months of barely seeing her husband, Kristin had grown tired of Kevin's behavior, confronting him one morning as he lay in the dark in the big, king-sized bed, reeking of stale cigarette smoke and alcohol.

"I'm not going to let this thing destroy us, Kevin, destroy you!" she screamed, throwing open the blinds before tugging the blankets from the bed and dumping them on the floor.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted back, shielding his eyes from the harsh morning sun. "Just get out, Kris, and leave me the fuck alone."

"Look Kevin, I married you for better or for worse." Reaching for his face, he smacked at her hands. "And this part is the worst, Kevin, the very fucking worst." Grasping his pale, bearded face into her hands, she held him tightly, forcing him to make eye contact with her, tears glistening in his red-rimmed eyes. "But now it's time for the better, baby. Please, Kevin, let me help you make things better."

"How? How can you possibly make things better?" Kevin pleaded, his hands trembling as they grabbed for her arms. "Why would you want any part of what my life has become?"

"Because..." She planted a soft kiss on his lips, brushing a stray piece of hair from his forehead as she spoke. "Because I love you."

He had hit rock bottom, and now it was time to slowly start the long climb back up to the top.

And over time, with love, patience, and a wife, family, and therapist who were willing to see Kevin through the high times, as well as the low times, things had, indeed, slowly gotten better.

He began volunteering his time to local charities, playing in a local basketball league that met on Tuesday nights at the gym, as well as working on an album of instrumental tracks with old, trusted friends in the business.

In May, Kristin gave birth to their first child, a son, whom they christened Brian Thomas Richardson.

He became the light of Kevin's life, and his reason for going on.

“He’s got a big head and a mischievous smile, just like you, Brian, and he’s everything to me. I wish you could have met him, taught him how to throw a curve ball and attempt a skyhook. I wish so many things, but above all, I wish you were here.” Stepping back, Kevin made room for Howie as he approached the headstone.

“Brian, there are so many things I want to tell you,” Howie began, choking on his words, as Kevin placed a protective arm around his shoulder, urging him on.

Nick lay back in the grass, not really listening to Howie’s words, as he focused on the blue sky overhead...

Part 26:
Nick

The day Nick was released from the hospital, A.J. had been the one to come and pick him up. Nick knew that a large crowd of reporters and fans had gathered out front to wish him well in his recovery, but he really didn't care. In three short weeks, his once-insatiable appetite for attention seemed to have faded, overtaken by a strong desire for peace and anonymity.

A.J. pulled his car around the back of the hospital, which had been roped off by security to keep the celebrity stalkers and annoying paparazzi out. Two nurses helped Nick into the passenger seat, assisted by A.J., who fussed over Nick like an old lady, wanting to make sure the seat was comfortable and that the air conditioning wasn't too high.

"Jesus, A.J., knock it off," Nick whined, swatting A.J.'s hand away from the air conditioning vent.

"I just want to make sure you're okay." Nick knew that while A.J. made it sound like he was talking about the air conditioning, the words had far deeper meaning. "Are you okay, Nick?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, as A.J. signaled for him to hand over one of the cigarettes from the crumpled pack on the dash.

"Well, if you don't know if you are okay or not, what the hell do you know?"

"I know I don't want to sing anymore," he mumbled, checking to make sure the car door was locked, as A.J. pulled away from the curb.

"Why not?" A.J. snapped, glancing in his rearview mirror as they turned out onto the street.

"I dunno. I just don't."

"That's not a good enough reason." A.J. pulled out the cigarette lighter, pushing it onto the tip of his cigarette, as the car filled with twisting strands of smoke.

"Okay. Well, how about I don't want to sing anymore because I don't want to be 'that guy' anymore," Nick replied in an irritated tone, as he waved the cigarette smoke out of his face.

"Nick, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"What I'm talking about, A.J., is that it's fucked up that some people work their asses off their whole lives and don't even have a quarter of what we have just for singing stupid songs and looking pretty," Nick replied, coughing into his hand.

Catching the hint, A.J. rolled down the windows before continuing the conversation. “Yeah, okay, that’s fucked up, but it’s all about the choices you make.”

“You’re right, A.J., so I’m choosing not to be ‘that guy’ anymore.”

