

Julie Lewis

SICK
as my
SECRETS

Sick as My Secrets

*“We had it all, this love so strong. Now everything we had is gone.
If you could read my mind, you’d know I’ve crossed that line...”*

Prologue

The house was dark inside, except for the bright flashes from a TV that had been left on. I called his name, but the only other voice I heard was Ryan Seacrest’s, coming from the Times Square broadcast on TV. My heart pounded as I followed the sound into the living room, worried about what I was going to find there.

In the eerie, flickering light, I saw him lying on the couch. One hand was hanging limply over the side. His eyes were closed, his mouth half open. In that instant, I knew he had to be dead.

As I came closer to the couch, my eyes swept over the scene, taking in the two pill containers sitting on the coffee table, along with an open bottle of tequila. All the breath rushed out of me as I sank to my knees at his side, looking down at his body in dismay. “Oh god...” I whispered. “Why would you do this to yourself?”

But that was a stupid question to ask. I already knew the answer. Of course I knew why, and in that moment, I realized it was as much my fault as it was his.

Chapter 1

Howie

You know that game Jenga? The one where you build a tower out of wooden blocks and try not to be the one who makes it fall? The guys and I used to play it on the tour bus, back in the days when we still shared the same bus. It was one of many ways we’d pass the time while we traveled from one city to the next. The moving bus added an extra challenge that made it more fun – and also more frustrating. We’d have this really tall, sturdy tower built on the table, and we’d take turns sliding a block out of the bottom and adding it to the top, and everyone’s hand would be steady, and the tower wouldn’t even wobble, and then... BAM! Out of nowhere, the bus would hit a bump in the road, and the whole tower would come crashing down. Sometimes we’d just shake our heads and laugh, and other times we would scream and curse, but we’d always end up picking up the pieces and playing again.

If you think about, life's a lot like a game of Jenga. It can be going along just fine, and then BAM, you hit a bump in the road, and everything falls apart.

That's what happened to me, anyway.

My life was good. Great, even. It wasn't perfect by any means, but whose is? I'd made some mistakes, but who hasn't? Still, I had a wife who loved me, two beautiful boys who'd made my life complete, and a successful singing career that was still going strong after twenty years. I had a lot to be thankful for and little to regret.

Then it all came tumbling down.

My downfall didn't happen in London, but that's where we were when the tower started to wobble. I guess it was fitting. After all, that was where I'd made the fateful mistake that would end up costing me everything. I'd tried to forget about that night, but the past has a way of coming back to bite you in the butt.

Flash forward five months. It was November, and the Backstreet Boys were back in Europe to promote our latest single and upcoming European tour. We had been touring for almost six months straight, with little more than two weeks off in between legs, and tensions were running high. Although we were grateful to be celebrating twenty years together, we were also tired. Really tired. Our twentieth anniversary was a milestone, but it was also a reminder that we'd been at this a *long* time. We were all in our thirties and forties now, far from the kids we'd been when the group got together, and let me tell you: when you get to be forty, your body just doesn't recover as quickly as it did at twenty. All that touring had taken its toll on us. I usually love traveling, but even I was feeling pretty ragged and run-down at that point.

Nick said he felt the same way. He had been complaining about having the flu, but I thought that was just a convenient excuse he'd made up to avoid me. I had hoped things wouldn't be weird between us, but the two weeks we'd spent apart after the cruise just wasn't enough time to heal the wounds I'd inflicted upon him on that boat. I felt bad about it, but I'd already apologized. What else was I supposed to do? I couldn't take it back. I wish I could, especially now.

All of this is my fault.

So, anyway, things were awkward, but Nick's "I'm sick" story kept the other guys from asking too many questions. They bought it when he said he would rather stay in his hotel room and sleep than go out with us, but I knew the truth: he was afraid to be around me after we'd both been drinking. After what happened on the cruise, I can't say I blamed him. But even though he had his reasons, it hurt. It still hurts, though he has even more reason to reject me now.

But back to our time in London. We were making an appearance on *The X-Factor* that night, and it was as we were backstage, getting ready, that my phone rang. I looked down and saw that it was Leigh, my wife, calling, so of course I answered it. “Hi, honey.”

“Howie?” Her voice sounded shaky, and I could tell she’d been crying. Right away, my heart leaped into my throat.

“Leigh? What’s wrong?”

She sniffled, then laughed a little. “Was it that obvious? I’m sorry, sweetie. I didn’t want to worry you, and I hope I’m not interrupting anything important, but I just had to call.”

“No, it’s okay. We’re at *The X-Factor*, getting ready for our performance, but I’ve got some time to talk.” I walked away from the other guys, who were goofing around in the green room, and found a quiet corner where I could hear her better. “What’s going on?” I asked, not knowing that her next words would turn my world upside down.

“I’m at the hospital with Holden. He’s sick, really sick. They think he’s got pneumonia.”

My heart skipped a beat as I thought of my baby boy being in the hospital. “Oh, *no...*” I said, and that got the attention of all of the guys, who looked over at me in concern.

“*What’s wrong?*” Kevin mouthed, but I shook my head and turned around, cupping the phone closer to my ear.

“When did this happen?” I asked, my mind racing. I remembered her saying something the other day about Holden having a cold, which wasn’t uncommon with a three-year-old in the house – like most toddlers, James was a magnet for germs – but pneumonia? That was a whole different thing.

“He’s had a cough for the last few days, but when he woke up from his nap this afternoon, he was wheezing. I got scared and took him to the emergency room, and they ran some tests and are going to admit him.”

“Oh, god...” I felt sick to my stomach, imagining Holden in a hospital bed and poor Leigh pacing back and forth in the hallway as she spoke to me. “Honey, I’m so sorry you’re having to go through this on your own. I wish I was there with you.” Right then, I just wanted to hold her in my arms, not try to comfort her over the phone. “How are you holding up?”

“Okay.” She sniffled again. “Your mom offered to take James for the night, so that helps. I wish you were here, too, though.”

“Do you want me come home? I could probably catch a red-eye out of here tonight.” I glanced over my shoulder and saw Kevin, Brian, AJ, and Nick all staring at me, mouths open, brows creased, eyes wide with worry. I offered an apologetic shrug.

“Oh, Howie, I don’t want you to have to do that,” said Leigh. “You should stay and finish your promo stuff. Your fans will be devastated if you don’t show up to the rest of your appearances.”

It was just like my wife to worry about the fans’ feelings when she was the one dealing with a sick child. But then, she had been a fan herself, back when I first met her, when she was working on our website. She understood how our fans thought, which was one of the many things I loved about her. I smiled and shook my head. “Honey, if I have to miss a few gigs for something like this, they’ll understand.”

“Still...” I could hear the hesitation in her voice. “I don’t want you to just hop on a plane and hurry back here for nothing. I don’t know how serious this is yet, but I do know that Holden’s in good hands. The doctors and nurses are taking good care of him, and I’m sure he’s going to be fine in a few days.”

She was probably right, but I knew that even if I did hop on a plane that night, it wouldn’t be for nothing. My son was more important to me than any performance or interview. “Listen, lemme talk to the guys tonight and fill them in on what’s going on, and I’ll call you in the morning to see how Holden’s doing. If he’s not any better, I’ll be on the next flight home.”

Leigh sniffled. “Okay... thanks, sweetheart. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Give Holden a hug and a kiss for me if you can and tell him Daddy loves him.”

“I will,” she promised. “Goodnight.”

“Call me if anything changes. Otherwise, I’ll talk to you in the morning. Goodnight, honey.” I hung up and turned to face the guys.

“Something wrong with Holden?” asked Kevin, his eyebrows furrowed so close together, you couldn’t see the gap between them.

I sighed. “Yeah. Leigh had to take him to the hospital. They think he has pneumonia.”

He, Brian, and AJ all gasped. As fathers, they all knew what it was like to worry about a sick kid – especially Brian, who had been through this before when Baylee was hospitalized with Kawasaki disease. I hoped what Holden had wasn’t that serious, but pneumonia certainly wasn’t something to take lightly, especially in a nine-month-old. Even Nick seemed to recognize this; he looked just as serious as the rest of them. “Sorry, man,” he said. “Are you going home?”

Since he'd spent the last two weeks avoiding me, Nick's sympathy meant a lot. "I don't know yet," I replied. "Like I told Leigh, I'm gonna wait till morning and see. But if he's not doing any better, then... yeah. I might have to."

Years ago, they – or our managers, anyway – might have tried to stop me. Canceling an appearance was something we did only in the most dire of circumstances. Even when my sister died, I didn't miss a show. But I also didn't make it home in time to see her before she passed, and I wasn't about to make that same mistake again. Not that I was worried my son was going to die. Still, if it was serious, I would rather be safe than sorry, and I was pretty sure that, this time, the guys would feel the same way.

"If you have to go, D, then *go*," said AJ, and the other three nodded emphatically.

"Nothing's more important than family," Brian agreed.

"Yeah, and you know the fans will understand," added Kevin.

"I know. Thanks, guys," I said, managing a smile. I appreciated their support more than I could ever put into words.

When it came time to take the stage on *The X-Factor*, my mind was miles away, already back in Florida with my wife and son. I let the other guys do all the talking, while I went through the motions, a beat behind the rest of them. Our performance that night was not my best. The second single off our new album was "Show 'Em (What You're Made Of)," a song I loved, a song that made me think of my children. "*You find the truth in a child's eyes, when the only limit is the sky. Living proof, I see myself in you...*" My voice broke and shook as I thought about my baby boy being in the hospital. I think it was then that I decided to go home, though I kept my promise not to call Leigh until morning.

After the show, some of the other guys wanted to go out, but I didn't feel like it, so I headed back to the hotel with Brian. Nick, I noticed, felt up to a night on the town once he found out I wasn't going, but I was too worried about Holden to be offended. I wanted to wait up for awhile, in case Leigh called back with an update, so Brian and I hung out in his hotel room for a few hours. None of the wives were on tour with us, so it was just us guys – and, frankly, I like Brian better that way. Not that I don't like Leighanne, but Brian's just different with her than he is when she's not around. He was a good distraction that night, helping me take my mind off things until I felt like I could sleep.

Still, sleep didn't come easy to me that night. I tossed and turned for a long time before I finally fell asleep, then woke several hours later, feeling like I hadn't slept at all. I couldn't go back to sleep, and I couldn't wait, so I called Leigh at three a.m. – ten p.m. in Florida – hoping to catch her before she went to bed.

"Hello?" she answered the phone groggily, and I wished I'd waited.

“Sorry, honey, did I wake you?”

“I was half-asleep, but it’s fine,” she replied quickly. “It’s morning there, right? Did you just wake up?”

“Yeah. How’s Holden?” I asked, not in the mood for small talk.

She sighed. “He’s hanging in there. I’m still here at the hospital with him; they brought me a cot so I could sleep in his room. He’s on IV antibiotics and oxygen to help him breathe. They’re going to run some more tests in the morning. The doctor said we might be better off moving him to Orlando, where they have more advanced equipment.”

The thought of my little man in a strange place with needles and tubes sticking out of him made me feel sick to my stomach. “I want to be there,” I blurted. It may have seemed like a spontaneous decision, but I think I had already made up my mind in my sleep. There was no way I could stay overseas and perform when my son was in the hospital, thousands of miles away, sick with what sounded like a serious infection. “I’m going to head to the airport right now, and I’ll be on the first flight out.”

I expected Leigh to argue with me, to assure me that I was overreacting, that she and Holden would both be fine and I didn’t need to come. It was a sign of how worried she was that she didn’t try to stop me. “Okay,” was all she said.

“I’ll call you when I land. Try to get some sleep. I love you.”

Leigh blew me a kiss over the phone. “I love you, too.”

We hung up, unaware that our world, the beautiful life we’d built together, was about to implode.

Chapter 2

Nick

We had only been in Europe for a couple of weeks, but I was already sick and tired of traveling. Literally. I was sick, and I was tired, and I was ready to go home.

I wasn’t used to feeling that way. Usually, it was the other guys who got homesick, not me. They all had families back home, wives who were waiting for them, kids who missed them like crazy. I never knew what that was like. I’d never had anyone waiting for me at home. I guess I’d just never had a good reason for wanting the tour to end.

Work was like an escape for me. When I went out on the road, I left my problems behind me. I could forget about whatever drama was happening back home and just focus on being a Backstreet Boy. When I was on stage, I wasn't worried about anything. I loved performing every night and partying afterwards. I loved hanging out with the guys and meeting the fans. It might sound egotistical, but it was nice to be surrounded by people who loved me for the right reasons – my talent, my personality, and, okay, maybe my looks, too – instead of the wrong ones, like my money, my fame, my name. There used to be a lot of leeches in my life, people who latched on and sucked whatever they could get out of me, until I finally broke free.

But not anymore. I had Lauren now, and Lauren wasn't a leech. She was everything to me.

I wished she was on the road with me, but she had stayed behind in LA to work on wedding plans while I went overseas. It was probably for the best – I knew she needed time to iron out all the little details I didn't know or care about, and if I were there, I would probably just be in her way – but I still missed her. I couldn't wait to get home and make her my wife.

When I woke up that morning, the first thing I did was check my phone to see if she had called. She hadn't, but there was a text from her that said, *“Just wanted to say goodnight – or good morning, depending on when you get this. I miss you like crazy and am counting down the days till you come home! I love you! XOXOXO, Lo.”*

I smiled and shot her back a reply: *“Goodnight, baby. Hope you're having sweet dreams of me! I love and miss you too, more than I can put into a text.”* I knew she wouldn't get it for awhile – it was the middle of the night back home, and she was probably still asleep – so I set my phone aside and got out of bed. It was early, but we were making an appearance on *BBC Breakfast* that morning, which meant getting up at the ass-crack of dawn.

I stumbled into the shower, feeling like shit. I don't know if it was from the drinking I'd done at the pub the night before or the cold I'd had for the past couple of weeks, but my head was pounding. The bathroom light was overly bright. I closed my eyes as I rubbed shampoo into my scalp, letting the hot water soothe my sore muscles. It felt good.

I stayed in the shower probably longer than I should have, and when I stepped out, I could hear someone knocking on my door. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I wandered out of the bathroom and went to the door. I pressed my eye to the peephole and saw Howie out in the hall. Well, of course, it just *had* to be Howie when I was standing there dripping wet and naked under my towel. Normally I wouldn't answer the door like that, especially after what had happened with Howie on the cruise, but I wasn't too hungover to remember what was going on with his son. He had said he was going to talk to his wife again in the morning and see how Holden was doing before he decided whether or not he needed to fly home. I wondered if he already had.

“Hey, Howie,” I said, as I opened the door. I saw his eyes drop below my neck and back up again, and inwardly, I squirmed. I had caught him checking me out several times since the cruise, and it always made me uncomfortable. I was secretly glad he hadn’t come out with us the night before. These days, it was just hard for me to relax around Howie.

“Um, hey, Nicky,” he replied. “Sorry, did you just get out of the shower?”

“Uh, *yeah*, Captain Obvious.” I laughed, so he’d know I was kidding. “So, have you gotten a hold of Leigh yet?”

“Yeah, that’s what I came to talk to you about.” He shifted, and it was then that I noticed the suitcases sitting beside him. “Holden’s still sick, and Leigh said they’re going to be running more tests on him this morning. She sounded scared, and I just really feel like I need to be there with her instead of here. So... I’m flying home.” He looked apologetic, like he was hurting my feelings or something.

“Howie, it’s okay, dude, I understand. You do what you gotta do,” I said, wanting to be supportive. “Give Leigh my love, and tell Little Man to hang in there, alright? I hope he feels better soon.”

Howie managed half a smile. “Thanks, Nicky.” He started to lean forward, opening his arms like he was going to hug me, and then hesitated. I knew what he had to be thinking because I was thinking it myself, and I hated him for making me question his motives, his feelings for me, and our friendship altogether. But I also knew he needed a hug more than me, so I sucked it up and opened my arms, inviting him in.

“Ha, I got you all wet!” I said after I let him go, laughing at the water spots on his damp shirt.

He just smiled. “That’s okay. Thanks again for understanding.”

I smiled back. “Sure. Hey, you want me to talk to the other guys for you?”

“No, that’s okay; I’ve already stopped by their rooms.”

“Oh.” I realized I was the last one he’d told – another sign of the awkwardness that still existed between us.

Howie shifted his weight again. “Listen, I gotta get going. Good luck with the rest of the gigs, and please tell the German fans I’m sorry I couldn’t be there.”

“Sure, I will,” I promised. “Have a safe flight.”

It was weird watching him walk away, dragging his suitcases behind him. I couldn’t remember Howie ever missing an appearance before. I mean, we did cancel some concerts in South Africa so he could go home and spend time with his dad before he

died, but that was different – at least, I thought it was different. Still, I wondered briefly if we should have just rescheduled, instead of showing up without him.

We didn't, though. I guess no one wanted to disappoint the European fans, so we went ahead with our appearances in England, then continued on to the next country, Germany, while Howie flew back to Florida to be his family. A little part of me was actually jealous of him. He got to see Leigh, while I was still missing Lauren. He got to go home, while I just wanted to go back to bed. My muscles felt stiff from riding in cramped quarters and sleeping on hard mattresses, my head ached from all the late nights and early mornings spent under bright studio lights, and my throat was sore from singing while I was sick. What I wouldn't give to rest my body and voice for one night.

But it wasn't like I wanted to be in Howie's shoes.

Chapter 3

Howie

I trudged into the Orlando International Airport around five o'clock that evening, thirteen hours after I'd boarded the plane in London. It was ten at night there. The guys were probably going to bed, knowing they had to get up and fly to Germany in the morning. Meanwhile, I had barely slept. I'd been up for close to twenty hours, unable to let my mind rest long enough to fall asleep. I was both physically and mentally exhausted.

I had a hard time just staying on my feet as I stood at the baggage claim, watching the empty carousel turn around and around as I waited for my luggage to arrive. All of the benches in the area were occupied, but there was a bare patch of floor that looked pretty inviting. I was tempted to lie down right there, but I knew I'd never get up again. *Suck it up*, I told myself sternly, as I swayed from side to side. *Your wife needs you. Your son needs you.*

The hardest part about being in the air for so long was being out of contact with Leigh for hours at a time. I had called her during my layover in Atlanta, but all she would tell me was, "We're at Florida Hospital for Children in Orlando. He's holding his own. Hurry home." I guess she didn't want to worry me any more than she already had, but the lack of information didn't exactly help. My mind filled in the gaps with every worst-case scenario imaginable, as I waited for my connecting flight. It was frustrating to know I was so close to home, yet so far. I actually considered calling Leighanne Littrell and asking her to drive me the rest of the way to Orlando, but I knew the plane would get me there faster. I just hated having to *wait*.

Finally, the baggage carousel started spitting out suitcases. I hauled my bags off the belt and made a beeline for the exit. I took a cab to my brother John's house in Winter Park,

which was much closer than my own home in Cape Canaveral. There I dropped off my luggage and changed clothes, then had John drive me to the hospital.

“Which entrance, you think?” John wondered aloud, as we pulled up in front of Orlando’s sprawling Florida Hospital.

“Um... children’s wing, there,” I said, pointing to a sign that directed us to go left.

John turned into a circular drive and stopped outside the entrance of the new children’s hospital. “You want me to come in with you?” he offered.

“Nah... it’s late. Go home and get some sleep.” I unbuckled my seat belt and opened the passenger door to get out. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime, little bro. Call if you need anything.”

“Thanks, man,” I said gratefully, as I climbed out of the car. I heard him slowly drive away as I walked toward the white building, which had a clean, modern look, with its geometric architecture and color-blocked window panes. The interior was even more impressive, meticulously decorated with an interactive Disney theme. But the cheerful décor didn’t do much to calm my nerves.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket to call Leigh. “Hi, honey. I’m here at the hospital,” I said when she answered.

“Oh, thank god.” She sounded as exhausted as I felt, but her voice was overflowing with relief. “We’re on the sixth floor. I’ll meet you at the elevator.”

When the elevator doors slid open on the sixth floor, there she was, looking tired, but still beautiful. I stepped out, and she threw herself into my arms.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered, burying her face in my neck.

“Me too,” I replied, as I stroked her hair. “How is he? Any improvement?”

She slowly pulled away, shaking her head. “He’s not good, Howie. His breathing was getting worse, so they moved him to the PICU. He’s on a ventilator.”

“What?!” My eyes widened as I stared at her, trying to wrap my head around what she had said. How could my son have gotten so sick, so quickly? Things hadn’t sounded that bad when I’d talked to her that morning, although more than half a day had passed since then. “I don’t understand. I thought you said-”

“Come on,” Leigh said quietly and reached for my hand. “I’ll fill you in.”

She led me down a hallway that was decorated in different shades of blue, with murals of the ocean painted on the walls and characters from *Finding Nemo* and *The Little*

Mermaid smiling down at us from all angles. We stopped outside a set of double doors that said *Pediatric Intensive Care Unit* and waited for a nurse to buzz us in.

“Mr. Dorough, hello,” she said, smiling at me. “I’m so glad you were able to get here safely. I’m sure it will help Holden to hear his daddy’s voice.”

“Thanks,” I managed to say, forcing myself to smile back.

“He’s over here.” Leigh led me through the unit to a crib in one corner, where our son was sleeping. Holden had always been a small baby, but he looked especially little and helpless lying in that hospital crib, hooked up to monitors and machines. I knew what most of them were for from when our older son, James, was in the NICU as a preemie, but that didn’t make it any easier. While James had been born a month early, Holden had arrived right on time, a perfectly healthy newborn. I never thought I’d have to go through this with him.

“Hi, Holden,” I whispered, reaching into the crib to stroke his head. He felt feverishly warm. Half his face was hidden behind the hose that was hooked up to the breathing tube sticking out of his mouth. There was another narrow tube taped to his cheek that was going into his nose. It looked incredibly uncomfortable.

“They had to sedate him, so he wouldn’t try to pull out the tubes,” Leigh explained. Her voice sounded shaky, like she was trying not to cry. I was struggling just as hard, wanting to stay strong for her, but shocked at seeing my son like that. When I had left him a few weeks ago, Holden had seemed perfectly fine. I was having a hard time understanding how he could have gotten so sick in such a short amount of time.