“Well, if you don’t want to be ‘that guy,’ Nick, then who the hell do you want to be? Abraham Lincoln? Michael Jordan? Me?” Laughing at his own joke, A.J. glanced over at Nick, realizing that he was serious.

“I don’t know, A.J. I guess that’s what I’ll have to figure out.”

The panic attacks began immediately after Nick returned to Florida.

He feared the dark, feared the light, feared being alone, and dreaded having company. All of the things that once gave him peace now filled him with anxiety.

Even the calming effect of the ocean had given away to recurring nightmares about being plunged into the depths of the dark blue water, where he struggled for his life against the howling wind and ominous waves.

He would awake screaming, drenched in sweat as he fumbled over his nightstand for the Valium that never seemed to make him feel any better. He desperately wanted someone to talk to, anybody who could tell him that what he was feeling was normal and that eventually it would all go away, but his family had slowly drifted back into their own lives, fanning the flames of the great Carter Money Making Machine.

And his friends, the ones who had watched the images of the grisly “Backstreet Murders” play out on the television over the weeks following the shootings, would call him or show up on his front step, laughing and talking to Nick about his “crazy adventures in Los Angeles” as if he’d been on an episode of *Fear Factor* and lost.

When he showed up at his doctor’s office, without an appointment, for a prescription for more Valium to calm his nerves, the nurse led Nick back to the corner office, shutting the door behind him.

“You look tired, Nick.” His Doctor motioned for Nick to sit down.

“I am tired. I was shot and almost died. That can make a person tired.” Nick’s eyes dragged slowly over the room, fatigue and stress weighing down his once youthful, handsome features, making him appear like an old man.

“I think you should see a therapist. Someone to talk to about what you have gone through.”

Nick shook his head, the corners of his mouth curling up in a half smile. "I'm doing just fine on my own," he lied.

"If I give you the number of someone, will you consider giving her a call?" His doctor reached for a cross pen and began to jot down a phone number, as well as another prescription for Valium, on a pad of paper. "At least tell me that you'll think about it," the doctor asked, sliding the two pieces of paper across the desk to Nick.

"Okay, I'll think about it," Nick answered, taking the paper and tucking it in the front pocket of his shirt before walking to the door.

"I'm not writing you another prescription until you see someone, Nick," his doctor said, sitting back in his chair as Nick opened the door, slamming it loudly behind him.

It took three weeks and an empty bottle of Valium before he finally dragged himself to the therapist his doctor had recommended.

The woman's name was Charlotte, and to her credit, she seemed to know what she was talking about, as she sat beside Nick on the burgundy leather sofa, looking him in the eyes as she spoke, something not a lot of people did anymore. It was if they were afraid if they looked him in the eye, they would see the truth, and no one wanted to deal with the truth.

"So what do you think about when you think about Mo?"

Nick blinked at the sound of the man's name, as he sunk further into the sofa. "I don't think about him," he lied.

"You don't think about the man who killed your friend? The man who almost killed you?"

Nick wondered what Charlotte would say if he told her he thought of Mo every day... every hour... almost every minute of every single day. He wondered what she would say if he told her that he had cut Mo's picture from an article in the newspaper and that he kept it folded in the billfold of his wallet. He wondered what she would say if he told her that he saw Mo all around him, heard his voice ringing in his ears...

"Nope."

"I don't believe you." Her voice was flat, and he could see her staring at him out of the corner of his eye as he stared straight ahead at the picture of wildflowers hanging on her office wall. "We've sat here, three days a week, for almost two months, and we talk about trivial things. We talk about the weather, your favorite vacation places, and what you used to do for fun. We talk about your life before this monumental event rocked

your world, and you answer my questions like I'm a reporter at a press conference for your next album release."

Charlotte stood up and walked to her desk, dragging back the leather wingback chair, which she placed in front of Nick before sitting down to face him.

"Do you think about death, Nick?" She had asked him this same question before, and always he gave the same response.

Nick shook his head no.

But the truth was that he'd slowly cut off contact with the outside world, pulled all of the phones out of the wall sockets and refused to answer the doorbells or furious knocks at his front door from friends who were growing concerned.

He was fucked up, and he knew it, finding himself spending the better part of his days lying on his back on his pool table, thinking about death. When he closed his eyes, he could see the bullet tearing into Brian's heart, draining him of life. He could see the bullets emptying, one by one, into Mo's body as Kevin pulled the trigger over and over, rage etched in every line of his tired face.

And if he held very still and waited long enough, he could see himself sitting in the hospital bed with the gun to his own head, pulling the trigger.

A pop of white light.

Then fade to black

And it felt so good.

"You don't think about death? Okay, well, do you think about life?"

Nick paused and looked up at her, his blue eyes glistening with tears, before shaking his head no.

"Okay." Charlotte placed a hand on Nick's knee, aware that he was trembling, as tears spilled down his face. "It's okay, Nick."

"I need help, Charlotte." He dragged a shaking hand across his forehead. "If I don't get help, I can't guarantee what I'm going to do to myself."

"Look at me, Nick." Charlotte's soothing voice brought Nick's eyes back to her own. "Let's start over. Let's start with the day you and Brian went out shopping on Rodeo Drive."

“I want to go away. I think I’m ready to be someone new.” Nick sat in the windowsill in Charlotte’s office, watching a family strap a white flocked Christmas tree to the hood of their car.

“Where do you want to go, Nick?”

“Anywhere but here.” He wanted away from the ocean and the prying eyes of the media, who still roamed the grounds of his home like big, lumbering rats, looking for garbage to feed on. He wanted away from memories of who he used to be, and who he would never become.

“Then I think you should go.” Charlotte sat on the sofa, her legs curled beneath her, as she twisted a strand of long, dark hair around her index finger. “I think you’re ready.”

Nick turned to her, raising his eyebrows in question. Did she really think he was ready, or was it one of her therapist statements she used to try and squeeze more feelings out of him?

“I think I’m ready, too?” He said it more as a question than a statement, hoping for Charlotte to tell him if he was right or wrong. but all she did was smile.

And so he disappeared.

Disappeared from everybody but his closest friends and family members, whom he provided with his new cell phone number before vanishing.

“Where are you?” A.J. was the first person to call him.

Walking the streets of Park City, Utah, wrapped in a long wool coat with a scarf wound around his face to ward off the chilling sting of winter, Nick felt peace, as snowflakes danced around his face, each one different but, to the naked eye, the same.

“Does it really matter?” he asked, a smile in his voice, as he peered into a funky-looking bookshop with a fat, striped cat on the counter.

“Are you happy?” A.J. asked

“No, but I’m getting there,” Nick replied, opening the door to the bookshop and ducking inside to get out of the cold. “What about you, A.J.? Are you happy?”

Sitting in the window seat of his Port Townsend home, A.J. watched his bulldog Amy digging in the snowdrifts around the base of the towering pine trees and laughed.

“No, but I’m getting there too, buddy.”

“Hey Nick.” Howie snapped his fingers in the air, making Kevin and A.J. laugh. “Earth to Nick.”

Blinking, Nick smiled, as Howie slung out a hand to help Nick to his feet. “So I guess it’s me, then?” he said, aware that all three sets of eyes were on him. “Would you guys be pissed if I asked if I could have a minute alone with him?” Nick jammed his hands in the pockets of his shorts as he nodded in the direction of Brian’s headstone.

“Sure, buddy, we’ll wait over there. Let us know when you’re done.” Kevin slugged Nick playfully in the shoulder, as A.J. leaned in for a quick hug, followed by Howie, before the three of them walked halfway down the hill.

Nick walked around the bookstore, basking in the brightly-painted walls and wind chimes hanging from the ceiling. Such a contrast to the bleak winter outside.

Walking along the back wall, he ran his fingertips over the covers of the books on display, smiling as the striped cat wound its way around his ankles, purring loudly.

“Sorry about that; he usually doesn’t wander the store and bug the customers.”

“Oh, he’s okay.” Looking up, Nick paused. “Do I know you?”

The girl stooped down to retrieve the cat, pushing her long, dark hair from her shoulder with a smile as she stood. “I don’t think so?” Her smile was wide and her eyes dancing. The girl with the long, dark hair.

“I-I-I’m sorry. You just look so familiar,” he stammered, searching her face with curious eyes, as the cat jumped down from her arms to the floor below.