“I can’t believe this,” I muttered, shaking my head. “I mean, how could this have happened? What did the doctors say? Did you get his test results? Do they know for sure what’s wrong with him?”

“He definitely has pneumonia. It’s some specific type; I can’t remember what Dr. Morgan called it now. I... I should have written it down...” She trailed off, raising a hand to her head. I watched her rub her temple wearily as she tried to recall the right name.

“It’s okay, hon,” I said. “We can talk to the doctor again in the morning.”

She nodded. “She was also concerned about Holden’s immune system; she thinks he may have some kind of deficiency that’s making it hard for him to fight off the infection. She was still waiting on lab results the last time I talked to her.”

My blood ran cold at the thought of our baby having some kind of disease that had caused this. What if it was leukemia? I shuddered. I had met way too many little kids with cancer through Make-a-Wish and the hospital visits we sometimes did while on tour, and they always broke my heart. I couldn’t imagine watching my own little boy go through something like that.

As exhausted as I was, I couldn't sleep with that idea eating away at my mind all night. Holden's nurse sent us home to get some rest, claiming the PICU policy didn't allow parents to spend the night, but I should have just stayed. It wasn't like I was going to sleep either way. Instead, I lay awake in bed while Leigh slept beside me, counting down the hours until it was time to head back to the hospital.

In the morning, we met with Holden's pediatrician, Dr. Morgan. "How's he doing?" I asked, as she invited us to sit down in her office.

The doctor folded her hands on the desk top. "Holden's condition is still very serious. At this point, we have to wait and see how his body responds to the antibiotics we've been giving him. It often takes several days, sometimes a week, for children to show any improvement."

I nodded slowly, but inside, I felt like screaming. I couldn't stand the thought of my baby boy being on that ventilator for a whole week. Wasn't there something else she could do?

"I wanted to talk to you about Holden's test results. As I explained when I met with you yesterday, Mrs. Dorough, the initial diagnosis of pneumocystis pneumonia was concerning to me because it suggested Holden might have an underlying condition that's affecting his immune system, which is what usually protects us from disease. Pneumocystis pneumonia is what we call an 'opportunistic infection,'" Dr. Morgan explained, looking more at me now. "What this means is that it takes advantage of people who have their guard down – people with weakened immune systems. We ran some more tests to find out why Holden's immune system isn't working the way it should."

Leigh reached over and rested her hand on top of mine. Maybe it was mother's intuition, but somehow, she knew before I did that the news was going to be bad.

"One of the things we tested for was the human immunodeficiency virus, which you would know as HIV." I heard my wife gasp, but I barely had time to react before I heard the doctor's next words. "Unfortunately, your son tested positive."

"He... he has HIV? As in... AIDS?" Leigh's voice sounded shaky, and I could tell she was on the verge of tears.

"HIV is the virus that causes AIDS, yes," said Dr. Morgan quietly. "It often takes years for it to develop into full-blown AIDS, but unfortunately, pneumocystis pneumonia is what we call an 'AIDS-defining illness.' That means—"

"My son has AIDS." Each word was familiar on its own, but strung together in that order, the phrase sounded foreign. I couldn't believe it had come out of my mouth. I

shook my head, wishing I could take the words back, not wanting them to be true. They couldn't be true.

Dr. Morgan nodded. "I'm very sorry."

I sagged in my chair. Slipping my hand out from under Leigh's, I brought both hands up to my head. It hurt from trying to wrap my mind around what the doctor had said.

"I don't understand." I looked over at Leigh. She was shaking her head, too, looking just as shocked and confused as I felt. "How is this possible?"

"Well, that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you both about," Dr. Morgan said. "I can tell the two of you are taken aback by this news, and again, I apologize. But I need to ask you some difficult questions." She paused, to give us a chance to collect ourselves, and when we nodded, she asked, "To your knowledge, has Holden ever been exposed to HIV?"

Leigh and I looked at each other again. Her eyes were wide. "No!" she insisted, still shaking her head.

"Not that we know of," I added.

Dr. Morgan nodded, looking down at the file in front of her on the desk. "According to his medical records, he's never had a blood transfusion or any kind of procedure that would put him at risk – though the risk of transmission through tainted blood products or infected healthcare workers is minimal these days, anyway. Unfortunately, the vast majority of children with HIV get it from their mothers." She looked up at us. "I'm sorry I have to ask this, but have either of you been tested?"

I shook my head, but Leigh said, "I was, when I was pregnant with him." I looked over at her in surprise. "My OB recommended it, just in case, and I figured it couldn't hurt," she explained. "Better safe than sorry, right? But I tested negative."

"Hm..." Dr. Morgan pursed her lips. "Well, it can take up to three months after exposure to test positive. Were you exposed to HIV before or after he was born?"

Leigh shook her head emphatically. "No!" she insisted. "No, never! I don't do drugs, and my husband and I have always been faithful to each other. Right, honey?"

She looked over me, and I felt my eyes widen as the truth hit me like a ton of bricks.

The gay club. That guy. Oh, god.

Leigh was still staring at me. "Howie?" Her voice wavered. "Right?"

Slowly, I shook my head.

Chapter 4

Nick

A part of me had hoped that when Howie announced he was leaving, we would just cancel the rest of our appearances and go home, too. But, of course, we didn't. We had done interviews and performed as a foursome plenty of times before, so I knew this time would be no different. The day after Howie flew back to the States, we got up and headed to Germany, the last country on our itinerary. We had four days worth of appearances booked in three different German cities. I was already counting down the days until I could go home and sleep.

It just seemed like my body had never quite recovered from the cruise. Granted, we'd only had about a week off between coming home from Miami and leaving again for Amsterdam. That was probably why. When I got home, I planned to go straight to bed and stay there for a week. A week was all I could afford: after that, I'd be back on the road for another two weeks, doing all the holiday shows we'd agreed to play. And after that? Two months off. We weren't scheduled to go back on tour until mid-February. I could spend the holidays at home with Lauren and help her with wedding plans. We were supposed to start shooting a reality show for Vh1 that would document all the wedding stuff, so that would keep me busy, and I was still trying to produce a horror movie, too, but at least I could work from home for awhile, at my own pace. I thought I would be ready to tackle all my projects in the new year after a nice, long break, but fate had other plans for me.

Looking back on that promotional trip to Europe, if I'd known it would be the last hoorah before my life went to hell, I would have tried to make the most of it. But as the saying goes, hindsight is twenty-twenty. As I rode through the city of Hamburg, I watched the sights fly by my window without really seeing any of them. My eyes were glazed. My head was pounding. It had been ever since we'd finished taping our appearance on *Markus Lanz*, a German talk show. I've always hated doing interviews for foreign TV; it's hard work, trying to interact normally with a host who's talking to me in a language I don't understand, while listening for the translation of what he's asking in my ear. It requires a good amount of concentration, and everyone knows I have the attention span of a goldfish. No wonder my head hurt.

I leaned it wearily against the van window, hoping the coolness of the glass would relieve some of the pain. It helped a little, but not much. I wished we were heading back to the hotel so I could lie down for awhile, but we had already checked out. We were going straight to the airport to catch a plane to the next city, Cologne. I would have to settle for a quick power nap on the way.

I had just closed my eyes for a second when I heard the sound of my name. My eyes flew open again, and I lifted my head to find AJ looking at me.

“Huh?” I could tell he had just asked me a question, but I had no idea what it was.

He rolled his eyes. “I *said*, what are your thoughts, Nick?”

“On what?”

AJ snorted. “Duh, on *dinner*? That thing we’ve been discussing for the last five minutes?”

“Oh. Sorry, dude, I was spacing out.” I gave him a sheepish smile as the others laughed, all too used to my spaciness to be concerned. “I don’t care where we stop for dinner. I’m not that hungry.”

Kevin turned around in his seat to frown at me. “You okay?” he asked. You could always count on Kevin to notice when something was wrong. He had never known me to miss a meal.

I shrugged. “I’m just tired.”

“No kidding,” he said, nodding. “I think we all are. It’s gonna be a late night and an early morning.”

“Don’t remind me,” I groaned, dragging my hands down my face. We weren’t scheduled to get to Cologne until after ten p.m., and we had an early wake-up call the next day for an appearance on yet another morning show.

“Three more days,” Kevin said encouragingly. “Then we can all go home and sleep.”

“Hey, speaking of going home,” Brian spoke up, turning around in his seat, too, “anyone heard from Howie yet today?”

We all shook our heads. It seemed none of us had talked to Howie since he’d texted the night before to tell us he’d made it home. No word on how Holden was doing.

“It’s six o’clock, so that means it’s... noon in Florida,” calculated Kevin, holding up his phone. “I’ll give him a call and find out what’s going on.”

We all listened in as Kevin talked to Howie. “Hey, man, how’s it goin’? We just finished taping an interview and were wondering how y’all were holding up. How’s Holden?”

There was a long pause while Kevin listened, occasionally nodding and murmuring, “Mm-hm...”

“Put him on speaker!” AJ hissed, but Kevin ignored him, jamming his finger in his ear. His brow was furrowed with a look of deep concentration. The rest of us exchanged

looks of exasperation, rolling our eyes at each other. Kevin could be such an old man sometimes.

“Well?” said AJ impatiently, when Kevin got off the phone a few minutes later. “What did he say?” It had been hard to tell from our end; Kevin had asked a lot of questions, but hadn’t relayed any of Howie’s answers.

Kevin slid his phone into his pocket. “Holden’s still in the hospital,” he said slowly. “I guess he’s got some kind of virus. Howie said they’re running more tests.”

Brian frowned. “Sounds serious... Did he say anything else?”

“No.” Kevin shook his head and shrugged. “He said he had to go.”

We all looked at each other, silently wondering. For a few seconds, no one said anything. Then Brian said, “I tell ya... there’s nothing worse in the world than watching your child go through something like that. When Baylee was in the hospital, Leighanne and I worried ourselves sick.”

“And Holden’s so young,” Kevin added. “If it were Max... or even Mason, for that matter...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “I can’t imagine.”

I couldn’t either. Unlike the others, I didn’t know how it felt to be a father – a fact which I’d been reminded of in just about every interview we’d done that year. Every album cycle, there are certain questions that get asked by just about everyone who interviews us, and this year, two of the big ones were about Kevin’s return and kids – or *Kinder*, as they call them in German. Time and time again, I found myself forcing a smile as people pointed out that I was the only Backstreet Boy who wasn’t married with children, cracking the same tired joke about being an overgrown kid myself. It was getting so old that the other guys had started saying it for me. I didn’t even know if I wanted kids, but people don’t like to hear that, so I’d learned to smile and make jokes to dodge the questions.

Anyway, not knowing what it was like to have a child, a little Mini-Me that I loved with all my heart and would give my own life to protect, I couldn’t fully empathize with what Howie was going through. I could sympathize, though. And despite everything, all the awkwardness that existed between us, I did. Howie was still my brother, and I felt bad for him.

“I wish there was something we could do,” I said. “It sucks that we’re so far away.” Again, a selfish part of me wished we would just cancel the rest of our appearances and fly home, but that was a stupid thing to wish for. We would only do that if things got really bad, like they had been for Howie’s dad, and I would never wish for something like that.

“We can pray,” said Brian, and the rest of us nodded. I’m not a spiritual guy myself, but I would never argue with Brian about the power of prayer. Praying was the least I could do for my friend and his family.

So that night during dinner, we did say a prayer, asking God to guide Holden’s doctors in finding out what was wrong with him so they could make him better, not knowing that they already knew, or that there was a lot more to the story than Howie was letting on.

Chapter 5

Howie

The ride home from the hospital that day was silent. I drove, while Leigh rode beside me in the passenger seat, staring out the window so she wouldn’t have to look at me. Neither of us spoke. I knew there was nothing I could say that would fix the damage I’d done in the doctor’s office. Leigh didn’t have to say anything; her frosty silence conveyed it all. We were only sitting a foot from each other, but to me, we’d never seemed farther apart. In that moment, I could already feel my wife – and with her, my life – starting to slip away.

She didn’t say a word until we were home. When we got back to our condo, she went straight upstairs. I followed her into our bedroom, but she had already locked herself in the bathroom. I could hear her fumbling around and the sound of running water. I undressed in a daze and sat down on the edge of the bed to wait for her to come out. A hundred thoughts were running through my head, all of them horrific. What if she was sick, too? What if I was? What if I’d gotten myself infected, and given it to her, and she’d given it to our son? What if James had it as well? What were we going to do?

A hundred “what ifs” and not a single answer, not until we knew more. Holden’s doctor had helped us get an appointment at a clinic for the following day so we could both be tested. Until we got the results, we would be left to worry and wonder. For the time being, we were in the same boat, but there was no sense of solidarity between us.

With Holden still in the hospital and James staying at my mom’s, it was too quiet in the condo. Leigh and I got ready for bed in a stunned sort of stupor, without talking to each other through the bathroom door like we usually did. When she finally came out, she was wearing a baggy t-shirt, and her face was wiped clean, but I could tell from her puffy eyes that she had been crying. She walked barefoot across the room, acting as if I wasn’t there. I got up to go into the bathroom. It was as she was turning down the covers on her side of the bed that she finally spoke.

“So, are you gay?”

I stopped in the doorway, my heart leaping into my throat, and slowly turned to face her. She still wouldn't look at me. She stared determinedly down at the bed, smoothing out the wrinkles in the sheets as if she hadn't said anything. But I'd heard her, loud and clear, and I could tell she was listening, waiting for an answer.

I opened my mouth, but for a few seconds, I couldn't speak. I didn't know what to say. Finally, after everything I'd kept from her, I decided my best course of action would be to tell the truth.

"Honestly, honey... I don't know."

Her head snapped up, and she made eye contact for the first time since we'd left the hospital, her dark brown eyes boring into mine. "How can you not know? You admitted you slept with another man. So... tell me. How did it feel? Did you enjoy it?"

I squirmed. How could I explain that it had felt good and, yet, made me feel horrible? That I had both enjoyed it and hated myself for enjoying it? I shook my head in disgust. "Our son was just diagnosed with AIDS, and this is what you're obsessing about? Look, let's just stayed focused on him for right now," I said desperately, hoping to redirect her. "We can worry about us later."

"How can I not worry about us when *we're* the ones who might have given it to him?" she asked, her voice rising as her eyes filled with fresh tears.

"Leigh... baby..." I said, as I rushed across the room toward her. I reached out to pull her into a hug, but she pushed me away, shoving a pillow into my arms instead.

"Take that and go. You can sleep on the couch tonight."

I sighed in dismay. "Baby, please," I started to beg.

"Go," she repeated.

So I went and spent a sleepless night in the living room, tossing and turning as I worried about my wife, my baby boy, and what the next day would bring for all of us.

In the morning, we went our separate ways. Leigh headed straight to the hospital to be with Holden, while I drove over to my mother's house to spend time with James. I hadn't seen my oldest son since I'd come home from Europe, and I could tell Leigh wanted to be left alone. We had agreed to meet at the immunology clinic for our one o'clock appointment.

It was the longest morning of my life. I put on a happy face as I played with James, not wanting him to sense that something was wrong. I don't think my mother was as easily fooled, but I had already decided to wait and see how my appointment turned out before

I told her what was going on. “We’re just waiting on some test results,” I said, when she asked about Holden. It was half the truth, anyway.

By noon, I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I told her I was heading back to the hospital and drove to the clinic instead. I got there half an hour early and sat in the parking lot, hiding behind my sunglasses as I waited for Leigh to arrive. She showed up with ten minutes to spare, and we went inside together. “How’s Holden?” I asked, as I held the door open for her.

“No change,” she said shortly, brushing past me. My heart sank as I walked in after her.

The waiting room was crowded. I kept my shades on, hoping I wouldn’t be recognized, but the people waiting weren’t exactly the type who would know a Backstreet Boy when they saw one. One man in a striped tank top looked at me curiously, but no one else gave us a second glance. I tried to take Leigh’s hand as we sat down, but she pulled it away, crossing her arms and legs tightly, like she was trying to hold herself together. I felt like I was falling apart inside, too.

We didn’t have to wait long, which was both a good and bad thing. Good because waiting, without knowing, is the hardest part. Bad because not knowing still allows you to have some hope. When you don’t know, you fear the worst, but hope for the best. I sat in that waiting room, thinking, *We don’t belong here. The hospital must have made a mistake. This is all wrong.*

Maybe it wasn’t hope so much as denial. Because once you know, it’s not about hope or fear anymore. Those feelings don’t change the facts. What it really boils down to is denial or acceptance. And when the doctor at the clinic called us in to go over our test results, I had a hard time accepting what I heard him say.

“I’m sorry, but the preliminary results indicate that both of you have tested positive for HIV.”

It took me a few seconds to process that information. HIV... positive. Both of us. Leigh... and me. I turned to look at her, but she had buried her face in her hands. So I looked at the doctor who had delivered the news.

“As I said, these are just preliminary results,” he added quickly, in a reassuring sort of voice. “The rapid HIV test, while highly accurate, isn’t one hundred percent reliable. It is possible to get a false positive. So what I’d like to do is send your blood samples to the lab for a second test, called a Western blot, to confirm the results. Unfortunately, we won’t get those results back for several days. In the meantime, I’d encourage you both to take precautions to avoid the possibility of transmitting the virus to anyone else. That means practice safe sex, don’t share needles...”

As the doctor droned on and on with what was obviously a rehearsed speech, an odd sort of buzzing filled my brain, drowning out his words. The whole situation seemed dreamlike, surreal. I couldn’t believe my wife and I were actually sitting there, in an

infectious disease clinic frequented by drug addicts and prostitutes, listening to a lecture on safe sex. It was all common sense stuff, I thought, advice I'd been hearing since adolescence. So how had I ended up there? How could I have been so stupid?

"...stop breastfeeding..."

As I heard the doctor say those words, I saw my wife's head shoot up. All of the color had drained out of Leigh's face as she stared at him with wide eyes. "Breastfeeding?" she repeated, her voice shrill. "It can be spread through breastfeeding?"

The doctor nodded. "The virus can be found in breast milk."

Leigh turned to look at me then, her face stricken. She didn't have to say anything for me to know what she was thinking. I knew.

At that point, we both knew.

Leigh was inconsolable after the clinic. I put my arm around her as we walked out, but as soon as we were in the parking lot, she pushed me away. "Don't touch me!" she snapped, as she stalked off toward her SUV, her long hair streaming behind her.

"Leigh, wait!" I called, chasing after her. "Don't just drive off. We need to talk about this!"

"I'm not ready to talk about it," she said, as she slid behind the wheel. "I just need some time to think." She slammed the driver's side door shut. I ran around to the passenger side, but the door was locked.

"Leigh, c'mon," I pleaded, pulling at the handle. "Let me in."

The engine roared to life. She lowered the passenger side window halfway and leaned over to talk through it. "Let you in?" She laughed derisively. "I'll never make that mistake again."

My heart sank. "Baby, I'm so sorry. Believe me, I never meant for anything like this to happen. Please, just unlock the door, and let's go somewhere so we can talk." I felt exposed, standing out there in a public parking lot, talking about this through the car window.

"I'm going home," she said shortly. "You should go to the hospital and see your son. See what you've done."

Her words felt like knives, stabbing me straight through my heart. As I stood there, reeling with the painful realization that I was responsible for this, she rolled up the

window and reversed out of her parking space, her tires squealing against the pavement as she pulled away. I watched her speed off, my heart breaking.

For a few seconds, I just stood there, staring blankly out at the street. I watched people pass by in their cars, people going about their everyday lives, lives that weren't falling apart. Eventually, I came to my senses and walked back to my own car. I climbed in and sat behind the wheel, contemplating my options. It was hard to think clearly through the buzzing in my brain, like static from a bad signal. I didn't know what else to do but follow Leigh's advice, so I drove to the hospital to be with Holden.

"Good news, Mr. Dorough," said the PICU nurse who buzzed me in to the unit, smiling as I walked through the set of security doors. "Holden's fever is down. It's a sign that the antibiotics we've been giving him are working."

"Thank you," I said automatically, managing to smile back at her. "My wife will be happy to hear that." But as I approached Holden's crib, I felt no sense of relief, myself. He looked the same as he had the day before, lost inside the maze of tubes that were pumping fluids, medication, and oxygen into his tiny body. He seemed so helpless... an innocent victim.

And it was all my fault.

"I'm sorry, buddy," I whispered, reaching out to touch the top of his head. His skin was still warm, but not feverishly so, and his hair felt so soft, like feathers. As I ran my fingers through it, the first tears finally came, trickling down my cheeks and splashing onto his crib sheet. "I'm so sorry."

A few days later, a call came from the doctor at the clinic.

"I'd like you both to come in to discuss your test results," he said on the phone, and once Leigh and I were sitting in his office, he confirmed what we already knew: "I'm sorry, but the results of the second test match our initial findings on both of your blood samples. This confirms the diagnosis of HIV."

I sucked in a deep breath and trapped it in my lungs. I could feel my own heart pounding, hear the blood rushing in my ears. I held my breath until I was light-headed, then released it in a rush of air.

Next to me, Leigh was hunched over, hugging herself tightly. Her hair hung like dark curtains, hiding her face. I reached out to her, resting my hand lightly on her back, and felt it stiffen beneath my fingers. Without a word, she jerked away from me, shaking off my hand.

I sighed again and returned my attention to the doctor. "So what do we do now?" I wanted to know.

“Well, you’ll both want to find a doctor who specializes in HIV so you can begin treatment. We do have many excellent specialists who offer outpatient treatment at this clinic, or you can ask for a referral from your primary care physician,” said the doctor. “You will also want to learn more about living with HIV and your treatment options. I have some pamphlets you can take home today with more information, and, of course, there are also plenty of good resources online. We also offer counseling services and HIV support groups here at the clinic; many people find it helpful to share their experience with others who have gone through the same thing.”

As he talked, I kept nodding, but it was hard to wrap my head around what he was saying. I understood the words, but I couldn’t see the connection to Leigh and me, couldn’t fathom us needing the services he was describing. I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience, like I was living someone else’s life. This couldn’t really be happening to me.

It didn’t hit home until he said, “And finally, I would strongly advise you to make a list of any other sexual partners you’ve had since your exposure to HIV. You should contact those people and encourage them to get tested.”

“I don’t need to make a list,” said Leigh flatly, speaking for the first time. She jerked her thumb toward me without looking up. “There’s only been him.”

I realized I couldn’t say the same, and that was when it really sank in. This was all my fault. I had done this to myself – and to her and our son, too. I sucked in another shaky breath and let it out slowly, struggling to keep my composure. “I don’t remember his name,” I admitted, staring down at my lap. “The guy who must’ve infected me. He was the only one. It was a one-time thing. He lives in London. I don’t have any way to contact him.”

The doctor nodded. “Well, if either of you think of any others who might have been exposed, make sure you talk to them about getting tested. Keep in mind that while HIV can’t be spread through casual contact, it can be spread through a variety of sexual acts, including both intercourse and oral sex.”

That last part made my heart lodge in my throat. “Oral?” I choked.

Leigh looked over at me, raising her eyebrows incredulously. The doctor kept his face impassive, but gave another short nod. “It’s rare, but yes, it is possible to transmit the virus through oral sex.”

My heart sank, as I realized there was another name I needed to add to that list, another person I’d put at risk, and that, like Leigh, he was one of my best friends.

Chapter 6

Nick

Life was good.

I got home from Europe on a Sunday. Lauren picked me up at the airport, throwing herself into my arms and planting a big kiss right on my lips. She made me feel like a soldier, returning from war. Obviously, the experiences don't really compare, but I did feel pretty ragged by that point, like I had been through some kind of combat. But, exhausted as I was, seeing Lauren gave me a second wind.

The sex that night was incredible. It always was after we'd been apart for awhile. My senses were somehow heightened, and everything – every kiss, every touch, every pulse – seemed extra sweet, like when you eat something sugary for the first time since starting a strict diet. Lauren was the dessert I'd been craving. It felt so satisfying to hold her in my arms and run my fingers through her hair, to feel her warm, firm body writhe under mine as I grinded against her, to hear her moan with pleasure when I finally slipped inside her.

We didn't use a condom. We never thought we needed to. Lauren took her birth control pills religiously; she didn't want to get pregnant, not with a wedding dress to fit into and more fitness competitions in her future. I figured, *Why wrap it up if I don't have to?* So I didn't.

Afterwards, when we collapsed onto the bed in a sweaty tangle of limbs, I closed my eyes in exhaustion and fell asleep almost instantly. I slept deeply and didn't wake until morning, when I was greeted by the sight of my fiancée, still asleep in bed beside me, looking like a Greek goddess with the sheets draped loosely over her tan, toned body.

I still felt tired, but I couldn't help but smile.

Life was good.

Two days before Thanksgiving, I got a call from Howie. I groaned when I saw his name on my phone, then immediately felt bad about it. He was probably calling with news about his son. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't answer? So I picked up the phone.

“Hey, Howie.”

“Hi, Nick.” His voice sounded strange, sort of shaky, and I knew something had to be wrong. Of course, my first thought was that Holden had taken a turn for the worse.

“Hey, is everything okay?” I asked quickly. “How's Holden?”

“Holden’s... better,” he replied. “He’s out of ICU, and they’re saying if he keeps improving, he might be able to come home tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s great, man!” I said with relief. “Glad to hear some good news.”

“Yeah... me too. Listen, Nick... assuming Holden’s out of the hospital by Friday, I was planning on flying out early and spending a few days in L.A. before I head up to Sacramento for the first show next week. I was hoping we could get together and talk about some things.”

Inwardly, I groaned again. “Didn’t we talk enough on the boat? No offense, but I really don’t wanna go there with you again.”

“That’s not what this is about.” I heard him pause and take a deep breath before adding, “Well... it sort of is, but that’s not all it’s about. Please, Nick, I just really need to talk to you, face to face. It’s important.”

I rolled my eyes, but he sounded serious, so I said, “Okay, fine, Howie, we’ll talk. Gimme a call when you get out here.”

“I will. Take care, Nick.”

It was an oddly formal goodbye, but with as awkward as things had been between us since the cruise, I wasn’t fazed by it. I hung up and didn’t think twice about the reason for Howie’s call or his request to talk more in person.

I spent Thanksgiving with my future in-laws. In the years since Lauren and I had started dating, her family had sort of adopted me as one of their own. I was grateful to have someone special to spend the holidays with, especially after the many I’d spent either alone or leeching onto someone else’s family – usually one of the guys, who felt sorry for me and my messed up family situation. I was glad those days were over. It was nice to feel like part of a real family again.

As part of the Kitt clan, I was expected to contribute, especially when it came to Thanksgiving dinner. I had never been much of a cook, but I’d learned a lot from Lauren over the years. After helping haul a trunkload of groceries into her father’s house, I watched my fiancée and her sister, Alexandra, start unloading the bags, assembling the ingredients for our feast across the kitchen counters with expert coordination. “Here, Nick – make yourself useful,” Alexandra said, slinging a huge bag of potatoes into my arms. “Start scrubbing these.”

“You got it, sis,” I replied, flashing her a cheesy grin. She handed me a vegetable brush, and I set up shop at the sink.

Amid all the activity, Lauren's dad, Larry, wandered into the kitchen. "Where's the turkey?" he asked, looking around.

Lauren, eyeing his beer belly, raised her eyebrows. "Looks like you already ate it."

"Aw, c'mon, Lo, don't get started on the Kitt Fit comments today. It's Thanksgiving!" Alexandra complained, but Larry didn't seem to mind. He grinned good-naturedly and lifted his shirt, looking down at his belly.

"Well, hey... there it is!" he exclaimed.

I laughed and snapped a picture with my phone, sending it to Instagram with a caption that said, *Where's the turkey??? Wait...just found it.* My future father-in-law would probably kill me if he knew I was posting his picture for the whole world to see, but luckily, Larry wasn't on Instagram.

He shuffled over to me as I slid my phone back in my pocket. "I see the women have put you to work," he said, eyeing the pile of potatoes I had barely begun to tackle.

I nodded. "You know it. Wanna help me wash some potatoes?"

"Sure..." Larry reached into a drawer, rummaged around for a few seconds, and finally pulled out a potato peeler. "I'll wash. You peel," he said, placing it in my hand.

"Touché," I replied, brandishing the peeler. It didn't look difficult to use, but I soon discovered that peeling potatoes is one of the worst jobs in the world. "Why can't we just have smashed potatoes?" I whined after just a few minutes of work, looking down in dismay from the small pile of potato skins waiting to go down the garbage disposal to the much larger mountain of potatoes still waiting to be peeled. "The skin of a potato is the healthiest part – isn't that right, Lo?"

"Shut up, Nick," Alexandra snapped, before Lauren could reply. "We're not worried about eating healthy right now; we're worried about enjoying a nice Thanksgiving dinner, and that means making mashed potatoes the right way – with *no skins*. So quit your bitching and get back to peeling."

"You tell him, Al," Lauren egged her on, somewhat sarcastically. I laughed at them both and lost my grip on the potato peeler. It slipped out of my wet hand, slicing a chunk out of my finger as it clattered to the floor.

"Or, hey, you could just throw the potato peeler on the floor and be done with it," Larry chimed in, without missing a beat, and everyone laughed again, this time at my expense.

I bent down to pick up the peeler, then straightened up, inspecting my finger. Blood was dribbling freely down it from the torn flaps of skin. "I don't know if I can continue peeling with such a grievous injury," I said, only semi-kidding, as I held up my finger for them to see.

“Suck it up,” said Alexandra without turning around. “Work through the pain, you pussy.”

I was too used to her sarcastic sense of humor to take it seriously, but it still felt good to hear Lauren gasp and cry out, “You’re bleeding! Oh, poor baby!”

At that, Alexandra did turn around. “Ew, gross!” she squealed. “Get away from the food; I don’t want blood or *human* skin in my mashed potatoes either!”

“Here,” said Lauren, grabbing a dishrag. “Put pressure on it while I go find a Band-aid.”

I wrapped the rag around my finger and watched my blood seep slowly into its fibers, staining them rusty red. When Lauren returned with a bandage, she helped me rinse off my finger and pat it dry. Then she raised it to her lips and tenderly kissed my fingertip. “A kiss to make it better,” she whispered, smiling.

She’s going to make a great mom someday, I couldn’t help but think, as I watched her wrap the Band-aid around my finger. We were in no hurry to have kids, as I’ve mentioned before, but right then I decided that if it did happen for us someday, I would be okay with that. More than okay, even. I would be happy about it.

Lauren made me happy, the happiest and healthiest I’d been in years. As I sat down to Thanksgiving dinner with her family the following day, I thought that out of all the things in my life I had to be thankful for, I was most thankful for her. I told her so that night, after we’d finished making love. “I love you, Lo,” I whispered, as I held in her in the dark. “I’m so happy you’re in my life.”

“Aww, I love you too, baby,” she said back, leaning into me. “You make me feel like the luckiest girl in the world.”

Because of Lauren, my life was good. But the next day, Howie came and changed everything.

Chapter 7

Howie

We brought Holden home from the hospital the day before Thanksgiving. I was thankful to the hospital staff for helping my baby boy get better, but it was hard to count my blessings when I was paying for my mistakes.

It hurt just to look at Holden and see what I had done. Although he was responding well to the antibiotics and steroids he’d been given for his pneumonia, he was still on oxygen

to help his healing lungs. I hated seeing him hooked up to tubes, unable to move around much without getting tangled in the oxygen line. He seemed so helpless, and even after eight days in the hospital, I was worried it was too soon. However, Dr. Morgan had assured us it would be healthier for him to finish recuperating at home, away from the dangerous germs that lurked in a hospital setting.

But I couldn't help but think it wasn't healthy for either of my sons to be in this house. It didn't feel like a home anymore, not with Leigh and I sleeping in separate rooms and barely speaking to each other. She had moved Holden's crib into our bedroom and spent most of her time holed up there, while I kept James occupied in other parts of the condo. He was too young to understand what was going on, but I knew he sensed that something wasn't right. "Holden's still sick," I explained, when he asked why we weren't *all* going to Grandma's for Thanksgiving. "Mommy has to stay here and take care of him."

We were supposed to have flown to New Jersey to spend Thanksgiving with Leigh's family, but instead, I brought James over to my mom's house, while Leigh stayed home with Holden. My family accepted my excuse for their absence, but I knew I was going to have to explain everything sooner or later, so after dinner, while James was playing with his cousin in another room, I sat all the adults down and told them the truth about what was going on.

"Leigh and I are having some problems," I started shakily, feeling it would be better to ease them into it than blindsides them with the news that I had HIV – and that I had given it to my wife and son. "It's all my fault. I was unfaithful. I... I slept with someone else when I was overseas-" I paused here, deciding to omit the part about it being another guy. My mother, a devout Catholic, was already looking at me with disappointment in her eyes; I couldn't imagine how much it would destroy her to hear that I might be gay. "-and I wasn't safe about it," I went on, speaking quickly so I could get it all out before I lost my nerve. "I was stupid, and I got myself infected... with... with HIV."

I stopped there, giving them a few seconds to absorb the first shock while I took a sip of water. My throat felt painfully dry. I swallowed hard, hearing the sharp intake of breath from my brother and sisters. When I looked up, my mother was staring at me with dismay, her hand over her heart. "Oh no, Howie," she gasped, and it broke my heart to hear her say my name that way, her soft, Puerto Rican accent not hiding the sadness in her voice. "Not the AIDS..."

"Not AIDS," I said quickly, realizing I would be clarifying this a lot in the weeks to come. "It's just the virus that causes AIDS. I don't have AIDS..." *Yet.* The word hung in the air, invisible, unspoken, yet obviously weighing on everyone's minds. We all knew it was only a matter of time. But it wasn't my own mortality I was most worried about. "Holden does," I whispered.

"What?!" came the collective gasp, and I struggled to explain how the virus had spread through my family, finally infecting my infant son, whose immune system was weaker

and more vulnerable to begin with. I felt like a criminal, confessing my sins, but my family didn't condemn me. They didn't judge. They just offered their unconditional love and support, saying things like, "We're here for you, Howie," and "Anything we can do..."

When I was finished, I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, but the worst part wasn't over yet.

I still had to tell Nick, and somehow, I knew he wasn't going to take the news anywhere near as well.

The following day, I flew to L.A., leaving Leigh at home with both boys. I hoped the time apart would do us some good, give us both a chance to clear our heads before we decided how we were going to deal with the blow we'd been dealt.

I didn't know what the future held for us, and there wasn't much time for us to figure it out. I was supposed to go back on tour with the guys in less than a week, but I couldn't imagine how I would get through the ten holiday shows we'd booked with all this hanging over my head. I knew I had to come clean and tell the guys what was going on.

But first I needed to talk to Nick. Alone.

"Hey, is Lauren here?" I asked when he invited me into his condo, looking around for signs of his fiancée. I hoped she wasn't home; this was going to be hard enough without having to say it in front of her, too.

But for once, I caught a break. "No, she went wedding dress shopping with her sister," said Nick, eyeing me suspiciously. "Why?"

Despite my best effort to be casual, I knew I was acting weird. He seemed to have noticed it, too. When I'd called to tell him I was in town, he had suggested meeting somewhere for drinks, but I had insisted on coming over to his place. I could tell he wasn't comfortable with me being there, but it was for the best. This wasn't the kind of conversation we could have in public.

I sighed, deciding I had better just get on with it. "I've gotta tell you something, Nick, and it's not good news. Can we go sit down?"

"Sure..." Nick said slowly, still staring at me intently. I thought I saw the first flicker of fear in his eyes, but I knew he was about to be blindsided, as I had been when Holden was diagnosed. How could he have seen something like this coming?

We went into his living room, which had a gorgeous view of the beach behind his condo. Nick sat in a corner of the couch and immediately crossed his arms and legs – typical

defensive posture. I perched on the edge of an armchair, unable to relax. My heart was starting to race, and my hands felt clammy with cold sweat.

Nick's blue eyes surveyed me coolly, like a couple of ice cubes. "So what's up, Howie?"

I took a deep breath. I had thought it would be easiest to build up to it by telling him the same way I'd found out – by starting with Holden's diagnosis and working my way back from there. But in the end, I decided to just drop the bombshell and say it.

"I'm HIV-positive."

I watched his expression change, his eyes widening, the frown falling off his face as his jaw dropped. "What?? No way. Are you fucking with me?" He grimaced, going red in the cheeks as he looked away. "Wait – don't answer that."

I saw the moment when it all clicked – when he realized what I was saying and what it could mean for him. He looked up again, his face flushed and his eyes filled with horror.

"What the fuck, man? Are you serious??"

I could hear the note of pleading in his voice, the hope that I was just messing with him, getting payback for all the pranks he'd pulled on me over the years. But he had to know I would never joke about something like this. "Unfortunately, yes, I am. I found out last week." I swallowed hard, my mouth feeling like sandpaper again. I wished he had thought to offer me a drink. "I... I think I must have gotten infected over the summer, when we were in London. I told you what happened there. It's the only time I've been with someone other than my wife, except for..." I trailed off, knowing I didn't need to finish. He knew all too well what I was talking about.

"But you don't think...? I mean, we didn't... We only..." Nick seemed incapable of finishing a thought, but he didn't have to either.

"I know. But you should get tested, just in case."

He shook his head dismissively. "I don't see how I could have it." He raked a hand through his hair as he thought back to that night. I knew because I had done the same thing, going over every piece of it that I could remember. We had both been pretty drunk, but...

"I was bleeding," I blurted.

He blinked up at me. "Huh?"

"That night. You... you bit my tongue, and I was bleeding, remember? If any of my blood got into your... system," I said awkwardly, "then you could have it. I mean, the odds of that happening are really, really small," I added quickly, "like one in a thousand or something, but still... it's possible. You should get tested."

Nick stared at me with total revulsion for a few seconds. Then he said, “So help me god, Howie, if I find out you gave me fucking AIDS...”

“Not AIDS,” I said automatically. It was becoming my mantra. “HIV. It’s the virus that-”

“Shut the fuck up,” snapped Nick. “I don’t fucking care what it is; I just know I don’t want it in my fucking body!”

“Neither do I, Nick.”

“Then you shouldn’t have fucking cheated on your wife!” he shouted. The words were like a slap in the face to me. “And I swear to god, if you gave it to me too, I will never forgive you.”

“I’m sure you’re fine,” I said quickly. My voice was shaking, but I meant it. I really did think I was just being overly cautious in telling him and urging him to get tested, too. There was no way he was going to test positive. Well, okay, there *was* a way... but like I’d said, the odds were still very slim.

“Oh, you’re sure?” He let out a sarcastic laugh. “That’s why you’re telling me I should get tested?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Nick.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. I mean, what else are you supposed to say when telling your best friend you may have infected him with an incurable virus? All I could do was apologize and be supportive. “Listen, there are clinics downtown that do rapid HIV testing. You could go today and get it over with. I’ll go with you, if you want,” I offered.

He snorted, giving me a look of deepest loathing, like I was a cockroach or something. “Oh yeah, ‘cause that’s all I need is the paparazzi taking pictures of us going into an AIDS clinic together like a couple of queers. No offense.”

That made me angry. “You know, Nick, it takes two to tango. You were there too.”

“Fuck you. I was wasted, and you know it.”

“So was I,” I started, then shook my head, realizing there was no point in trying to defend myself. “It doesn’t matter. Drunk or not, it happened. We have to deal with it. So if you want me to go with you...”

“I don’t. Didn’t I make that clear? I don’t want you to do a fucking thing except leave. Get the fuck out of here.”

My heart sank when I realized he was serious. “Nicky...”

“Don’t call me that!” he snapped, his eyes flashing dangerously at me. “Don’t you ever fucking call me that again.”

There was nothing else I could do except nod. I stood up slowly, wishing he would apologize for his rudeness, but I knew he wasn’t going to. And why should he? Rude or not, his reaction was warranted. I was the one who should be sorry, and of course, I was. An apology wasn’t enough, but it was all I had to offer him at that point.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered again, and then I walked out. Nick didn’t say another thing, and he didn’t try to stop me, either.

Chapter 8

Nick

It’s hard to explain how I felt after Howie left my house that day. Angry? Hell yeah. Freaked out? You bet. But I think the best word to describe my feelings is *betrayed*. I felt betrayed by a man whom, only a month ago, I had considered to be my best friend.

A lot can change in a month.

I couldn’t believe the conversation I had just had with Howie. It replayed in my mind as I paced around my condo, unable to sit down and relax. Over and over again, I heard Howie say, “*I’m HIV-positive,*” and then, “*You should get tested.*” What was I supposed to do with that information? I wondered. Obviously, I should get tested, but I didn’t want to admit that to myself, let alone anyone else.

What were the odds he had actually infected me? They had to be pretty slim. It was only one time, and it wasn’t like we’d actually had sex; at least, I didn’t think we had. I only half-remembered what had happened that night, anyway. But even Howie had said the odds of me having it were something like one in a thousand. “*I’m sure you’re fine,*” he’d told me. He was probably right. What had happened to him was different. It wouldn’t happen to me.

You’re fine, I tried to tell myself, repeating Howie’s words, but I didn’t feel very reassured. My thoughts were still racing, and so was my heart.

I finally made myself sit down and look up some stuff the computer, hoping it would help ease my mind. It just scared me instead, so I stopped, making sure I deleted my browsing history before Lauren got home. I had decided not to tell her about Howie until I had to; I didn’t want to worry her for no reason.

When I heard the front door open an hour or so later, I closed the lid of my laptop and went to greet her. “Hey, how’d the dress shopping go?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

I hoped she wouldn't hear the tremor of anxiety in my voice or see the tension in my face.

Luckily, Lauren was too distracted by wedding dresses to notice anything. "I think I found the one!" she gushed, her eyes glowing with excitement. "I didn't order anything yet, so it's not a done deal, but... oh Nick, it was beautiful!"

"I'm sure you were beautiful in it," I replied automatically. "Are you gonna let me see it, or do I have to wait till you're walking down the aisle?"

Lauren gasped. "Of course you have to wait!" she said, swatting me playfully on the arm. "It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding!"

I shrugged. "Whatever you say, babe. You're the boss." Inside, I was thinking we needed all the good luck we could get.

But as the night wore on, I started to feel better. With Lauren around, I wasn't as worried as I had been before. She was a good distraction, even if she didn't know what was going on in my mind. We watched a movie, and when it was over, she suggested we go to bed. I thought she was tired from shopping, but it turned out that trying on wedding dresses had made her horny.

"I can't wait till after the wedding, when you get to take it off me," she whispered, as she climbed on top of me, straddling my hips. I felt myself getting hard, but then I heard Howie's voice in my head again, saying, "*If any of my blood got into your... system... you could have it.*"

"Baby, please," I groaned, gently pushing Lauren off of me. "Not tonight, okay?"

"Why not?" she asked, sounding surprised. I'm pretty sure it was the first time she'd ever heard me say no to sex. I could hardly believe it myself, but I knew it was for the best. As long as there was a chance I was infected, small as it may be, I couldn't put her at risk. In that moment, I decided that Howie was right; I *had* to get tested. Not just for my own peace of mind, but for my fiancée's protection.

"I have a headache," I said, which was halfway true. With the knowledge of Howie's HIV weighing on my mind, my head did hurt.

"Aww, poor baby!" She gave me a sympathetic look, sticking out her lower lip. "Are you still sick? Seems like you haven't been feeling well ever since you got back from Europe."

Since the cruise, I thought. The realization sent cold shivers down my spine, as I remembered something I had read on WebMD earlier that day, while doing research...

"The symptoms of acute infection look similar to those of other viral illnesses and are often compared to those of the flu... The initial symptoms of acute HIV infection may

include: headache, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, fatigue, aching muscles, sore throat, fever...”