“You wouldn’t believe how many people tell me that,” she said with a giggle, a giggle that reminded Nick of the sound of wind chimes, and suddenly, it was as if everybody around them disappeared, and it was just the two of them, standing toe to toe, with the striped cat winding in and out of their legs, as she took Nick’s face into her hands, narrowing her eyes as she spoke.

“You’re going to be okay,” she said, conviction strong in her voice. “I promised Brian I would take care of you... and I never break a promise.”

Standing back, she glanced over her shoulder as a customer rang the service bell at the counter. “So can I help you find anything?”

“What... what did you just say to me?” Nick’s hands trembled at his sides, her comforting words hanging in the air.

“...I never break a promise.”

“I asked if I could help you find anything?” As the bell rang out again, she turned, holding a finger up to Nick on her way to the counter. “Hold that thought; I’ll be right back.”

Smiling, Nick watched the dark-haired girl make her way to the front of the store, where she shared some friendly banter with the customer at the counter. Looking down, Nick smiled at the cat, before sighing.

“I’m going to be okay.”

Park City suited Nick’s moods, with its ever-changing weather and scenery. He found himself becoming social again, making frequent trips to the bookstore on Main Street to browse the shelves and spend time with his dark-haired girl.

Charlotte called him weekly for phone sessions, where he could clear his head and see if he was truly on the right track. The Valium found its way into the drawer in his bedroom, where it rarely came out anymore.

As spring enveloped the mountainside behind his home, the pine trees darkened and the greenery sprung with yellows, lavenders, and pale peaches that calmed his nerves. He even began calling Kevin again, the two sharing laughs as Kevin spun tales about impending fatherhood, which made Nick shake his head with amazement. And he was pleased when Howie called and asked him to serve as a best man at his wedding.

The trip to Maui had been his first outing in nine months. Stepping off of the plane, he spotted his three friends standing on the concourse, draped in leis and baggy-fitting, crisp linen ensembles, reminding him of their early days of singing together in matching outfits. “You look like a fucking boy band!” he shouted.

Howie was the first to step forward, wrapping his arms around Nick’s waist, as A.J. and Kevin walked up, slapping Nick on the back in unison.

“God, we look old,” A.J. said with a laugh, finding it hard to believe that so much time had passed since they had been in one another’s company.

“We are old!” Kevin laughed, fiddling with the magenta and white lei around his neck.

“Don’t remind me.” Howie rolled his eyes, slicking a hand through his wild curls.

“Being old isn’t so bad.” Nick slung an arm around Howie’s shoulder, messing up his hair, much to Howie’s chagrin. “I’d rather be old than dead.”

Stopping, Kevin slapped Nick on the back, as Howie and A.J. both smiled. “You got one hell of a point there, Nick.”

Making a fist, Kevin dropped it in front of Nick, as Nick did the same, followed by Howie and A.J., until all four of their hands were balled up, knuckles touching, an old ritual they used to do before hitting the stage in the old days.

“So, what do you guys say we go and get Howie married before the little shit changes his mind?”

Part 27:
I Owe It To Myself

Nick stood staring off into the distance, thinking about Howie's wedding and the birth of Kevin's son, Brian Thomas, almost a month later.

He smiled when he thought back to the christening ceremony, in which he was named little Brian's godfather. He knew he would never forget the moment when the baby had been placed in his unsure arms.

Cradling the warm little body against his chest, Nick was trying desperately to concentrate on not dropping the infant, when, suddenly, he felt its tiny little hand curl around his finger.

Looking down, he was met by a pair of familiar blue-gray eyes, staring up at him with all the trust in the world.

Like they'd met some place before.

The afternoon of the christening, he'd gone back to Kevin's house, making himself comfortable in the guest house with his feet on the coffee table, a beer in his hand.

"You decent?" Kevin shouted, throwing open the front door and strolling inside, his son cradled in his arms.

"What if I hadn't been decent?" Nick asked, looking at the beer in his hand and wondering if he should be drinking in front of a minor.

"Then I would have covered my eyes." Kevin shifted the baby around, digging in his pocket and pulling out a lavender envelope that he thrust in Nick's face. "I thought you might like to see this," he said, as Nick set the beer on the coffee table and reached for the envelope.