I only had about half the symptoms listed, but still, it was enough to make me wonder. What if the way I'd been feeling wasn't the result of overwork, jet lag, and a bad cold? What if it was from my body trying to fight off HIV instead?

“I wish you didn't have to go back out on the road so soon,” Lauren was saying, bringing my attention back to the bedroom.

“Me too,” I muttered, thinking she might just get her wish. I couldn't imagine Howie wanting to do the holiday tour, after what he'd told me. But if he was going to break the news to the other guys, he'd better act fast; the first show was just five days away. That meant I had five days to find out if he'd infected me or not.

“Maybe you should go to the doctor,” Lauren suggested. “You probably just have some bug; there's been all kinds of stuff going around. But he might be able to prescribe something to make you feel better.”

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing hard. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

I had already decided I didn't want to go to one of those clinics downtown, the kind that offer anonymous HIV testing. There was no anonymity in L.A., not for me, anyway. If I was caught by the paparazzi trying to sneak in and out of one of those places, there was no telling what kind of rumors they'd start. I didn't want to have to do any damage control, so I decided to go to a real doctor instead.

Of course, my doctor's office was closed over the weekend, but I called first thing Monday morning to make an appointment, and they managed to squeeze me in the same day. Sometimes it sucks to be famous in this town, but fame does have its perks. When I told the receptionist that I was a Backstreet Boy about to go back on tour, she was able to pull some strings and find an appointment slot that supposedly wasn't available before. I took it.

That afternoon, I drove myself to the doctor's office. I was overdue for a check-up anyway, so that's all I'd told the receptionist this was: a wellness exam. But when the nurse sat down to take my medical history and started asking me questions, the truth came pouring out.

“I think I need an HIV test,” I blurted out.

Her fingers froze over the keyboard of the computer into which she'd been entering my information. She looked over at me, raising her eyebrows. “Have you been exposed to HIV?”

“Um... yeah, I might have been. A friend of mine who I’ve... done some stuff with... was just diagnosed,” I said, wishing I could sink through the floor and disappear. I could feel my face burning with embarrassment, but thankfully, the nurse didn’t ask any more awkward questions.

“Okay,” she said, turning to type something else into the computer. “Let me just run this by Dr. Stark, and I’ll be back to draw some blood.”

I nodded. “Okay.” The nurse left, and I sat alone in the exam room, swinging my legs nervously as I looked around. I felt like a little kid again, afraid of getting a shot. But it wasn’t the blood draw that scared me this time. I was more worried about what my bloodwork might reveal.

When the nurse came back, she snapped on a pair of latex gloves and said, “Okay, Nick, I’m going to go ahead and draw some blood. Can I have your left arm, please?”

I dutifully held out my arm. She swabbed the inside of my elbow with antiseptic and wrapped an elastic band around my bicep. I looked away as soon as I saw her reach for the syringe. “Little pinch,” she said, and I gritted my teeth, sucking in a deep breath as I felt the needle slid into my vein. It stung, but only for a few seconds. Before I knew it, she was handing me a cotton ball to hold over the tiny hole in my arm.

“How long does it take to get the results back?” I asked, watching her label a little tube of blood.

“It can take anywhere from a few days up to two weeks.”

Two weeks?! I thought desperately. How was I going to keep it in my pants for that long without Lauren wondering what was up?

Seeing the look on my face, the nurse smiled reassuringly. “I know how hard it can be to wait on test results. We’ll try to let you know by the end of the week.”

I nodded. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Of course. Let me just get this ready for the lab, and then I’ll send Dr. Stark in to see you.”

The doctor finally came in a few minutes later. “Hi, Nick, how are you doing today?” he asked, shaking my hand.

I shrugged. “Okay, I guess.” Or, at least, I hoped.

Dr. Stark got right down to business, removing the stethoscope from around his neck and slipping it into his ears. He made small talk with me while he listened to my heart and lungs. “Everything sounds good,” he said, draping the stethoscope back across his shoulders. “I’m just going to check your lymph nodes.” As he moved his fingers along

my jawline, feeling the nodes in my neck, he finally addressed the elephant in the room. “So, I hear you requested an HIV test.”

“Mm-hm,” I mumbled, trying not to move my mouth too much.

“You think you may have been exposed?”

“Um, yeah.” I still felt ashamed to admit it.

Dr. Stark nodded grimly. “Well, it’s good that you came to get tested. Regardless of how the test turns out, I just want to remind you to take precautions. Avoid sharing needles, and practice safe sex, especially until we know the results.”

I felt my cheeks redden, as I realized he probably thought I was just another drug-addled sex addict, like so many other celebrities in this city. And that may have been true, at one time, but I’d worked hard to clean up my act in the last five years, and I resented the assumption. “I don’t do drugs,” I said quietly.

“That’s good. Well, Nick, I do feel some swollen lymph nodes, but that can be caused by a lot of things, including the flu. The other symptoms you’ve been experiencing – body aches, low-grade fever, fatigue – are also indicative of a viral infection, but we won’t know how serious it is until we get the results of your bloodwork back. I’ll give you a call to go over those when we do.”

“Okay. Thanks, doc.” I shook his hand again, hoping he would be able to tell me I’d just had the flu the whole time. I couldn’t imagine how I was going to get through the next few days, waiting for his call and dreading it at the same time.

I drove home that day on autopilot, my mind wandering a million miles away. I wondered what it had been like for Howie... and then, when I thought more about it, I wondered how he’d found out in the first place. I hadn’t given him the chance to tell me the whole story, but I was still too pissed to try to talk to him again. Right then, I wanted nothing to do with Howie Dorough.

Unfortunately, I was stuck in a situation that had everything to do with him. The way I saw it, this was all Howie’s fault, and if I found out he had given me HIV, I didn’t think I would ever be able to forgive him.

Chapter 9

Howie

The four days I spent in L.A. before flying up to Sacramento were some of the loneliest of my whole life. My wife wouldn’t talk to me, and neither would my best friend.

Whenever I tried to call Leigh, I would get her voicemail. If I left her a message, asking how Holden was doing, she would send me a text, but she wouldn't answer her phone. Nick never responded at all. I wanted to wait until the whole group was together to tell the other guys what was going on, so I avoided AJ and Kevin. I didn't talk to anyone. I barely left the house.

The only time I did go out was to meet with an HIV specialist. I had done my research, and Dr. Stephen Iverson was supposed to be one of the best in the nation. I figured, as long as I was in Los Angeles, I would at least get my foot in the door for an appointment with him; if I liked him, I could bring the rest of my family out to see him the following week. But walking into his office was harder than I'd thought it would be.

It was a cloudy, cool day in L.A., but the chill I felt as I climbed out of my car and looked up at the office building had nothing to do with the temperature. Feeling vulnerable, I zipped up my jacket anyway and ducked my head as I walked quickly up the ramp to the entrance. I could suddenly hear Nick's voice in my head, saying, "*All I need is the paparazzi taking pictures of us going into an AIDS clinic together like a couple of queers.*" The sign on the side of the building just said *UCLA Medical Group*, nothing about being an AIDS clinic, but that's what it was, all the same.

I went inside and signed in, giving my name to the receptionist in a hushed voice. She handed me a clipboard with some forms to fill out while I waited. I kept glancing up from the paperwork, checking to see if anyone was looking my way. I knew the chances of my being recognized were higher out here in L.A., where people expected to run into celebrities. But the people in the waiting room seemed preoccupied, too caught up with their own worries and problems to pay attention to anyone else.

I, on the other hand, had spent the past week worrying about everyone *but* myself. Finally, it was time to focus on me. It was weird having to answer all the personal questions about my medical history the forms asked. None of it seemed to apply to me. I had always been healthy, never suffered so much as a broken bone, let alone any kind of serious illness. I prided myself on taking good care of my body; I worked out regularly to stay in shape, and I tried to eat right, even when we were on the road. For being forty, I thought I looked pretty good. I felt good, too. It was hard to believe I could be sick, but my HIV diagnosis lingered in the back of my mind like a dark shadow, casting doubt over all my other thoughts.

Should I have known there was something wrong with me? Was there a way I could have caught this earlier and avoided infecting anyone else? I looked at the long list of symptoms I was supposed to be checking off, wondering if there were any I had missed. Most of them were pretty general – fever, sore throat, muscle aches, fatigue, headache – all part of the territory when you travel around the world, singing and dancing on stage for two hours every night. I was pretty sure I'd had all of those symptoms at some point in the last six months, but I wasn't experiencing any of them now. I felt fine – and when I was finally in front of Dr. Iverson, I told him so.

“If it wasn’t for my son’s diagnosis, I never would have even thought to get tested,” I admitted. “I haven’t felt sick at all. But then again, my son didn’t seem sick either, until he came down with pneumonia.”

The doctor nodded knowingly. “HIV is notorious for being a ‘silent’ infection. People can have the virus for years without knowing it because they may not show symptoms until it progresses to full-blown AIDS. Some people do have flu-like symptoms shortly after becoming infected, but not everyone. You’re probably in what we call the ‘clinical latency’ phase, which means the virus is reproducing slowly without causing symptoms. Even without treatment, this phase can last ten years or more, so you could go a long time without ever experiencing symptoms of the virus. Unfortunately, because HIV does weaken the immune system, it can progress much faster than that, as it seems to have done in your son’s case. Babies are more susceptible to infections because their immune systems are weaker to begin with.”

I knew he was only trying to explain why Holden had gotten sick so much faster than me, but his words made me squirm with guilt. It should have been me, not Holden, who had ended up in the hospital. It wasn’t fair that he was so sick while I was still well, when it my fault he had HIV in the first place. I would never be able to forgive myself for what I’d done.

Dr. Iverson, seeming to sense he’d upset me, cleared his throat and quickly changed the subject. “Well, Howie, what I’d like to do today is a baseline evaluation. Once we finish going over your medical history, I’m going to give you a physical exam and get a blood sample so we can run some tests. Once we know what stage your HIV is in, we’ll be able to make some decisions about starting treatment. Sound like a plan?”

I nodded. “Sounds good,” I said, even though it didn’t. I wished I could be anywhere but sitting in that office, but it wasn’t like I had much of a choice. It was either deal with this, right then and there, or curl up and die. And I wasn’t ready to die. Not then.

Dr. Iverson said he would call in a few days to go over my lab results. In the meantime, I flew on up to Sacramento the following day for the first holiday show with the guys. They didn’t know it yet, but it was the only show I planned to perform. As much as I loved my career, now was not the time for me to be touring all over the country. I needed to take care of my family, first and foremost. I also needed to take care of myself.

We met for lunch at the hotel, where we had all reserved rooms. I tried to make eye contact with Nick, wondering if he had gotten tested yet, but he wouldn’t look at me. When the hostess came over to show us to our table, I caught Nick’s arm and held him back.

“Did you get tested?” I asked him in a whisper.

“Let go of me!” he hissed back, yanking his arm away. He took off after the other guys, taking such long strides that I practically had to jog to catch up to him.

“Did you?” I repeated, my voice rising above a whisper. I knew he would answer if I kept asking; he wouldn’t want the other guys to overhear.

Sure enough, without looking at me, Nick gave a short nod. I could tell he was clenching his jaw, and the tension in his face made my heart start to race.

“And...?” I asked, afraid of what his answer would be.

“I dunno. Results aren’t back yet,” he muttered out of the side of his mouth.

I frowned, wondering why he hadn’t taken my suggestion and gotten the rapid test. If the results were positive, he would still need another test to confirm it, but either way, at least he would *know*. It had been five days since I’d told him; I knew it had to be driving him crazy, not knowing, while worrying about the worst case scenario. I knew because I’d been there myself, barely two weeks ago. I wanted to put my arm around him and tell him it was going to be okay, that I would be there for him if he tested positive, that we could get through this together. But I knew better. Any show of support from me would only send him over the edge. He seemed to be on the brink already, so I backed off.

We were seated at a table for five in a private section of the hotel restaurant. It would be the perfect place to tell the other guys, away from prying eyes and listening ears, if only I could work up the courage to do so. I decided to wait until after we ate; I didn’t want to ruin anyone’s appetite.

As we were all looking over our menus, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I took it out and was surprised to see a text from Nick: “*R u gonna tell them?*”

I glanced up; he was glaring at me across the table, his phone in his hand. I texted him back: “*After lunch.*”

My phone buzzed again. “*U gonna tell them about me?*”

It hurt that he had to ask, that he didn’t trust me not to tell his secrets. The truth was, I would never tell the guys about what had happened with Nick. That was our private business. Unless he tested positive, too, they didn’t need to know, and if he did... well, then it would be up to him. Either way, it wasn’t my place.

I started to text him that, but Kevin’s hand suddenly clamped down on my wrist, startling me so badly, I dropped my phone on the table. “C’mon, fellas, let’s put the phones away at the table, huh?” he said. “You too, Nick.”

I snatched my phone off the table before Kevin could see my messages and slipped it back into the safety of my pocket.

“Sure thing, *Dad*,” Nick said with a heavy sigh, rolling his eyes at Kevin. He grudgingly put his phone away, too, and as he did, he gave me a significant glance, his eyes boring into mine.

I shook my head a fraction of an inch, hoping he’d get the message. *No, Nick. I would never tell them about you.*

The corners of his lips jerked upward in a flicker of a smile. Message received. The smile was gone as quickly as it had come, but still, Nick looked relieved, like at least one weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

Lunch was a long and agonizing affair. I didn’t have much of an appetite; I hadn’t for days. Across the table, Nick, too, just picked at his meal. If Kevin, Brian, or AJ noticed, they didn’t comment on it. They were too busy talking about their kids, which were often the topic of conversation among us these days. Kids were the one thing we had in common, outside of our careers. As the only Backstreet Boy who wasn’t yet a dad, Nick never had much to contribute and typically tuned out of these conversations, so no one seemed too concerned by how quiet he was being. On a normal day, Nick would try to change the subject at some point, but not that day. While the others talked, he just sat there in silence, staring down at the uneaten food on his plate.

“How’s Holden doing, Howie?” AJ asked, after he’d finished telling us about Ava’s first birthday party. Again, I was wracked with guilt – not because I had skipped out on Ava’s party, but because I was thinking about my own baby boy, who would turn one in two months. How many more birthdays would Holden be able to celebrate? Because of me, that number was probably much less than it would have been. I couldn’t blame Leigh for barely speaking to me; she had every right to be angry. As much as it hurt to admit it, my actions had shortened our son’s lifespan.

I gave a guarded answer to AJ’s question. “He’s... doing okay, under the circumstances. His lungs are still healing from the pneumonia, so he’s on oxygen to help his breathing for now, but it’s good to have him home from the hospital.”

“I’m sure it was hard to leave him to come out here,” Brian said sympathetically. “I still hate leaving Baylee, even though he’s a big boy now.” He grinned.

I smiled back and nodded, thinking, *You have no idea.*

After we finished eating, when our plates had been cleared away and the offer of dessert declined, I took a deep breath and said, “Hey guys, I have something to tell you.”

They all looked at me, except for Nick, who looked down at his lap.

I cleared my throat nervously. “Um... I wasn’t being completely honest with you before, when I talked about how Holden was doing. Holden’s not okay. He has AIDS.”

Their mouths all dropped open, even Nick's. He hadn't seen that one coming, hadn't let me stay long enough to explain everything. Now he was staring at me, his eyes wide with shock, his face stricken.

"Holy shit, dude, are you serious?" AJ gasped.

"Oh my god," Kevin murmured, when I nodded. "Howie..."

"I don't understand," said Brian, shaking his head slowly. "How could that happen? How could he have AIDS?"

Nick's eyes were wider than ever; he had realized what the others were about to hear from me. I took a shuddering breath, steeling myself for their reactions, and looked down at the table. "He got it from Leigh... and she got it from me."

"You have it too?" asked AJ. I looked up to find him staring at me in disbelief. His eyes were the saddest I'd ever seen, and there were so many deep creases etched across his forehead, he suddenly seemed to have aged a decade. It killed me to see that look on the face of my oldest friend.

I sighed. "I'm HIV-positive, yeah. We found out a couple of weeks ago, after Holden was diagnosed."

"But how-?" Brian started to ask again, then trailed off, still shaking his head. He'd probably just realized he didn't want to know, but I felt like I had to tell them the truth. Some version of the truth, anyway.

"It's all my fault. I... I had a one-night stand a few months ago and must've gotten myself infected then. I didn't know. What I did... it was so stupid, but honestly..." I glanced at Nick. "I didn't know."

After much discussion, we took the stage at the Ace of Spades music venue that night for what we'd decided would be the last time – for awhile, anyway. I didn't know what the future held for me as a performer, but I did know I needed to put my health and family first. The guys agreed. Although I gave them my blessing to go ahead with the other shows, they flat out refused to tour without me.

"We've made this mistake too many times before," Kevin said firmly. "We've seen what happens when we let the business become a bigger priority than our health..." He looked at Brian, who was nodding knowingly. "...or our families..." His eyes shifted to Nick, who was staring determinedly down at the floor. "...or our emotional well-being." His gaze landed on AJ, who still had that haunted look in his eyes. "When something bad happens or we suffer some kind of loss, we need to take the time to grieve and get our lives back together. Otherwise, we'll just end up falling apart later. We know this. We've been there, done that, right?"

We all nodded.

“This time is no different,” Kevin concluded. “I know we don’t wanna disappoint the fans, but our fans don’t wanna see a half-assed show, either. They wanna see all five of us onstage, happy and healthy. Until we can give them that, I say we take some time off.”

No one could argue with that logic.

There wasn’t time to back out of the Sacramento show without leaving the concert promoters in a lurch, so, being professionals, we played our set. It wasn’t our best, but I’m sure it wasn’t our worst either. Even Nick and I managed to set our differences aside and do what needed to be done. As they say in show business, “The show must go on,” so I buried everything deep down inside me before we took the stage, determined not to let it get to me.

The concert didn’t go off completely without a hitch, though. I made it through the first few songs with no trouble, but in the middle of “Show ‘Em (What You’re Made Of),” all my emotions – all the guilt, shame, and fear I’d been feeling for the last two weeks – came bubbling back to the surface. Usually it was Kevin who got choked up during his verse, but this time, as I listened to him sing, *“The gloves are off, ready to fight. Like a lion, I will survive. Will I? Will I?”* I felt my own throat start to close, as my eyes filled with tears. *“You gotta stand for somethin’, even if you stand alone. Don’t be afraid. It’s gonna be all right...”*

Blinking back the tears, I looked over at Nick, who was standing next to me. He was unusually sedate, staying in one place on the stage instead of bouncing all around to a beat only he seemed to be able to hear. We all made fun of him for his spazzy Muppet dance moves, but I missed them that night. Still, his voice sounded as strong as ever when he started to sing, *“You find the truth in a child’s eyes, where the only limit is the sky. Living proof, I see myself in you.”*

“When walls start to close in, your heart is frozen...” I struggled through the chorus, trying to regain my composure. I couldn’t look at Nick anymore; he only served as a reminder of how much I’d screwed up. My solo was next; I had to get it together.

But as soon as I started to sing the words, *“You find the truth in a child’s eyes...”* I thought of Holden, who had my eyes, and I fell apart.

AJ quickly came to my rescue, finishing the bridge as I turned around and walked to the back of the stage to wipe my eyes. I could hear the fans screaming in a show of support for me, but it didn’t make me feel any better. I knew that once the show was over and the videos made it online, they would start speculating as to what had sparked such an emotional reaction. They had been speculating ever since I’d skipped out on our appearances in Germany, leaving the guys to explain my absence in every interview they

did without me. The official excuse was that my son was sick, but no one knew the extent of it.

So that night, after the show, we released a statement.

“We regret to announce that we will be pulling out of the remainder of our scheduled holiday shows in support of our brother Howie, who is dealing with a serious illness in his family. We wish Howie and the whole Dorough family the best and thank our fans for their love, support, prayers, and understanding. We ask that everyone respect the Dorough family’s privacy during this difficult time.”

Of course, the rampant speculation didn’t stop after that; if anything, it escalated. The fans and media were alike in wondering what was wrong with my son, not realizing that when we referred to an illness in the family, we meant it literally. With the exception of James, it was my whole family that had it, not just Holden. But I wasn’t ready to make that announcement yet. Telling the guys was one thing. Telling the whole world was quite another.

Chapter 10

Nick

There was a time when I’d wished we would cancel all our gigs so I could go home and rest. But once we cancelled the holiday shows, I realized I would rather be on the road. Touring had always been an escape for me. When things were bad at home, I liked being able to hop on a bus and leave all my problems behind. Without the tour to distract me, all I could do was dwell on them.

I spent the next two days sitting at home, waiting for Dr. Stark’s office to call with my test results. Finally, on Friday, my phone rang. The number was unfamiliar, but I recognized the area code and answered right away. “Hello?”

“May I speak with Nickolas Carter, please?” asked a woman with a pleasant, perky phone voice. I knew she had to be from the doctor’s office; no one else would call me Nickolas.

“Speaking,” I said.

“Hi, Mr. Carter, this is Teresa from Dr. Stark’s office. I’m calling to tell you that we have your test results back from the lab. Dr. Stark would like you to come in at your earliest convenience so he can go over them with you.”

“Can you just tell me over the phone?” I asked. I wasn’t in the mood for bullshit.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “He said he would prefer to talk to you in person.”

I guess that’s when I knew the news wasn’t good. Why else would he insist on telling me in person, instead of over the phone? He had to know how busy I was. Hell, I was supposed to be in Chicago that day. But I sighed and said, “Fine. I can come this afternoon, if that works.”

“Yes, he’ll be available. Come in anytime.”

When I hung up, I went and found Lauren, who was finishing her workout on the beach out back. “Hey, babe, I gotta run out for a bit. Impromptu meeting with the movie producer. I’ll be back later.”

She looked up from her stretch in surprise. “Oh... okay. See ya later then,” she said, sounding unconcerned. She didn’t even change her pose.

I felt bad about lying to my fiancée, but I figured it would be better to find out exactly what I was dealing with first, before I told her the truth.

I drove myself to the doctor’s office, where I was met by Dr. Stark himself, wearing his white coat and a grim smile. “Nick, nice to see you again,” he said, shaking my hand. “Thanks for coming in on such short notice.”

“No problem,” I replied uneasily. “I ended up having the day off.”

“Let’s step into my office so we can go over your test results,” said the doctor, putting his hand on my shoulder. He steered me into a small room with bookshelves on one wall, framed diplomas on another, and a big desk in front of the window. I sat down in front of the desk, and Dr. Stark took a seat behind it. “So, I got back the results of your labwork,” he started, opening a file on the desk in front of him. “Unfortunately, your blood tested positive for HIV antibodies, which means you do have the virus.”

My heart sank. Somehow, I had already known what he was going to say from the moment he called me into his office, but it was still a shock to hear the actual words. My heart was hammering hard. My stomach felt sick. “You’re sure?” I said, my voice cracking. I was still clinging to the hope that maybe there had been a mistake, even though I knew that wasn’t the case.

Dr. Stark nodded. “When the initial test came back positive, we confirmed the results with a second test. Both showed that you are HIV-positive.”

I sat there in disbelief, letting the doctor’s words slowly sink in. This was the worst case scenario, the diagnosis I’d been dreading since Howie had told me he was infected, but even though I had been exposed, I hadn’t really expected to test positive. “*The odds of that happening are really, really small,*” Howie had told me. “*I’m sure you’re fine.*” Here I’d thought I was just taking extra precautions, getting tested so I’d know I wasn’t going to pass something on to Lauren, but now it turned out that I *wasn’t* fine. And

when I thought of all the times I'd had sex with my fiancée since the cruise, I felt even sicker. Unknowingly, I had put her at risk, too.

"What am I gonna tell Lauren?" I whispered, more to myself than to Dr. Stark, but of course he overheard.

"Your girlfriend?" he asked, sounding sympathetic.

"Fiancée."

"I'm sorry." Dr. Stark cleared his throat. "If you've engaged in any kind of unprotected sex since your exposure, she'll need to be tested. You're welcome to bring her here, or, if you'd like, I can refer you to an HIV specialist, someone who has more experience in treating people with HIV and AIDS."

I nodded. "Sure... that'd be great," I said hollowly.

"Unfortunately, Cedars-Sinai has cut funding for their HIV/AIDS program," said the doctor as he turned to his laptop and started typing something into it. "UCLA, on the other hand, continues to be on the cutting edge of AIDS research. I'm going to recommend a colleague of mine, Dr. Cynthia Usako. She works for the UCLA CARE Center, their AIDS clinic in Century City. Here's her contact information." He wrote down a name, address, and phone number onto the back of one of his business cards and passed it across the desk to me. "Just give that number a call to schedule an appointment for you and your fiancée. I'll get you a copy of your test results to take with you to the appointment."

"Thanks." I took the card and tucked it into my wallet, still wondering what I would say to Lauren when I got home.

I didn't have to wonder long. When I walked in the door, Lauren took one look at my face and knew something was wrong. "Hey, you... what happened?" she asked, her forehead creased with concern.

I've always been a shitty actor. I knew I couldn't hide the truth from her any longer. "I gotta tell you something, babe," I muttered, taking her by the hand. "Let's go sit down."

I led her into the living room, where we sat side by side on the couch. But as soon as I opened my mouth to speak, I realized I had no idea where to begin.

Lauren was getting impatient. "Nick? What is it?" She squeezed my hand. "Say something, baby; you're scaring me."

I took a deep breath and turned to face her. “Baby, I wasn’t being honest with you before, when I told you I was meeting with my producer.”

She frowned. “Why? Where were you really?”

“I was...” I started to tell her, then changed my mind and decided to start from the beginning. Shaking my head, I said, “Before I tell you, there’s some other stuff you should know. Stuff I’ve been keeping from you for awhile now.”

Her eyes widened, as the furrow in her brow deepened.

I went on, “Something weird happened on the cruise. I didn’t wanna talk about it, but... you have a right to know. On the second night, Howie and I got really drunk at the deck party, and...”

“Wait.” Lauren pulled her hand out of mine and held it up to stop me. “You know how you guys always say, ‘What happens on the Backstreet Cruise stays on the Backstreet Cruise?’ If you’re about to tell me you and Howie had some kind of sex orgy with a bunch of groupies on that boat, or something like that, just stop. I don’t wanna know.”

I swallowed hard. My mouth felt so dry, but my palms were sweating like crazy. I wiped them off on my pants. “Lauren, I swear, I didn’t hook up with some other woman.” I paused there, closed my eyes, took another deep breath, and then let the truth come pouring out. “I hooked up with Howie.”

I heard her sharp intake of breath and opened my eyes to find her staring at me with a strange look on her face, a look of total disbelief. I could tell I’d blown her mind, even before she exclaimed, “What?!”

It was so embarrassing to have to tell her the whole story. “Like I said, we were really, *really* drunk. I could hardly stand anymore, so he walked me back to my cabin, and... I don’t really know how it happened or what all went down, but one thing led to another, and we woke up in bed together.”

Lauren was still staring at me in dismay, her mouth hanging half open. I could tell there were a lot of things she wanted to say, but all she asked was, “Why are you telling me this now?”

I sighed. “When Howie found out he was HIV-positive, he told me I should get tested... so I did. Baby, I’m sorry, but I tested positive.”

Lauren’s face fell, as her eyes filled with tears. “Oh my god,” she gasped softly, and then she leaned forward and flung her arms around me. As she held me, I’m not sure she was thinking about what this could mean for her. Her initial reaction was all about me. But inevitably, it must have occurred to her that if I was infected, she might be infected, too. I saw the look on her face as she pulled away, and I knew.

“You wanted to know where I was.” My voice shook as I looked into her scared eyes, which were still swimming with tears. Struggling to keep my composure, I continued, “I was at the doctor’s office, getting my test results. He said you should get tested, too.”

Lauren closed her eyes, and although I could tell she was trying to collect herself, I saw the tears sliding out from under her long lashes, leaving trails of mascara in their tracks. As I watched her, waiting nervously for her response, I thought about how I had treated Howie when he told me to get tested. But Lauren’s reaction was totally different from mine. She didn’t fly off the handle, didn’t scream or shout or try to throw me out of the house. All she did, when she finally opened her eyes, was reach for my hand again. Lacing her fingers through mine, she gave it a reassuring squeeze and said, “It’s okay, Nick. Whatever happens, we’re gonna get through this. Together. All right?”

I nodded, my heart lifting a little. “Together,” I repeated, relieved that she seemed willing to stand by me, despite what I had done. But the truth was, I hoped we wouldn’t have to go through this together. This was my battle to fight. I didn’t want it to become hers, too.

Chapter 11

Howie

The day after our show in Sacramento, I flew home to Florida. Our head of security, Q, had booked the same flight, along with his brother, Mike, who was also one of our bodyguards. As we sat at our gate at the airport, waiting for our boarding call, I said to Q, “I bet you’re glad to be going home, huh?”

Q’s wife, Angela, was almost five months pregnant with their first daughter. I could tell he was thinking of them when he smiled and shook his head. “Man, it’s always good to get to spend some extra time at home, but not under circumstances like these. You know I’d rather be out on the road with you right now.”

I nodded. “Me too.”

Q clamped his hand down on my shoulder. “That’s a rough hand you been dealt, but I know you, D. You’re gonna get through this. Backstreet be back before ya know it!” He gave me a cheesy grin, and I couldn’t help but smile back. That was Q, always smiling, always saying something to make a stressful situation more bearable. His optimism was infectious, and by the time we boarded the plane, I felt better. When I got home, I was going to do whatever it took to get my life – and me and my wife – back together. I was not going to let this virus ruin my life, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to let it rip apart my family.

After we'd landed in Orlando and picked up our luggage, I turned to say goodbye to Q and Mike. "I hope you'll learn from my mistakes," I told Q, as he gave me a hug. "Never cheat on your wife, and never take her – or your kids – for granted."

"You don't gotta tell me twice, dawg," he replied. "I hope you and Leigh can work things out. Y'all are too good together to call it quits."

"Thanks, man."

"Holla if you need anything. You know I'm only a few miles away," said Q, grinning, as he hoisted his heavy backpack over one shoulder. I watched him walk away, wheeling his bags behind him, unaware that it would be the last time I ever saw him.

I hadn't been able to get a hold of Leigh before I left Sacramento, so my brother gave me a ride home from the airport. When I walked into my condo, I was surprised to find it dark and quiet.

"Boys?" I called. "Daddy's home!" I listened for the familiar sound of little feet running across the floor; James was always right there to greet me whenever I came home from a trip or tour. But all I heard was the sound of my own voice, echoing through the empty house.

Frowning, I called Leigh's cell phone, but of course, she didn't answer. I was disappointed, but didn't see any reason to worry. When I checked the garage and found Leigh's SUV gone, I told myself she was out running errands with the kids or spending time with her friends. It was good that she was getting out of the house, I thought, after spending so many days holed up inside it with Holden.

But when the boys' bedtime came and went with still no word from my wife, I was definitely beginning to worry. I called my mother, wondering if Leigh had dropped James and Holden off at her house. "No, Howie," she said, sounding concerned. "I haven't seen them all week. Why, where is Leigh?"

"That's what I want to know," I replied, my heart starting to race with panic. "I've gotta go, Mom; I'll call you back when I find out."

I tried Leigh's number again next, but it went straight to voicemail. This time, I left a message. "Leigh, it's me. I just got home from Sacramento to find the condo empty. Where are you guys? Call me back, please; I'm starting to get worried here."

My phone rang a few minutes later. When I saw my wife's name, I sighed with relief. "Hey, honey," I answered the phone. "I'm so glad you called back. I've been worried sick about you guys. Where are you?"

"We're fine," she said shortly. "We're with my folks."

I frowned. “In New Jersey?”

“Uh-huh. Since we missed Thanksgiving with them, I thought it’d be nice to bring the boys up here for awhile.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t believe she would take our sons on a trip without telling me, but I decided not to say anything about it then. I didn’t want her to hang up. “How did Holden do on the flight?” I asked instead, wondering if she would read between the lines and realize I wasn’t happy with her putting our baby on a plane a week after he got out of the hospital.

“We didn’t fly. We drove.”

“You *drove*?” I asked incredulously. “All the way to Jersey??”

“Well, not all in one day,” she said, sounding exasperated. “We left on Saturday and made it here by Monday night. Both boys did fine in the car. I figured it would be healthier for Holden this way – fewer germs than on a plane.”

“I guess that’s true,” I admitted. “So... do you want me to meet you there? I could fly up tomorrow...”

There was a long pause. A part of me knew what was coming, but it still felt like the wind had been knocked out of me when I heard her say, “No, Howie.” Her voice was quiet and almost eerily calm. She had known this was coming, too, had probably already planned out what she was going to say when I asked. “I don’t want you to fly up here. I think it would be better if we spent some time apart.”

I sank down onto our bed, the phone shaking in my hand as I looked around the room. For the first time, I noticed that the top of her dresser had been cleared off considerably. Her jewelry box and some of her knick-knacks were still there, but all the little lotions, perfume bottles, and picture frames that usually lined the dresser were gone. I got up and walked over to it, opening the top drawer. It was empty.

All the air rushed out of my lungs, like a balloon being deflated, and for a second, I could hardly breathe. “H-how much time?” I asked shakily, gripping the edge of the dresser to keep my knees from buckling.

“I don’t know, Howie.”

It was an honest answer, as far as I could tell, but it didn’t make me feel any better. “Well, we don’t have all the time in the world, you know,” I said, somewhat sarcastically. “What about Holden? He needs medical treatment – hell, we all do! The sooner we get started, the better.”

“I know.”

“I saw a doctor out in L.A.,” I continued quickly, “an HIV specialist. I did some research; he’s one of the best in the country. He could help all three of us. We just need to go back to L.A.”

“I don’t want to go to L.A.,” said Leigh quietly. “I researched, too, Howie, and I found a pediatric AIDS specialist in Philadelphia, only an hour from here. Holden has an appointment with her next week.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll find a doctor up here, too. Don’t worry about me.”

“But I do! I do worry about you. We’re in this together, Leigh,” I insisted. I knew I was starting to sound desperate, but I didn’t care. “We need each other.”

“What I need,” said Leigh, slowly and deliberately, “is time away from you. Time to think. Time to figure out where my life is going. I don’t want anything else from you, Howie; all I’m asking is that you give me that time. I think you owe me that much, don’t you?”

I sighed, knowing she had me beat. What else could I say? She was right. I did owe her that and so much more.

“Alright,” I whispered, wiping a streak of dust off the dresser where one of her picture frames had been. Closing my eyes, I could still see the photo in the brushed gold frame. It was my favorite from the shoot we did for *People* magazine after Holden was born, the one of Leigh and I looking lovingly down at our son, who fit perfectly in my two hands. I wondered if it was a good sign that she had taken it with her. “I want what’s best for you and Holden,” I went on, “so if time’s what you need right now, then take it. Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you, Howie,” said Leigh, and she hung up.

The next day, I got a text from Nick. It was two words long.

“I’m positive.”

When I read those words, my heart nearly stopped. I stared down at my phone in disbelief, mouthing the words to make sure I hadn’t read them wrong. “No way,” I whispered, shaking my head. How could Nick have HIV? The odds of him contracting it that way were so slim. Everything I’d read said so. The main reason I’d encouraged him to get tested was to ease my own mind, to make sure I hadn’t spread the virus to someone else. I had never really expected Nick to test positive.

It made me wonder, what if I wasn't the one who'd infected him? What if he already had it, even before the cruise? What if *he* had given it to *me*?

I stopped and speculated about that for a few minutes, but I soon realized there was no way it could be true. The timeline just didn't add up. If I had contracted HIV on the cruise, Holden couldn't have had it for more than three weeks before he was hospitalized with pneumonia. That simply wasn't enough time for the virus to wipe out his immune system to the point of making him sick. It had to have spread through my family long before then.

That meant if Nick really was HIV-positive, I had infected him, and not the other way around.

"Oh, god," I groaned, still holding onto my phone so tightly, I'm surprised the case didn't crack. Those two words seemed to stare back at me like a pair of accusatory eyes. "Please, no."

I kept waiting for a follow-up text: "*Just kidding!*" But my phone stayed eerily silent.

So I called him.

My heart hammered in my ears as I listened to his phone ring. I could hardly breathe. Several times, I almost lost my nerve and hung up, but I forced myself to stay on the line. Still, a part of me was hoping he wouldn't pick up. I wasn't sure what I was going to say if he did, but I knew I had to say *something*.

The phone rang several times, and just when I thought it would go to his voicemail, as it had so many times before, there was a pause... and then Nick's voice croaked, "What do you want?"

I could tell he had been crying, and my heart ached for him. He, of all people, didn't deserve this. Not that any of us did, but Nick had been through enough in the last decade. And just when he'd finally gotten his life together, I'd gone and shattered it.

"Nick... I'm so sorry."

The words weren't enough, not nearly enough to make up for what I had done, but in that moment, I didn't know what else to say.

"You should be," he spat. The hatred I heard in his voice stung, but I knew I had it coming. "What the fuck am I gonna do now? What the fuck am I gonna tell my girlfriend?!" His voice rose with panic on the last word.

He hadn't told anyone else yet, I realized. I took it as a good sign that he'd texted me first. Maybe he didn't totally hate me. There must have been some part of him that still saw me as an older brother if he was seeking my advice. Then again, I was the only one who knew what he was going through. Who else was he going to ask?

“I don’t know, Nick. I’d say tell her the truth, but what do I know? My wife left me.”

I’m not sure what I expected from him – sympathy, maybe? What I got instead was scorn. “Well, what the fuck did you expect, Howie? You cheated on her – with a *dude* – and then infected her with HIV. Of course she left you. Lauren’ll probably leave me, too, when she finds out.”

“Aww, Nicky... you don’t know that,” I said, but a selfish part of me half-hoped he was right. I didn’t want him to be unhappy, but with Lauren out of the picture, maybe he would open his eyes and see me in a different light. Maybe he would finally realize that he had feelings for me, too, feelings that went beyond friendship.

“I told you not to call me that,” Nick growled. He was angry, but over time, his anger would fade. One day, I hoped, he would find it in his heart to forgive me for what I’d done.

In the meantime, I would be the best friend I could. I knew he needed me, even if he didn’t realize it yet. We were in the same boat now, Nick and I. It would be better to embark on this journey together than travel it alone. I guess that’s when I decided to go back to L.A. by myself.

“Whatever happens, I’m here for you, Nick,” I said, ignoring his angry tone. “You’re gonna get through this. We both are.”

I don’t know if he heard me or not. The silence on his end told me he’d already hung up the phone.

Chapter 12

Nick

I don’t know why I gave Howie such a hard time. Sure, I was pissed at him for what he had done, but when it came down to it, we were in the same situation. We’d both been unfaithful, gotten infected with HIV, and potentially passed it on to our partners. When I thought about it that way, I realized I was no better than him. But that still didn’t stop me from hating him.

When I saw him outside the AIDS clinic in Century City, I wanted to hit him. But that would happen later. As it was, I almost didn’t recognize him. It was Lauren who elbowed me in the ribs and whispered, “Is that Howie?”

I stared at the small man who was coming out of the clinic as we were walking in. It was Howie alright, but he was wearing a baseball cap pulled down low over his forehead,

which was weird because Howie hardly ever wore hats. Normally he cared too much about his hair, but I guess he didn't want to be recognized. I had considered wearing a cap myself for the same reason, but changed my mind when I realized it made me look like Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia*. I just hoped we wouldn't run into any paparazzi. Running into Howie was somehow even more awkward.

I probably would have just walked past him without saying a word, but Lauren was too nice to do that. She cleared her throat and said, "Hi, Howie."

Howie's head snapped up, his eyes widening under the brim of his hat when he saw us. "Hey!" he exclaimed, his voice going higher than usual as he looked from Lauren to me. I could tell he felt just as uncomfortable as I did, but it didn't take away any of my anger.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him, none too nicely. "I thought you were in Florida."

"I came back here to start treatment," he said. "This clinic is supposed to be one of the best in the country. But I guess you already knew that, or you wouldn't be here."

"I got a referral," I replied, through gritted teeth.

He nodded. "How are you guys doing?" he asked, glancing at Lauren again. "Have you... gotten tested yet?"

She shook her head. "Today."

"Oh." He gave her a grim smile. "Well, I hope everything turns out okay. Let me know, will you?" He looked back at me.

"Come on, Lo, we don't wanna be late," I said loudly and put my arm around Lauren, steering her away from him.

"That was rude, Nick!" she hissed in my ear, as I hurried into the clinic, but I didn't care. I had bigger worries on my mind, like whether or not I'd given my girlfriend HIV.

We met with the specialist, Dr. Usako, who drew blood from both of us and sent the samples off to the lab for a battery of tests. A few days later, we were called back to the clinic to go over the results.

"Let's start with Lauren," said Dr. Usako, as we sat down in her office on that second visit. "Fortunately, there is good news. The HIV test came back negative."

I let out the breath I'd been holding in a huge sigh of relief. Lauren and I had been holding hands as we waited to hear the results, but when I heard the word "negative," I let go and threw my arms around her instead. Holding her close, I could feel her body go limp against mine, as all the tension she'd been feeling for the past few days finally

left her. She had stayed strong and held it together, for my sake, but I could tell now how scared she'd been.

"Thank god," I whispered, stroking her hair. "Thank god."

Lauren couldn't even speak. When she finally straightened up in her seat, there were tears in her eyes. Thinking they were happy tears, I smiled at her and squeezed her hand, but she just shook her head and mouthed, *I'm sorry*.

My smile faded into a frown. "What are you sorry about? We just dodged a bullet, babe. *I'm* the one who should be sorry for putting you in this position in the first place. God, I don't know what I would've done if you'd tested positive." I shook my head, trying to imagine my reaction if we had received different news. "I'd wanna blow my fuckin' brains out. I don't know how Howie lives with himself, after what he did to his family."

"Don't say that," Lauren said softly. She was right. Those words would come back to haunt me.

"This is very good news, but we're not quite out of the woods yet," Dr. Usako interjected. I'd almost forgotten she was still sitting across the desk from us. "Although the preliminary test was negative, it can take up to three months for a person who's recently acquired the virus to build up enough antibodies in the blood to test positive. Just to be on the safe side, I would suggest getting tested again at the end of February. In the meantime, make sure you use a condom during intercourse to lower the risk of transmission."

We both nodded – not that we needed that last piece of advice. We hadn't had sex since finding out I was positive, and I wasn't sure when we would again. The threat of HIV was a major turn-off.

"Now let's talk about you, Nick," Dr. Usako continued. "As you know, we ran a battery of tests to determine a baseline for where we're starting before treatment. We wanted to see how far the virus has progressed and predict how your body will respond to different drug regimens. One of the tests we'll do each time you visit is a CD4 count, which measures the health of your immune system by counting the number of T-cells in your blood. T-cells are a type of white blood cell that help fight bacteria and viruses by triggering your body's immune response. Generally, the higher the number, the better. A normal CD4 count is between 500 and 1,500 cells per cubic millimeter of blood. Your count was 470."

"That's not too far off, then," Lauren put in hopefully, and I nodded. I was struggling to follow everything the doctor was saying, but I did understand basic math.

"No, it's not. That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that your viral load, which measures the level of HIV in your blood, is very high, over 100,000."

I swallowed hard, hating the sound of that. "What's normal?" I wanted to know.

“Well, ‘normal’ would be nothing. An HIV-negative person would have no viral load.”

“Oh.” *Duh*, I thought, feeling stupid.

“Our best hope with treatment would be to get your viral load down to an undetectable number, less than 50.”

“I have a ways to go then, huh?” I said, licking my lips. My mouth felt so dry.

“You do, but it’s typical to have a high viral load shortly after the initial infection, when your immune system is still trying to figure out how to respond to the virus. Once it does, that number will drop,” Dr. Usako replied, her voice reassuring. “If you choose to start treatment, it should drop considerably.”

“I have a choice?”