Opening the flap, he pulled out a single sheet of crisp vellum and read the dark violet, swirling lettering.

You have cordially been invited to attend the wedding of Miss Leighanne Wallace to Mr. Patrick Sanderson...

Nick didn't need to read any further. Tapping the invitation on his knee, he glanced up at Kevin.

"Are you going to go?"

"Fuck no, I'm not going to go. I can't believe she has the gall to even invite me."

“What, she doesn’t deserve to be happy?” Nick asked.

“Don’t start with me, Nicky.” Kevin turned, heading for the door.

Nick stepped onto the veranda of the Hilton Head Country Club, a glass of champagne in one hand, as he scanned the sea of happy faces for Leighanne. He finally found her sitting alone on a stone bench, overlooking the eleventh hole green, a winsome look on her face.

“Hey there, lady,” Nick said in his most suave voice.

Glancing up, Leighanne smiled. “Nick Carter.”

“The one and only.”

“I can’t believe you came.” Scooting over, she patted the bench beside her, taking the glass of champagne from Nick’s hands as he sat down.

“You look beautiful.” Nick smiled, taking in her elegant, off-white, strapless gown that showed off her dark tan and golden hair.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” She reached out, straightening the crooked bow tie on his tux. “But you still can’t get your bow tie straight.”

They both laughed at the memories of her wedding to Brian, when Nick had stumbled into almost every picture, slightly drunk, his bow tie always askew.

“I didn’t think any of you would come.” She went on sipping from his glass of champagne.

“Well, you were wrong.” Nick could see Patrick gazing over the sea of faces for his new bride. “So what about this Patrick? Is he a good guy?” Nick asked.

Leighanne smiled at the mention of her new husband’s name. “Yes, he’s a very good guy. And he loves me very much.”

“And do you love him?” As Nick asked the question, Patrick finally caught Leighanne’s eye.

“Yes, Nick.” Her eyes sparkled, as the bride and groom shared a moment with one another across the room. “Yes, I love him very much.” There was a moment of silence before she spoke again. “I’m not going to apologize for being happy, for going on with my life, Nick.”

“Nobody asked you to, Leighanne.”

She smiled, a single tear winding its way down her cheek, as the sounds of “Crazy” by Pasty Cline drifted through the air.

Standing, Nick took the glass of champagne from Leighanne and set it on the bench beside her.

“Leighanne Sanderson, may I have this dance?” he asked, reaching for her trembling hand.

“Yes, Nick... yes, you may.”

“Hey Nick, you about done there?” Kevin called out, shaking Nick from his daydream.

“Yeah, buddy,” Howie cut in. “We were thinking about going back to Kevin’s place, kicking back with a couple of cold beers-”

“Or water,” A.J. jumped in with a laugh.

“Or water, and reminiscing about the good old days.”

“Um yeah, I’ll be right there,” Nick called out, digging in his back pocket for his wallet. “Just give me a second.”

Standing back from the grave, Nick realized that he hadn’t said anything to Brian.

“It’s been a pretty shitty year, Bri,” he began. “There are days when everything seems to go right and I can’t imagine anything different, and then there are other days when I still find myself just wanting to let go.”

Glancing back over his shoulder at Kevin, A.J., and Howie, he smiled, as Kevin reached for A.J., putting him in a playful headlock as Howie looked on, a sparkle in his eye.

“But I’m not going to let go, Brian. Not today, anyway. You wanted me to live, so that’s what I’m going to try and do. I owe it to the guys, I owe it to my godson, and I guess I owe it to myself to stay alive.”

Flipping open the billfold of his wallet, he pulled out the picture of Mo.

The image had faded over time of the man who had turned his world upside down. The sharp edges and menacing glare had given away to a soft gray haze that no longer seemed threatening.

“This is your reality now, Nick... are you scared?”

Shredding the picture of Mo, Nick held it in the palm of his hands as a breeze caught the pieces, scattering them into the warm, summer air, mixing with the white blossoms that rained down from the tree overhead.

“Hey Carter, you coming?” A.J. shouted, as he, Kevin, and Howie began to walk down the hill.

“Yeah, I’m coming!” Nick shouted, glancing up at the blue sky, a smile on his face. Damn, it was a beautiful day, and he was going to make the most of it.

THE END