The doctor smiled. “Of course, you have a choice. In fact, some experts recommend waiting until your CD4 count is below 350 to start treatment. Others feel it’s best to start treatment as soon as possible after infection to keep the CD4 count from dropping that low. HIV drug regimens can cause some serious long-term side effects, but so does advanced HIV infection and AIDS, so it’s all about finding a balance between keeping you healthy and preventing side effects.”

“What would you recommend?” Lauren asked.

“Given Nick’s lab results and medical history, that’s a loaded question,” said Dr. Usako. Looking at me, she elaborated, “Your history of substance abuse, along with your previous diagnosis of dilated cardiomyopathy, will make finding the right medication regimen a more complicated process. HIV drugs are notorious for damaging the liver, and your liver enzymes are already slightly elevated, likely from alcohol abuse.”

Her tone wasn’t judgmental, but still, I swallowed hard, feeling like a screw-up.

“On the other hand,” the doctor went on, “HIV itself can cause or, in your case, worsen cardiomyopathy and other heart conditions. There are many other illnesses associated with advanced HIV and AIDS, including opportunistic infections and certain kinds of cancer. Given your high viral load, I would suggest starting treatment now. If you agree, we’ll start you on a modified regimen of medications that have fewer drug interactions and serious side effects than some of the standard regimens. We’ll monitor your viral load and CD4 count, as well as your liver function, to see how well the medication is working.”

My heart was pounding, and my head was swimming, but somehow, I managed to nod and say, “Okay.”

Dr. Usako looked at me seriously. “I must warn you,” she added, “if you do choose to start treatment, you should expect to stay on it, probably for the rest of your life. Stopping treatment will make you sick. It’s very important that you stick to the regimen and take your prescribed dosage of medication daily.”

“I can do that,” I said.

“I’ll make sure he does,” Lauren agreed, squeezing my hand. I gave her a grateful smile, glad she seemed willing to stick with me, at least for now. In the back of my mind, I wondered what would happen now that she was negative and I was positive, but I tried not worry about it then. There was too much else to think about.

Dr. Usako wrote me a prescription for three different drugs, explaining what each one did and how often I should take it. Two of the pills only needed to be taken once a day, but the other had to be taken twice daily, twelve hours apart. “When you go to the pharmacy to fill these prescriptions, pick up a pill organizer with an AM and PM compartment for each day of the week,” she suggested. “You should take your medication at the same time every day. Set your cell phone alarm to remind you until it becomes part of your daily routine.”

That was going to be tough, I thought, since my schedule varied depending on whether or not I was working, but the doctor’s suggestions were good ones. Once Lauren and I left her office, we went straight to the pharmacy and brought home a pill container that matched her description, along with a bulging paper bag filled with my prescriptions. When we got home, we laid everything out across the dining room table, and Lauren helped me fill the pill organizer with a week’s worth of my medication. It was only four pills a day, but for a guy who wasn’t used to taking anything except vitamins, it sure looked like a lot. I wasn’t looking forward to a lifetime of taking medicine, but if it kept me healthy, it would be worth the hassle.

I wondered briefly about Howie and whether his meds were the same as mine, but I wasn’t about to call and ask him. Instead, I sent him a one-line text: “*Lauren tested negative.*”

He responded right away with, “*Oh thank goodness! That’s great! Tell her I’m happy for her,*” to which I did not reply.

That night, as I lay in bed next to Lauren, thinking back over our appointment at the clinic, I remembered her strange reaction to finding out she was negative. “Hey, babe?” I said suddenly, my voice breaking the silence of our bedroom. “What did you mean earlier, when you said you were sorry?”

“Huh?” asked Lauren sleepily.

“At the doctor’s office. After you found out your test results, you started crying, and you mouthed ‘I’m sorry.’ What was that about?”

Lauren rolled over to face me. “Really, Nick? I have to spell it out for you? I’m sorry that you’re sick and I’m not. Not that I wanted to test positive,” she added quickly, before I could call her crazy. “Obviously, I’m relieved I didn’t. But somehow, it just seems like it would be easier if I did.”

I shook my head. “Why would you say that? I would never wish this on you.”

“I know. I don’t want you to be sick, either. It’s so unfair. How could you have gotten it from that *one* time, when I’ve slept with you so many times since then and still haven’t? I just don’t understand.”

“Me neither,” I said bitterly, hating Howie some more, “but I’m glad you got lucky. I guess I’m just the unlucky one.”

She sighed. “Well, the doctor said I’m not out of the woods yet, remember? I could still have it.”

“I think you’re gonna be just fine, babe,” I said firmly. I wrapped my arm around her and held her close. “Try not to worry about it. And don’t worry about me, either. All those meds are gonna do their job, and I’m gonna be all right. And who knows: maybe in a few years, they’ll find a cure for this, and we’ll all be fine.”

“I hope so,” she whispered, hugging me tightly. “I love you too much to lose you. I want us to grow old together.”

“Me too,” I murmured back, but a lump had risen in my throat, making it hard to speak. Even before I had proposed to her, I’d envisioned us growing old together – in fact, that was what finally made me want to pop the question. But now I realized I had taken our future together for granted. With my diagnosis, there was no guarantee we’d get to enjoy a long life together. “Until death do us part...” It might happen a lot sooner than either of us would have anticipated when we got engaged.

Lauren was right. It wasn’t fair. Not to me, and definitely not to her.

I hated Howie even more for messing up my marriage before it had begun.

Chapter 13

Howie

On December 8, 2007, I married the only woman I ever loved. On December 8, 2013, I celebrated our anniversary alone.

I tried to remind myself that I would have spent the day away from my wife, anyway, since I was supposed to have been playing a show in St. Louis that night. But I couldn't forget the real reason we were apart, so it didn't make me feel any better.

Although I had a huge bouquet of flowers delivered to her parents' house in New Jersey, I didn't hear from Leigh at all. The only person I talked to all day was Kevin, whom I'd called to see if he could pick me up from the airport the following afternoon.

"Sure, man," he agreed. "I'll bring Kristin's SUV. It's big enough for everybody and has the car seats in the back for both boys."

"No boys," I said quietly. "Just me."

"Oh." I could hear the awkwardness in Kevin's voice. "Well, in that case, I'll bring the Beamer."

I forced myself to chuckle. "Sounds good to me, man. Thanks."

The next day, I flew back to L.A. Kevin picked me up, as planned, and crammed my luggage into the back of his BMW. "So... just you this time, huh?" he asked, as he got onto the 405.

I sighed. "Yeah. Leigh and the boys are staying with her family in New Jersey."

He glanced over at me, his eyebrows raised. "For how long?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"That's rough, man," said Kevin, shaking his head. "I'm sorry."

It was so nice to have someone to talk to that I actually considered telling him everything, the whole truth, right then and there. Kevin and I had always had a certain camaraderie that came with being the oldest ones in the group. We also had a lot in common, with similar families and lifestyles. I thought he might be the most sympathetic to my situation.

But then I heard Nick's voice in my head, going, *"Well, what the fuck did you expect, Howie? You cheated on her – with a dude – and then infected her with HIV. Of course she left you."*

I knew Kevin would never be so cruel, but I couldn't help but worry that he would judge me if he knew. Especially if he knew about Nick. So all I said instead was, "Thanks."

Kevin must have sensed there was more on my mind that I wasn't saying, though, because after a few seconds of silence, he said, "Hey, why don't you come over for dinner tonight? I don't know what Kristin has planned, but we could always throw something on the grill, kick back with a few beers, and just catch up. Whaddya say?"

“Sounds great,” I said gratefully, before I could stop to reconsider. It had only been a few days, but I felt desperate for human contact, something besides being poked and prodded through sterile gloves at the doctor’s office. Hanging out with Kevin that evening was just what the doctor ordered, I decided. Hopefully it would help take my mind off my doctor’s appointment the next day.

Kevin drove us back to his house, where Kristin and the kids were waiting. “Hi, Howie,” Kristin greeted me, giving me a big hug. “How are you doing?”

“Not great, but okay,” I answered honestly.

She nodded, giving me a sympathetic smile. “And how’s Holden?”

“He’s doing well, from what I hear. I haven’t actually seen him in over a week. He’s in New Jersey with James and Leigh, visiting her family.”

“Oh,” said Kristin, her smile fading. I saw a significant glance pass between her and Kevin.

I cleared my throat, eager to change the subject. “Gosh, he’s getting big!” I exclaimed, looking past Kristin to baby Maxwell, who was sitting behind her on a blanket. “Sitting up by himself already!”

“He’s strong!” Kristin agreed, smiling again. “Gonna be an athlete, like his dad. I can already tell.” She winked at Kevin, who was grinning broadly with pride.

“Hey Howie, watch what I can do!” shouted six-year-old Mason, running into the living room to show me how he could do a handstand off the arm of the couch.

“Mason, how many times have I told you not to do that in the house?” Kristin scolded him, but I could tell she wasn’t really mad. Shaking her head, she gave me an exasperated smile. “He treats the furniture like his own personal jungle gym.”

“Now *he* reminds me more of his big cousin Brian,” I said to Kevin, who nodded emphatically.

“Ohh, yeah.”

We went out to the back yard, which had a beautiful view of the ocean. Kevin and I sat by the pool and watched Mason run around, while Kristin plopped down in the grass to play with Max. It was a pleasant scene, but it made me miss my own wife and kids so much. We should have been at home together, watching our own boys play on the beach behind our condo in Florida, not on opposite coasts of the country, barely speaking to each other. Despite my feelings for Nick, I still loved Leigh. I loved the life we’d built together, and I hated myself for letting it fall apart.

Once the sun started to sink in the sky, it got too cold for the kids to stay out, so Kristin took them both inside to start dinner. Kevin fired up the grill, and we both scooted our chairs closer to it, grateful for the warmth. While the grill was heating up, we sat and watched the sun set over the water.

“So how are you doing, *really*?” Kevin asked me in a low voice, as he looked out over the ocean.

I sighed. “Horrible,” I admitted. “I feel so guilty. I had a great life, and I fucked it all up. How could I have let that happen? How could I do that to my wife and kids? Especially Holden. That’s what kills me the most.”

He glanced over at me, his green eyes sympathetic. “I can’t imagine how hard this must be for you. I know the guilt must be getting to you, but you can’t blame yourself for everything. You made a mistake... the same mistake a lot of other men have made. I’m not saying it’s okay, but it happens, you know? We’re guys. We don’t always think with the head that God put on our shoulders. How could you have known that one lapse in judgment would lead to all this? That’s not your fault; that’s just bad luck, man.”

I nodded. He had a point, but still, I was pretty sure I would never stop hating myself for hurting my wife and son.

“So you’re starting treatment soon?” he asked.

I nodded again. “I had some tests run last week, and I’ve got an appointment tomorrow to go over the results and talk about my options.”

“You want me to go with you? Sometimes it helps to have somebody else there to take in all the information.”

I considered his offer for a few seconds before I shook my head. “Thanks, but I think I’m good. I appreciate it, though.” I loved Kevin, but this was personal. It just seemed like the kind of thing I should do on my own.

It was a good thing Kevin didn’t come, considering who I saw as I was coming out of the clinic the next day. None other than Nick Carter. Lauren was with him, which meant he must have told her the truth, but as far as I knew, he hadn’t told anyone else yet, and if Kevin had been there, we both would have had some awkward questions to answer.

Luckily, I was alone when I heard Lauren say, “Hi, Howie.”

My mind was still on CD4 counts and viral loads and triple cocktails and everything else Dr. Iverson had talked about during my appointment, so you can imagine my surprise when I looked up and saw her and Nick coming toward me. “Hey!” I squeaked.

Nick looked at me like I was a leper. “What are you doing here? I thought you were in Florida.”

I cleared my throat uncomfortably. “I came back here to start treatment. This clinic is supposed to be one of the best in the country. But I guess you already knew that,” I added, giving him a pointed look, “or you wouldn’t be here.”

The muscles in his face tightened as he clenched his jaw. “I got a referral,” he said stiffly.

I nodded, wondering if he had the same doctor I did. What were the odds of that happening? Probably greater than the odds of me giving him HIV, but that had happened. Dr. Iverson hadn’t mentioned anything about seeing a second Backstreet Boy after me, but I guess he couldn’t – patient confidentiality rules and all. “How are you guys doing?” I asked, to see if Nick would elaborate. When he didn’t, I looked at Lauren, who was standing awkwardly at his side. She hadn’t left him yet, which made me wonder about her status. “Have you... gotten tested yet?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “Today.”

“Oh.” I could tell she was nervous and tried to give her a reassuring smile. “Well, I hope everything turns out okay. Let me know, will you?” I added, looking at Nick.

Nick ignored me. “Come on, Lo, we don’t wanna be late,” he said, slinging his arm around Lauren. Then he brushed right by me, as if I wasn’t even there. I watched them walk away with a heavy feeling in my heart. Lauren gave me an apologetic look over her shoulder, then whispered something into Nick’s ear as they went into the clinic. I could tell they were talking about me, and I tried not to care, but it hurt worse than the needles that awaited them inside.

Days later, though, I did get a text from Nick.

“Lauren tested negative.”

Finally, it seemed, someone had escaped the deadly curse that seemed to have claimed the rest of our lives. I took it as a good sign that things were about to get better. It wasn’t like they could get much worse. But I was wrong. Five days before Christmas, I found out one of life’s cruel truths: things can always get worse.

Chapter 14

Nick

If the drugs Dr. Usako had prescribed were the ones with the fewest side effects, I didn’t want to know what the others were like. Less than a week into my medication regimen, I was already sick to death of taking pills, then trying not to puke them up again.

I had spent the last few days going between my bed and the bathroom with what felt like the worst stomach flu of my life. I was nauseous all the time, and although Lauren kept trying to get me to eat, I had no appetite. “C’mon, baby, you’ve gotta get something down,” she insisted on the fourth day, bringing me a bowl of broth on a tray, but I stubbornly refused. I had realized that whatever I put in my body was just going to come right out again – probably out of both ends.

I wondered if Howie was having such a rough time with his meds, but pride kept me from calling to ask. Thanks to him, I’d gone from playing two hour shows in front of an adoring crowd every night to trying not to shit my bed. This sucked. Really sucked. I pushed the tray away and rolled over, burying my face in my pillow. In the last day or so, I’d started feeling dizzy, and even lying down with my eyes closed, it felt like the room was spinning.

Lauren sat down on the edge of the bed and put her hand lightly on my shoulder. “Nick, please,” she whispered. “You’re going to get dehydrated. At least drink some water?”

I heard the crackle of hollow plastic as she tried to hand me a bottle of water, but I just groaned, hoping she’d get the hint and go away. I loved her, but I wanted her to leave me alone.

She didn’t. “That’s it. I’m calling the doctor,” she said, standing up suddenly.

I rolled over again, ignoring the rocking of the bed. “No, wait,” I protested. “I’ll try to eat some soup.”

She shook her head. “This has gone on long enough. She’s gonna have to change something with your meds. You can’t keep living this way; it’s going to kill you!”

I sighed, but I was in no position to argue. I barely had the strength to get out of bed. Lauren brought her phone into the bedroom, and I lay there and listened helplessly as she talked to my doctor.

“Hi, this is Lauren Kitt, Nick Carter’s fiancée. I’m calling because he’s having a horrible time with the side effects of those medications you prescribed. He’s been taking them every day like you told him, but he’s been so nauseous, he can hardly keep anything down.” She gave me a look of concern, clutching the phone tightly to her ear. “It’s gotten to the point where he won’t eat or drink, and he barely gets out of bed. I’m really worried about him.”

“I told you not to worry about me, babe,” I mumbled, but Lauren shook her head and put a finger to her lips, listening hard.

After a long pause, she said, “Okay. I’ll do that. Thanks, Dr. Usako.”

“Do what?” I asked, when she got off the phone.

“Take you to the ER. She said it sounds like you’re dehydrated and to go there so they can give you fluids and a prescription of something called Compazine that’s supposed to help with your nausea. She’s going to call ahead to let them know we’re coming.” Lauren gave me a look, as if challenging me to try and argue against that.

I sighed, knowing I had no choice. I needed to go. It was the only way I would feel better. “Alright, fine,” I grumbled, struggling to sit up. I was so weak, Lauren had to help me get out of bed and put on a pair of sweatpants, which was humiliating. When we finally made it out to the car, she drove, while I sat pathetically in the passenger seat, trying not to puke.

In the emergency room, I was poked and prodded. As soon as I told the nurse who took my medical history that I was HIV-positive, she hooked me up to a monitor that measured my heart rate and blood pressure and all that stuff. It seemed a bit excessive, but I guess she didn’t want to take any chances.

“You’re definitely dehydrated,” said the doctor who examined me. “I’d like to run some tests, but in the meantime, we’ll start an IV and get some fluids in you.”

“Can he get something for the nausea?” Lauren asked. “I talked to his doctor on the phone, and she mentioned a drug called Compazine?”

The doctor nodded. “We’ll give him a dose of that through the IV, too.” Turning to the nurse, he added, “Let’s run in a liter of saline, plus ten mgs of Compazine, dip a urine, and order a CBC, lytes, BUN, and creatinine.” I didn’t understand a word of this, but basically, it meant I had to pee in a cup and have more blood drawn. I was so used to having my blood drawn by this point that I barely even flinched when the needle went in.

The IV was a different story. The nurse had to stick me about five times before she got it. “I’m so sorry,” she kept apologizing. “I’m having trouble finding a good vein.” I could tell she was flustered; her hands were shaking, and I was freaking out, worried she was going to stick herself. But, thankfully, she didn’t, and once the IV was finally hooked up and running, Lauren and I found ourselves alone for the first time.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, as she held my hand.

“Shitty,” I said. “This sucks so much. I don’t know if I can keep doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Taking these pills. Not if they’re gonna make me feel like this. It’s not worth it. I’d rather just let the AIDS get me.”

“Don’t say that!” Lauren said sharply, shaking her head. “You just started taking them. Dr. Usako said it could take awhile to find the right combination of drugs, so give it some time before you decide you’re done with them all.”

I sighed. It was hard to stay hopeful when I still felt sick to my stomach.

Lauren seemed to understand. “Why don’t you just close your eyes and try to take a nap?” she suggested. “Give the medication a chance to work its magic, huh? I bet you’ll feel better when you wake up.”

I didn’t think I’d be able to sleep in that hospital bed, all hooked up to tubes and wires, but whatever they’d put in my IV made me drowsy, and I was able to doze off for awhile. When I woke up, I did feel a hell of a lot better. For the first time in four days, I wasn’t nauseous. My stomach was still a little rumble, but not like it had been. “Dr. Usako was right,” I told Lauren. “This Compazine stuff kicks ass.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, baby.”

After a few hours in the ER, we left the hospital with a clean bill of health – other than my HIV, obviously – and a prescription for Compazine tablets, which the doctor said I could take three times a day as needed to help with the nausea. “Yay... more pills to take,” I said sarcastically, as I added a dose to each compartment of my pill organizer at home. I was up to seven a day now.

Lauren came up behind me and kissed the back of my neck. “Hey, if it helps you feel better, it’s worth it. Don’t forget that.”

I swore I wouldn’t forget, but at the same time, I remembered Dr. Usako’s warning about sticking to my medication regimen. Now I understood why her patients would want to stop taking their pills. I was starting to realize what a pain in the ass this treatment plan was going to be. But like Lauren said, it would be worth it if it kept me healthy – at least, I hoped so.

That night, I took another dose of Compazine with my evening meds and a small sip of water, careful not to upset my stomach again. Then I crawled into bed with Lauren, looking forward to a full night’s sleep, uninterrupted by excessive trips to the bathroom. I slept soundly until just after four a.m., when I woke to the sound of my phone ringing.

“Who is it?” I heard Lauren ask groggily, as I reached for the phone.

I squinted at it, surprised to see Brian’s name. Why the hell would he be calling me this early? “Yo, Brian, this better be important for you to be calling me at fuckin’ four in the morning,” was how I answered the phone.

“Sorry, bro, didn’t think about the time difference,” he replied, but there was none of his usual humor in his voice. I could tell something was wrong. “Listen, I just got off the phone with Howie...”

In spite of how much hatred I'd felt for Howie lately, my heart leaped into my throat when I heard that. "Is he okay?" I croaked. "Is Holden okay?"

"He's fine. It wasn't about Holden. It was about Q." I heard Brian take a breath before he told me the bad news. "Nick, Q passed away this morning."

It took me a second to process what he'd said, but when I did, it felt like all the air was suddenly sucked out of my lungs, and I slumped over, deflated.

Chapter 15

Howie

Five days before Christmas, I got an early morning phone call from our bodyguard, Mike. He was crying. "Q's dead," he told me through his tears.

I couldn't believe it.

Mike said it sounded like a heart attack, but that didn't make sense to me. Q was only forty years old. Sure, he was a big guy, but he was strong and in shape. He had to be, in order to do his job well, and Q was the best bodyguard we'd ever had. Having been with us since the early days, he'd become more than just a bodyguard. He was a good friend. The news of his death devastated me. I didn't understand it. How could someone like Q just drop dead all of a sudden, while people like me could live for decades with an incurable illness? None of it made any sense.

I've always been a believer in God, but on days like that, when life seems short and cruel and meaningless, it's hard to believe in a higher power, a greater good. I was glad I called Brian first. He was the only one on the east coast, three hours ahead of the rest of us, but he was also the biggest believer I knew, other than maybe my mother. Talking to him helped. "He's in a better place, Howie," Brian said, toward the end of our conversation. "He's in Heaven now. God just got himself one hell of a new head of security."

I snorted, sending flecks of snot flying across my bedroom. "Brian, did you just say 'God' and 'hell' in the same sentence?"

"I guess I did," he admitted, chuckling. I could tell he was smiling, and for just a second, it made me feel better. Then the reality of the situation returned.

Sighing, I said, "Well, I better break the news to AJ before he hears it from someone else. He and Q were close, you know?"

“Yeah,” Brian said sadly. “I can call Kev, if you want.”

“That’d be great,” I replied gratefully. Mike had left it up to me to let the rest of the group know.

“You need me to call anyone else?”

Nick, I thought immediately, swallowing hard as his name popped into my mind. “Could you... could you call Nick for me?” I couldn’t bare the thought of giving Nick any more bad news.

Brian didn’t seem to mind. Why would he? They’d once been best friends, although for awhile, I thought I had sort of taken his place as Nick’s closest friend in the group. But if Brian thought it was weird that I would ask this of him, he didn’t say so. “Sure, I’ll call him,” he agreed. “Keep me posted if you hear anything about arrangements and whatnot, okay?”

“Will do. I’ll talk to you later.”

After we hung up, I called AJ, then my wife. It was still early, even on the east coast, but I knew Leigh would be up with the baby already. Of course, she didn’t answer, so I left her a message. “Leigh, it’s me. Call me back, please. It’s important.”

She called a few minutes later, and when I told her what had happened, it was like we had never fought. “Oh my god!” she exclaimed, sounding as shocked as I felt. “Poor Mike! And poor *Angela*! I’m so sorry, honey. Is there anything I can do?”

It was nice to hear her call me “honey” again, with sympathy, instead of hatred, in her voice. “You can come home,” I said hopefully. “I’m guessing the services will be sometime after Christmas; they probably won’t have time to plan anything before. Bring the boys home for Christmas and stay for the funeral.”

Leigh sighed. “Howie, that’s not going to happen. We’re spending Christmas here, with my family. But I will fly down for the funeral; it’s the least I can do.”

It wasn’t enough for me, but I knew better than to argue with her. “Okay. I’ll let you know when I find out more.”

“Thanks. Hey, I better go – I’m trying to get breakfast ready for the boys.”

“Oh, okay. Tell them Daddy loves them.” I felt a lump swell up in my throat. “And, Leigh?” I added, before I got off the phone. “I love you, too.”

But when my wife hung up without saying the words back, I could tell she didn’t believe me anymore.

That Christmas was the worst one ever. Even though I spent it with my family in Florida, I had never felt more alone. The people who mattered to me the most – my wife and children – were missing, and it was all my fault.

“She’ll come around, Howie,” my oldest sister, Angie, tried to assure me. “She needs some time to deal with all of us. You have to admit, it’s a lot. Just show her how sorry you are, and eventually, she’ll have to forgive you.”

As much as I appreciated my sister’s support, I wasn’t so sure she was right. After all, Angie didn’t know the whole story. None of my family knew about Nick. They didn’t know I was struggling with my sexuality. How could I explain that I had feelings for Nick, but still loved my wife? It didn’t even make sense to me. I couldn’t handle being asked if I was gay again, even though I knew that, eventually, I would have to come clean and answer that question, once and for all. It was only a matter of time before Nick started confiding in others about his HIV status. He couldn’t hide it forever, and once everyone found out he was infected, the truth would come out, and I would have to come out, too. No one would expect Leigh to come back to me then.

She did come down to Florida the day after Christmas for Q’s funeral, just like she’d promised. The services were scheduled to take place the following morning. When I picked her up from the airport that afternoon, I was disappointed to see that she was alone. “You didn’t bring the boys?” I asked, looking around, as if I actually expected to find James lagging behind her.

She shook her head. “No. They’re having plenty of fun at my parents’ house, playing with their new toys. Why would I bring them all the way here, just to see people grieve and hear their parents fight? They’re better off up there.”

I knew she had a point, but I couldn’t hide my disappointment. “I miss them,” I said, sighing. “I’m surprised James didn’t beg you to let him come.”

Leigh shrugged. “Like I said... he’s pretty content playing with all his Christmas presents.”

“Don’t you think he’d want to see me more?” I asked angrily. “Doesn’t he wonder why I’m not with you?”

“He thinks you’re on tour,” she replied casually, hitching her back up higher on her shoulder. “That’s where you were supposed to be, so... that’s where I told him you are.”

She started walking so briskly toward the exit, I struggled to keep up. “So you lied to him?” I said, as I finally fell into step beside her. “Nice, Leigh.”

“Well, what was I supposed to tell him, Howie? That his dad slept with another man and got himself infected with HIV, which he then passed on to me and Holden?”

“Shh!” I hissed, looking around to see if anyone had heard her. Thankfully, everyone else in the airport seemed too engrossed in their own business to pay any attention to us. “Does he even know I’m sick?” I asked, holding the door for her as we went outside.

“God, it feels good out here!” exclaimed Leigh, leaning her head back to look up at the sky. The sun was hidden by gray clouds, but at least it was warm. “It was in the thirties when I left Jersey. And no,” she added, as we walked to the car, “he doesn’t know about either of us. I don’t want him to worry any more than he has to. It was hard enough having to explain about Holden. He’s too young to really understand what’s happening.”

I nodded, knowing she was probably right. It was better that James be left out of this. Still, I wished Leigh would at least let me see him. I missed him and Holden so much, it hurt.

“So what did you tell him about Holden?” I asked, once we were in the car.

Leigh sighed. “I told him his baby brother’s sick, and that’s why he’s been going to the doctor, to get medicine to make him better.”

“So you did see that specialist you were telling me about? He started Holden on medication?”

“She,” Leigh corrected. “Her name is Dr. Parr. We’ve been to her practice in Philly twice in the last two weeks. She’s very nice, very knowledgeable. She put Holden on a couple of different drugs. He hates the taste of them, so I’ve had to find new and different ways to get him to take them every day this week.” She laughed, but when I looked over at her, I saw tears in her eyes.

“Oh, Leigh... I’m so sorry, honey.” Remembering what Angie had said, I reached out and rested my hand lightly on Leigh’s thigh. “I hope you’re taking care of yourself, too. Have you been to a doctor yet?”

She nodded, wiping her eyes.

“And?” I prompted. “Have you started treatment yet?”

Leigh shook her head. “My doctor said she doesn’t recommend starting treatment until my CD4 count drops below 350 because of the side effects. It was over 500 at my first appointment, so I’m holding off for now. I don’t want to have to deal with side effects when I’m trying to take care of Holden.”

I frowned. “But honey, don’t you want to stay healthy so you *can* take care of Holden? The medication is supposed to help keep your CD4 count up. My doctor put me on this all-in-one pill that has three different drugs in it – a triple cocktail, he called it. I only have to take it once a day, so it’s not a big deal. I’ve been on it for over two weeks and haven’t had any real side effects so far. You should ask your doctor about it.”

Leigh sighed and rubbed her eyes again. “Is this really what our life has become? I’m so tired of talking about doctors and drugs and this damn disease. I really don’t wanna go there right now. I just wanna go home.”

I took it as an encouraging sign that she was still calling our condo “home,” but when she insisted on sleeping in James’s bed that night, I realized she might as well have booked herself a hotel room. As I lay awake, alone in the bed we used to share, the question she’d asked in the car echoed through my mind.

“Is this really what our life has become?”

It made me sad to reach across the bed and feel nothing but empty space between the sheets. I missed the warmth of my wife’s body. But when I finally fell asleep, I dreamed of a different body filling my bed, and a life that could have been.

I dreamed of Nick.

I saw Nick for real at the funeral home the next day, when Leigh and I went to pay our respects to Q’s family. There was a two-hour visitation preceding the funeral, and the line was out the door. Details about the services had been made public, and I was worried that fans might show up. Some would want to support us; others would just want to see us. Either way, if there were enough of them, they would cause a scene.

Q’s family, anticipating the same problem, had already come up with a solution. On the way to the funeral home, I got a text from Mike. *“Come find me when u get here. We got a private room.”* When Leigh and I walked in, Mike looked up and saw us. He stepped out of the receiving line and came over to us. “This way,” he said in a low voice, leading us to small room that had been set up for the family. There were places to sit and a spread of food that looked mostly untouched. “Help yourself,” he added, waving his hand vaguely at the food. “We’ll come back here before the funeral. Y’all can just chill here until then, so you won’t have to worry about bein’ bothered by fans.”

“Thanks,” I said, reaching out to hug him. “I’m so sorry, man.”

Mike nodded, smiling tightly. “Thanks.”

“How’s the rest of the family doing?”

“They’re hangin’ in there. Angela’s devastated, as you can imagine.”

My heart broke for Q’s widow. I knew how hard it was to be separated from my wife, but I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose her forever. Thanks to my thoughtlessness, that was a very real possibility someday, sooner than I would have

predicted. I swallowed hard, trying not to think about it. I wanted to keep my mind on Q. Today was about him.

But when I looked around and saw Nick and Lauren sitting with the rest of the guys and their wives, I knew it was going to be hard not to let the awkwardness between us get in the way of our grief. The glare Nick gave me was intense enough to push all thoughts of Q to the back of my mind, even before Mike had excused himself and left the room.

Once he did, Leigh went straight to Lauren and hugged her. The two of them had always gotten along well, but in their black dresses, they looked more like sisters than friends, sisters who shared a dark secret.

I greeted all of the other guys before making my way over to Nick. In my dreams, he had looked divine, with a white sheet draped across his godlike body, the morning sunlight making his blue eyes sparkle and giving his blond hair a golden glow. But in real life, he looked like hell. A well-tailored suit can make any guy look good, but Nick's suit seemed about a size too big, giving him a slightly shrunken appearance. He hadn't bothered to put any product in his hair; it just lay flat over his forehead. Beneath it, his face looked pinched and pale, and there were bags under his eyes. He didn't look well at all, and the change in his appearance worried me.

"How's it goin', Howie?" he said robotically when I approached him.

I held out my hand, and he reluctantly took it. "How are *you* doing?" I asked him, squeezing his hand. "You look like shit."

"Gee, thanks," he replied sarcastically. "Then again, I'd rather look like shit than look sexy to you."

I glanced around quickly to make sure no one else had heard him, then pulled him into a hug. "Seriously, Nick," I said softly, speaking so only he could hear me. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not fucking okay! Not since you gave me HIV!" he hissed into my ear. I couldn't help but notice that he was no longer calling it "AIDS." Actually having it changes your vocabulary.

"I know, but... it's not just that, is it?" I released him slowly, holding him at an arm's length so that I could look him in the eye. "What's going on with you?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm having trouble adjusting to my meds," he mumbled, barely moving his lips to avoid being overheard.

My heart ached with sympathy for him. "Side effects?" I asked softly.

He nodded. "I don't wanna talk about it," he muttered, pulling away from me.

“Nick, wait!” I said, when he started to walk away. “Walk with me.” I put my hand on the small of his back and started to lead him to the safety of corner, away from the others, where we could talk more openly.

“Don’t touch me!” he snapped, and as he whirled around, his fist collided with my face.

I stumbled backwards, clutching the side of my face. I could feel my cheek starting to swell underneath my fingers. Who knew Nick had such a strong right hook? Apparently, no one else did, either. When I straightened up, I saw them all staring at us in shock.

“Holy shit!” AJ was the first to speak. “What the hell was that for, Nick?”

“Ask him,” Nick spat, as he stomped across the room, throwing himself into a chair as far away from me as he could get.

“I’m sorry!” I called after him, even though it was really he who should have apologized for hitting me.

All he said back to that was, “Yeah, you should be!”

Chapter 16

Nick

Q’s death really shook me up. He was mainly AJ’s bodyguard, but before that, he’d been mine. Q had been a part of the Backstreet family since the height of our fame in the nineties, and I could barely remember doing a tour without him. He had always been there to protect us. But on the day of his funeral, it was Howie who needed protection.

I don’t know why I reacted the way I did. I mean, sure, I’d been wanting to hit Howie for awhile, but normally, I have more self-control than that. I guess all the emotions I’d been trying to contain – the anger, the grief, the resentment – finally boiled to the surface and got the best of me. Before I knew what was happening, my hand had made contact with his face.

“Holy shit!” shouted AJ, looking at me like I was insane. “What the hell was that for, Nick?”

“Ask him!” I stalked over to the other side of the room and slumped down in a chair, massaging my sore knuckles.

“I’m sorry!” I heard Howie call.

“Yeah, you should be!” I shot back, without looking at him. I immediately wished I hadn’t said any of that. I didn’t want the other guys asking questions. I knew I would have to tell them the truth at some point – we were too close not to – but this wasn’t the right time or place. It wasn’t at all the way I would have wanted them to find out.

Then Kevin said, “Nick, you’re bleeding!”

I looked down at my swollen hand and saw beads of blood shining through the broken skin over my knuckles. “Man, Howie has one hard head,” I said, forcing a laugh. I was trying to make light of the situation, but Kevin was looking at me seriously.

“Here,” he said, reaching for my hand. “Let me see.”

When I saw his fingers come within inches of brushing against my bloody skin, I panicked. “No!” I pulled my hand away, holding it tightly to my chest. “Don’t touch it!”

Kevin recoiled. “What the hell, Nick?” he asked, looking at me with the same annoyed expression I’d seen on his face a thousand other times. “I’m just trying to help! You need to wrap up that hand before you get blood all over your suit.”

“I know, but...” I shook my head, still cradling my hand, as tears sprang to my eyes. “You can’t touch my blood. It’s poison.”

Kevin stared at me. “What are you talking about?”

The tears started to stream down my face, as I let go of everything I’d been holding back and allowed the truth to come pouring out. “I have it, too.”

“Have... what?”

I looked past him to Howie, who was standing still on the other side of the room, looking back at me. Our eyes locked for just a second before he closed his, as if bracing himself for what he knew was about to come out my mouth. The whole room had fallen silent. Everyone was staring at me. I saw Lauren nod her head, giving me the strength I needed to say it.

“HIV.”

For a few seconds, no one spoke, but their reactions said it all. Leighanne Littrell’s mouth dropped open so wide, it was almost comical. She looked so scandalized, I felt the insane urge to laugh. Meanwhile, Rochelle McLean kept looking from me, to Howie, and then to her husband, her eyebrows raised, as if she was silently asking AJ, “*Did you know about this?*” But AJ was as visibly shocked as everyone else. Brian and Kevin both just stared at me, struggling to understand.

How? It was the obvious question on everyone’s mind, yet no one had the guts to ask it out loud.

Then Baylee whispered, “Mom, what does that mean?”

Leighanne looked down at her son, then up at me. She closed her mouth and opened it again several times before she finally said, “Come on, Bay, let’s take a little walk.” She took him by the hand and led him out of the room.

I half-expected Brian to follow her, but he didn’t. Instead, he asked me, “How long have you had it?” I could tell he was still trying to piece together how I had gotten infected. It was a more tactful way of asking, “*Who had it first?*”

But I was tired of being tactful, just as I was tired of hiding the truth. “I’ve had it since the cruise,” I said, “since Howie fucking raped me!”

There were audible gasps that time. Even Howie looked shocked. He shook his head wildly, his eyes wide. “I did not *rape* you!” he sputtered, clearly horrified that I would say such a thing.

“Yes, you did,” I insisted, my heart starting to pound as vague recollections of what had happened that night raced through my head. “I didn’t give my consent. And I sure as hell didn’t *tell* you to put my dick in your mouth. You just went ahead and did it.”

“You told me to keep going!” said Howie, his voice shaking. There were tears in his eyes now, too.

“I was drunk out of my fucking mind!” I shouted, standing up from my chair. “I didn’t know what I was saying; I was barely conscious!”

“I was drunk, too!” Howie yelled from across the room. “I didn’t know-”

“Oh, don’t even try to tell me you didn’t know what you were doing!” I interrupted him. “You knew! You had to fucking know, because it wasn’t the first time you’d done it! Oh yeah,” I added, looking around at everyone else, “Howie told y’all he cheated on Leigh while we were on tour, but what he didn’t tell you was that it was with a *dude*.”

They all looked at Howie, their eyebrows raised – everyone except Leigh and Lauren, who already knew.

“Is that true?” AJ asked Howie. “Are you gay, man? ‘Cause, you know, if you are... that’s okay...”

But before Howie could answer, Brian interjected, “It’s not okay if he’s going around giving people AIDS!”

“HIV,” Howie and I said at the same time, then looked at each other. In hindsight, maybe we just should have said “Jinx,” smiled at the absurdity of our situation, and apologized to each other. Maybe then, we could have moved on. Maybe we could have

prevented a tragedy from happening. But in that moment, things were still too heated. I had just been humiliated in front of my closest friends, and I'd hurt Howie's feelings. There was no way we could laugh it off then.

It was Kevin who calmed everyone down. "Guys!" he shouted, his deep voice rising above the rest of ours. "Are we really going to do this right now, right here, in the middle of a funeral parlor? Don't forget why we're here. We're here for Q and his family. This day should be about them... not about any of our drama. If y'all aren't willing to set aside your differences for Q, then get the hell out. We are *not* gonna fuck up his funeral."

That shut us up. We sat in silence on opposite sides of the room until it was time for the funeral. If anyone from Q's family wondered about Howie's shiner or my bandaged hand, they didn't ask.

When it was all over, Howie and I went our separate ways without another word to each other. It would be days before I heard from him again, but when I did, it was a phone call I would never forget.

Chapter 17

Howie

The fight at Q's funeral left our group fractured. AJ, as someone who knew how it felt to screw up, was sympathetic towards me, but Brian had sided with Nick. Kevin seemed to be somewhere in the middle. He wasn't as judgmental as his cousin, but he did have a soft spot when it came to Nick. I knew he wasn't happy with me for letting something like this happen to Nick or to the group. It was hard to believe that after celebrating twenty years together, we had never been closer to completely falling apart.

After the funeral, we all went home without even talking about the tour. We were supposed to fly to Europe in February, but somehow, I didn't see that happening. I wondered what we would tell our fans. We had always tried to be honest with them, but I couldn't imagine how humiliating it would feel if we had to tell the truth about this. The media would have a field day with it. Our faces would be all over the tabloids, and the paparazzi would never leave us alone. This scandal would ruin everything we had worked for over the past twenty years. It would tarnish our legacy.

Maybe we should just go on tour and get it over with, I thought. We could always go our separate ways afterwards, if it came to that. No one would think it was a big deal if we did it quietly, without canceling a whole tour. But it was hard to think about going back on the road when my home life was still in shambles.

Leigh left the day after the funeral and flew back up to New Jersey to be with our boys. I hadn't seen them in a month, and I missed them like crazy. I thought about following her up there, but I didn't want to make a scene. I had too much respect for her family. Still, the separation was starting to get to me.

It hit me the hardest on New Year's Eve, as I sat alone in our house in L.A. with a bottle of tequila, watching the festivities in Times Square on my TV and worrying about what 2014 would bring. The future had never seemed so uncertain.

Seven years earlier, on New Year's Eve, I'd proposed to Leigh at her parents' house in New Jersey. We'd been dating for over six years by that point, and I was feeling the pressure from both my parents and her to finally pop the question so we could settle down and start a family. Leigh was thirty-three and could hear her biological clock ticking. I was thirty-four, the youngest of five children. My mother, who was already in her seventies, wanted more grandchildren while she was still able to enjoy them. Unbeknownst to us, my father had less than two years to live. If I had known he would never get to meet my sons, I would have married Leigh and gotten started much sooner. But you never can predict the future.

One year ago, I'd been looking forward to 2013 and all the exciting prospects it held: the birth of my second child, a new album with the Boys, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and a world tour to commemorate our twentieth anniversary. All of that had happened, and it had been wonderful, but as the year came to a close, my whole world seemed ready to implode. Q was dead. Nick hated me. Brian blamed me. Leigh wanted nothing to do with me. My sons weren't allowed to see me. And worst of all, my wife, baby, and best friend were sick because of me. I couldn't blame any of them for hating me. I hated myself.

If that wasn't bad enough, I could hear Nick's in my head voice shouting, "*Howie fucking raped me!*" I couldn't help but cringe every time I relived that conversation – if you could even call it a conversation. It felt more like an attack on me, and his words hurt worse than his fist. Was that really how he saw it? I wondered. Worse yet, was that really what had happened? I knew I had taken advantage of Nick that night on the cruise, but until he called me out, I never would have considered myself a rapist. The word repulsed me; it made me feel dirty, depraved. Those who knew what I had done would see me the same way, as a despicable person.

As the ball dropped in New York City, my cell phone alarm went off, reminding me to take my pill. I took it at the same time every evening, after dinner and before bedtime, so I could sleep off any side effects. My doctor had warned me that the medication might cause dizziness, headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and rashes, but so far, I hadn't experienced anything severe. Not like Nick, who had looked so sick the last time I saw him, or Holden, who hated the taste of his medicine so much, Leigh had to force it down his throat. Even Leigh was so scared of the side effects, she refused to start treatment, and yet here I was, taking my one pill every day with no trouble. It wasn't fair. Why should they be having such a hard time while I had it easy, when I was the reason they needed medication in the first place? They didn't deserve this. I did.

“Should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind,” sang the people partying on my TV screen, as I popped the pill in my mouth. *“Should old acquaintance be forgot and auld lang syne.”* I washed it down with a shot of tequila. *“Should auld lang syne, my dear, should auld lang syne. We’ll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne.”*

“I’ll take another cup of kindness,” I muttered to myself, laughing bitterly at my private joke as I poured and downed another shot. I knew it was stupid to mix medication and liquor, but maybe it would make me feel as shitty on the outside as I did on the inside. If it did, I’d deserve it. And if it didn’t, I could at least drink enough to dull the pain I felt on the inside. Then I would feel nothing. I would be numb.

The thought was appealing, so I threw back another shot and then another. The more I drank, the worse I felt – about myself, about my life, about everything. It was depressing, sitting there alone with a bottle of booze, realizing I’d driven away my family and destroyed my life. Not just my life, but Nick’s life, too. And, by extension, the Backstreet Boys. If this broke up the group, I’d be to blame for that, as well.

Maybe they’d be better off without me, I thought, my hand shaking as I filled my shot glass once more. *Maybe the whole world would be better off without me.*

I swallowed the shot. The numbness was starting to set in by now. The drink didn’t even burn as it went down. My head was swimming, and my thoughts were muddled, but somehow, it seemed to make sense that if I could just make myself disappear, it would solve all the problems I had caused. The Backstreet Boys wouldn’t have to break up, but if they did, they could blame it on my death. The world would never need to know about Nick’s illness if he decided not to tell. Leigh could sell my estate and use the money to buy a nice house in New Jersey, near her family, where she and the boys could live out of the limelight. James would miss me, but he was so young, he would get over it and grow up a normal, happy kid. Holden wouldn’t even remember me, which would be for the best. With any luck, he’d get to grow up, too. My mother and siblings would have the hardest time dealing with my death, but they could take care of each other. They would be comforted by the thought that I was in Heaven with Dad and Caroline, even though I knew I might be destined for Hell.

Once my decision was made, I felt so much better. Finally, I’d found a solution, a way to make amends. I finished off the bottle of tequila, then staggered into the kitchen to find another. Thankfully, my liquor cabinet was always well-stocked. I rummaged for another bottle of tequila, which I took into the bathroom with me. I pissed a stream of clear urine that must have been mostly alcohol, then reached into the medicine cabinet for my bottle of HIV medication. The bottle was mostly empty; I only had a week’s worth of pills left. I wasn’t sure it would be enough, so I grabbed a bottle of Tylenol P.M. to supplement it with. Then I trudged back out to the living room and sat down on the couch.

While the TV continued to show shots of New Year's revelers partying in Times Square, I started popping pills, washing each handful down with a swig of tequila, straight from the bottle. This triggered my gag reflex, so I slowed down, trying not to throw up. If I puked up the pills, I would have to start over, and I wasn't sure I would have the guts to try again.

When I'd taken as much as I could stomach, I lay down on the couch. The whole room seemed to be spinning, and there were weird lights dancing before my eyes. My vision was so blurry, I could barely make out the faces on my TV anymore. I closed my eyes and tried to picture the faces of my children instead. I should have written a note, I realized, so that, someday, my family would understand why I'd done this. I opened my eyes again and struggled to sit up, looking around for a piece of paper or something I could write with. But by now, my hands were shaking too badly to write anything legible.

I considered calling Leigh and leaving her a message. She would be in bed by now, and even if she was still up, she probably wouldn't answer the phone. It would be better that way, I told myself. But then I thought about how upset she'd be when she heard my message in the morning. I didn't want to put her through any more pain.

So I called Nick instead, knowing he wouldn't answer either. I had a hard time finding his name on my phone; my fingers felt clumsy and kept hitting the wrong keys. I finally put the call through and listened to the phone rang. It rang four times before it went to his voicemail, and it was there that I left my final words for him and my family.

"Hey, Nicky," I started, then remembered how touchy he'd been about that nickname lately and corrected myself. "Sorry, I mean Nick... I know you hate when I call you Nicky, but I do it out of love, man. Listen... I just wanted to say I'm sorry. Sorry for what happened on the cruise. Sorry for putting you through all this shit. I know you must hate me. I hate me too."

Tears filled my eyes, blurring my vision even more. "I never meant to hurt you," I went on. "I love you, Nick... as a brother and a friend. I hope you know that. Please tell Leigh I love her too. And tell James that Daddy loves him... and that I'm sorry for leaving him. And tell Holden... that I love him more than he'll ever know, and that I'm sorry..." I sniffled loudly, as my nose started to run. "...sorry for making him sick. I never meant to hurt him either. I never meant to hurt any of you. God... I'm so sorry..."

I trailed off, letting the message end there. It seemed like there should have been more important information for me to pass on, but I didn't know what else to say. *I should have planned this out ahead of time*, I realized, but my brain felt fuzzy, incapable of organizing my thoughts any further. I knew I didn't have much time left.

I pulled up the photos on my phone and scrolled through them until I found a picture of James and Holden on Halloween. James was grinning in his hammerhead shark costume, while Holden sat in his infant seat, happily playing with his toes. That was

how I wanted to remember my boys: healthy, happy, and having fun. I stared longingly at the picture until my eyelids grew heavy and the phone slipped out of my hand.

Chapter 18

Nick

It was supposed to be a quiet New Year's Eve. Lauren and I usually liked to ring in the new year with a lot of partying, but this year, we'd decided to keep the celebration low-key. I didn't feel much like partying, and I wasn't supposed to drink while on my medication. I'd had such a hard time with side effects already that adding alcohol to the mix seemed like a recipe for disaster. So we stayed home and drank sparkling cider instead.

The call from Howie came a couple hours before midnight. We were watching a movie when my phone rang. When I saw Howie's name come up, I rolled my eyes and set my phone aside without answering.

"Who is it?" Lauren wanted to know.

"Guess," I said. "I'll give you a hint: Who's the last person I'd want to talk to tonight?"

"Howie?"

"Ding, ding, ding!" I imitated a game show bell. "We have a winner!"

She smiled and shook her head. "You're so bad. He probably just wants to get another apology in before the year ends. Or maybe he's hoping you'll apologize to him."

"Why should I apologize to him?" I asked defensively. "All I did was punch him in the face. He fucking gave me HIV!"

"Um, you also accused him of raping you. Remember?"

I rolled my eyes again. "I swear to you, Lauren, what happened between us on that cruise was *not* consensual. That makes it rape."

She sighed. "Nick, I would never argue with anyone about what constitutes rape. I'm not saying that what happened was okay, but just consider this: Howie's been one of your best friends for twenty years. He obviously has feelings for you that go beyond friendship, and if you don't feel the same way, that's fine, but don't discount his feelings. This has to be as hard for him as it has been for you – maybe even harder. He made a mistake that not only affected him and you, but his whole family, too. He's gonna have

to live with that for the rest of his life. I'm not asking you to forgive him, but try to have a little compassion for him, huh?"

When she put it that way, it made me feel like shit for ripping on Howie so hard. I had every right to be mad at him, but I guess he didn't deserve to have his name dragged through the mud in front of all our friends. Did I really believe he had raped me? Not really. We'd both been drinking; we were both to blame for what had happened. Did that make it any easier to forgive him? No, in fact, it made it harder. Not only had he infected me with an incurable virus, but he'd also stirred up feelings inside me that made me question myself, my impending marriage, and my entire future. I hated him for that.

But when my phone beeped, signaling a new voicemail, I picked it up and played the message anyway. I didn't plan on calling him back, but it wouldn't hurt to hear what he had to say – or so I thought.

Howie's voicemail started off pretty funny. *"Hey, Nicky... sorry, I mean Nick."* He was seriously slurring his words. *"I know you hate when I call you Nicky, but I do it out of love, man."*

I snickered. "Howie's drunk," I told Lauren. Drunk Howie was always hilarious, mostly because, unlike me, he wasn't usually a sloppy drunk... so whenever he did get falling down shitfaced, it was funny as hell. Even Lauren laughed, leaning in so she could hear the rest of the message.

But it got dark quickly. By the time he started asking me to tell his kids he loved them and that he was sorry for leaving them, my heart was racing. I had a really bad feeling about his reason for leaving me a message like that. I looked over at Lauren. She was looking back at me, her eyes wide. "Shit," I said. "He's gonna fucking kill himself. We just heard his goddamn suicide note!"

"What should we do?!" she cried. "Call 911?"

I considered it for a few seconds, then shook my head. "No. We don't wanna make it worse by attracting a bunch of attention. If we call 911, it's gonna go out over the police scanners, and once the paparazzi realize someone famous lives at that address, they'll be all over it. I'll drive over there myself and make sure he's okay. For all we know, it could just be a cry for help."

Lauren got up from the couch. "I'll go with you," she said, already slipping on her shoes. I grabbed my keys.

We left in a hurry and headed to Howie's house in West Hollywood. Six miles, twelve lights to his front door. Each one felt like an eternity, especially with Lauren mumbling expletives under her breath the whole way there. She had my phone in her hand and kept trying to call Howie, but he wouldn't pick up. It was a good thing I knew the combination to open his front gate because he didn't answer when I buzzed him at the

bottom of his driveway, either. I knew that was a bad sign, but a part of me was still hoping I'd find him pouting inside, waiting for me to get worried enough to come over and check on him.

“So help me god, if he's in there faking it, I'm gonna hit him again! Hard!” I ranted as I gunned the engine, squealing to a stop outside his garage. I got out, slamming the car door, and jogged up to the house. Lauren followed me. I banged on the front door a few times, but there was still no answer. “Howie, you better open up right now, or I'm gonna bust down the goddamn door! You hear me?” I yelled, giving the door a good, firm kick.

I knew I had no chance of actually breaking the door down by myself, so it was a good thing I'd brought Lauren. She had the strongest legs I'd ever seen on a woman. We kicked together, and after a few tries, the front door splintered, and we forced our way in.

The house was dark inside, except for the bright flashes from a TV that had been left on. “Howie?” I called, but the only other voice I heard was Ryan Seacrest's, coming from the Times Square broadcast on TV. My heart pounded as I followed the sound into the living room, worried about what I was going to find there.

In the eerie, flickering light, I saw Howie lying on the couch. One hand was hanging limply over the side. His eyes were closed, his mouth half open. In that instant, I knew he had to be dead.

As I came closer to the couch, my eyes swept over the scene, taking in the two pill containers sitting on the coffee table, along with an open bottle of tequila. All the breath rushed out of me as I sank to my knees at Howie's side, looking down at his body in dismay. “Oh god, Howie,” I whispered. “Why would you do this to yourself?”

But that was a stupid question to ask. I already knew the answer. Of course I knew why, and in that moment, I realized it was as much my fault as it was his.

“Is he breathing?” Lauren asked. Her voice sounded shaky.

I hadn't seen Howie's chest rise, but I leaned in closer to check, listening closely. I couldn't hear anything, but when I held my hand in front of his face, I felt a faint wisp of warm air. “Yeah... he's breathing,” I sighed, my voice cracking with relief. “Barely, though.” Howie's breathing was slow and shallow, and if the half-empty bottle of Tequila was any indication of what he'd taken with the pills, he wouldn't be breathing for long.

“We need to take him to the hospital,” Lauren said, echoing my thoughts. “Hand me those pill containers, please.”

I wondered what she wanted with those, but I went ahead and picked up the bottle of extra-strength Tylenol PM. The lid was off, and there were still some pills rattling

around inside. Taking that as a good sign, I put the cap back on the bottle before tossing it to Lauren. “What are you doing, hiding evidence?” I asked, watching as she tucked it into her purse.

She rolled her eyes at me. “Really, Nick? They’re going to want to know what exactly he took and how much. It’ll be easier if we can just show them. What’s that other one?”

I scooped up the second bottle, my stomach sinking when I realized it was empty. “Atripla,” I said, sounding out the name on the label.

Lauren wrinkled her nose. “What’s that?”

I shook my head, trying to decipher what it said in parentheses underneath the brand name. *Efavirenz 600 mg, emtricitabine 200 mg, tenofovir disoproxil fumarate 300 mg*. It just looked like gibberish to me. “There’s like three different drugs listed here, none of which I can pronounce. It’s prescription-only. Must be his HIV meds.” I handed it over.

“God,” Lauren whispered, as she looked at the bottle. “This is some heavy-duty stuff. He was serious, huh?”

Her words made me feel sick to my stomach, there was no time to dwell on them now, not when we could still save Howie. “C’mon, let’s just get him into the car and go. I think I can carry him myself, if you get the door.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Squatting down, I slid my arms underneath Howie’s body and hoisted him off the couch. I straightened up slowly, struggling to get a good grip on him.

“You got him?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah,” I grunted. “Good thing he’s such a little guy. If it were Kevin, we’d be screwed.”

She laughed nervously. “If it were Kevin, you’d make *me* carry him instead.”

“Ha ha,” I said sarcastically, but she had a point – she could lift more weight than me. What had happened to Howie was my fault, though, so I shouldered the burden of carrying him to the car.

“I’ll drive,” said Lauren, once we were outside. “You better ride in the back with him, in case he stops breathing or something.”

I didn’t want that responsibility, but I knew she was right. I sat in the back seat with Howie’s head in my lap as she drove us to Cedars-Sinai.

Halfway to the hospital, Howie started to vomit. “Turn his head to the side!” Lauren shouted, looking into the rearview mirror. “So he doesn’t choke!”

I had more than enough experience dealing with drunk friends to know what to do. I rolled Howie onto his side, cringing as he spewed the contents of his stomach onto the seat of my car. I could see pill fragments floating in what was otherwise mostly liquid. It was pretty gross, but I took it as a good sign that he’d thrown up some of the pills.

I thought he was going to be okay at that point, but when I rolled him back over, I realized he wasn’t breathing. “Shit, I think he stopped breathing!” My voice was so shrill, I barely recognized it. It was like I was having some kind of out of body experience; it didn’t feel real. “What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

“Pinch his nose and breathe into his mouth,” Lauren instructed. She had taken a first aid course as part of her fitness training, so I figured I’d better listen to her. I didn’t want to do what she was suggesting, but I couldn’t just sit there and let Howie die, so I leaned over until I was a few inches from his face.

“God damn you, Howie, I hate you so much for this,” I whispered, as I squeezed his nostrils shut and sealed my mouth over his. I suddenly remembered making fun of him that night on the cruise, telling him his lips tasted like hot sauce and singing the “Taco-Flavored Kisses” song from *South Park*. But this time, he just tasted like tequila and vomit. I tried not to puke in his mouth as I blew air into his lungs. “God, this is so gross,” I whined, pulling back to take a breath of fresh air.

“We’re almost there,” Lauren said. “Is he breathing now?”

I bent down again to see if I could detect any signs of breathing, but there was nothing. “No... I don’t think so.”

“Does he have a pulse?”

I put my fingers on the side of his neck, the way I’d seen people do in movies, but I couldn’t feel anything, so I slid my hand down the front of his shirt and pressed my palm against his chest. His skin was cold and clammy, but I felt a faint heartbeat. “Yeah,” I sighed, letting out the breath I’d been holding.

“Good. Give him another rescue breath. If you don’t keep breathing for him, his heart’s going to stop.”

I looked down at Howie. His color was bad, sort of a dusky blue. I could tell he wasn’t getting enough oxygen. He would die if I didn’t do something soon, so I lowered my head and breathed into his mouth again.

Thankfully, it only took two more breaths to stimulate Howie’s own body to take over. He suddenly gasped and then started to cough, and I rolled him onto his side, afraid he was about to hurl again. But he didn’t. Slowly, he began to breathe on his own, taking

ragged, uneven breaths every few seconds. It didn't sound like normal breathing to me, but I figured it was better than nothing. "That's a boy, Howie," I said, patting him softly on the back. "Keep breathing, buddy. Don't stop."

When we got to the hospital, Lauren pulled right up the emergency room entrance, honking her horn. It was a gutsy move, but it worked. A woman in scrubs came out, looking at us curiously.

I opened my door and waved her over. "Hey, we need some help here!" I called, as I climbed out of the car. "It's my friend. He ODed on pills and alcohol. He's barely breathing."

"Hang on one second," the woman said. She ran back inside and returned with a gurney and a man in matching scrubs, who was helping her wheel it across the pavement.

"Ma'am, you're going to have to move your car," the man said to Lauren, once they'd gotten Howie out of the car and onto the gurney.

She looked at me. "Go with him. I'll park and come find you."

I nodded. "Okay."

"What's your friend's name?" asked the woman, as they wheeled Howie inside.

"Howie. Howie Dorough," I said in low voice, hoping no one waiting in the hall would overhear.

If the nurse recognized his name, she didn't react. "Don't worry," was all she said. "We're going to help Howie. Would you mind following me this way so you can answer a few questions for us?"

"Sure, no problem," I said nervously, walking a few steps behind her. We ended up outside a small room that was soon swarming with medical staff. I watched through the window as they moved Howie onto the bed in the middle of the room and started cutting off his clothes. Feeling uncomfortable, I looked away.

"Can you spell out Howie's last name for me?" the nurse asked, her pen poised above the clipboard she held in her hand.

So she really didn't know who he was, I realized. "Dorough... D-O-R-O-U-G-H," I spelled, hoping that was right. I glanced in at Howie again; one of the nurses had strapped an oxygen mask to his face and was squeezing the bag connected to it, while the others were moving around his bed, hooking him up to various monitors.

"And how old is he?"

I only had to think for a few seconds before I answered, “Forty.” We’d celebrated Howie’s birthday on tour that year. I remembered ripping on him for turning the big 4-0, which made him officially “over the hill.” Now I looked in at him, lying unconscious on the hospital bed with wires connected to his bare chest and a bag forcing air into his lungs, and I thought, *He’s too young for this.*

“What have we got?” asked the white-coated doctor who appeared outside the door.

“Howie Dorough, forty years old, unconscious and in respiratory distress after an apparent overdose,” said the nurse who was working on Howie’s chart. “His friend here brought him in by car.”

The doctor looked at me. “Do you know what he took?”

I swallowed hard, seeing the scene of Howie lying on the couch in his dark living room, looking ghostly in the glow of his TV. I knew I’d never be able to get that image out of my head. “He drank at least half a bottle of Tequila, maybe more, and he took some pills,” I said, trying to remember what kind. I wished I’d thought to bring in the pill bottles from Lauren’s purse. “One was Tylenol P.M., and there was another kind... Atripla, I think it was called.”

The doctor narrowed his eyes. “Is he HIV-positive?”

Those words still hit me hard; I didn’t think I’d ever get used to hearing them. “Yeah,” I forced myself to answer. “He is.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

I tried to think back. “Um... well, he was diagnosed about a month ago, but he’s had it since, like, June or July.”

“No, I meant how long ago did he take the pills?” the doctor asked impatiently.

“Oh.” I felt my face flush. “Um, I don’t know for sure. I wasn’t there. He called me around ten or so. He sounded really messed up, so I went over to check on him and found him like this.”

The doctor looked at the clock on the wall. “It’s just after eleven now, so would you estimate it’s been less than two hours since his overdose?”

“Um... maybe? I don’t really know,” I replied, offering an apologetic shrug.

The nurse smiled at me reassuringly. “That’s alright.”

The doctor said nothing at first, apparently deep in thought as he stroked his chin, staring at the clock in the hallway. I could practically see the wheels in his head turning and wondered what he was thinking. Would he be able to save Howie? Before I could

work up the balls to ask, he turned to the nurse and spouted off a mouthful of medical jargon I didn't understand. "Let's order a tox screen, including blood alcohol and acetaminophen levels, a liver panel, electrolytes, BUN, and creatinine. In the meantime, we'll drop an NG tube and administer fifty grams of activated charcoal. Got all that?"

I sure as hell didn't, but the nurse nodded her head. "Got it," she said, jotting down the last of the orders as the doctor went in to examine Howie. When she was finished writing, she looked up at me and smiled again. "They're going to give Howie charcoal to absorb the toxins in his system. This could get a little messy, so it would be best for you to wait somewhere else. If you'll just follow me again, I'll show you to our waiting room."

She put her hand on my arm and guided me out of the room. I tried to look back, to get a last glimpse of Howie, but I couldn't see anything with so many medical people crowded around him. I could tell he was in bad shape by the way they were buzzing around his bed, each of them doing a different job. He must have needed a lot of help.

"Is he gonna die?" I blurted out.

"It's a good thing you brought him here when you did," the nurse said. "An overdose like that can be deadly if not treated early, but there's still time to reverse the effects. We won't know for sure until we get his labs back and see how he responds to the treatment, but I can assure you that he's in good hands. Why don't you wait in here, and I'll come find you when he's stable?" She gestured to a waiting area with chairs and vending machines. Lauren was already there, sitting by herself in a corner. She looked up and smiled when she saw me, giving me a tentative wave.

"Thanks," I told the nurse.

"You're very welcome," she replied, smiling. "Thank *you* for all the information you were able to provide. You've been very helpful."

But I didn't feel very helpful at all. I felt like I was to blame for this.

"What's happening?" Lauren asked, when I went over to sit beside her.

My voice faltered as I tried to fill her in, and once I was finished, I broke down completely, burying my face in my hands to hide my tears.

Chapter 19

Howie

I didn't expect to wake up from my overdose, so you can imagine my disappointment when I opened my eyes and found myself staring at a wall. Despite its pristine whiteness, I knew right away I wasn't in Heaven. It was all wrong. I didn't feel right. There was something shoved down my throat and something else stuck up my nose. My eyes crossed as I tried to see what was coming out of me, but it was all too blurry to tell. It made my head hurt.

Looking around, I realized I had to be in the hospital. There was no mistaking my surroundings: the sterile white walls, the eye-watering smell of antiseptic, the incessant sounds of monitors and medical equipment beeping and buzzing around a bed that had rails on both sides.

My heart sank as it occurred to me how badly I must have screwed up. *Fuck*, I thought. I felt like a total failure. After all the other mistakes I'd made in the last six months, I couldn't even kill myself correctly. Somehow, I'd managed to mess that up, too.

"Happy New Year," said a wry voice. I turned my head toward the sound and saw a woman in scrubs standing on my left side, fiddling with an IV bag that was filled with clear fluid. "Seems you weren't expecting to see 2014, huh?" She gave me a grim smile. Her voice softened, losing its sarcastic edge as she added, "I'm Pauline, your nurse."

Pauline... The name reminded me of my mother, Paula, and my sister, Pollyanna. This woman was much younger than both, but something about her reminded me of them. Maybe it was her sternness, mixed with the sympathy in her eyes as she looked down at me. I must have made for a pretty pathetic sight. I got the sense that she wanted to scold me for what I'd done. My mom would have done the same thing, if she were there, and so would Polly. I wondered if anyone had called them yet. Someone had to know where I was and why; someone had to have brought me here.

"You're in the Intensive Care Unit at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center," Pauline continued, answering part of the question in my eyes. "You were having some trouble breathing when you were brought in, so there's a tube in your windpipe that's breathing for you right now. Just try to relax and let it do its job. Are you in any pain?"

My eyes followed the IV line down to my left arm, where it was taped to the inside of my elbow. I watched it drip for a few seconds as I did a quick self-assessment of how I was feeling. I was groggy, weak, and achy all over, like I had the world's worst hangover – which was to be expected, I supposed. Nothing hurt much in particular, so I slowly shook my head.

"That's good." Pauline patted my shoulder. "How about I go grab your doctor and see if she's ready to take out that breathing tube?"

I nodded gratefully. Just the slightest movement made the tube tug. I was eager to get it out.

“Okay. Be right back,” said Pauline. I watched her walk away, then closed my eyes, welcoming the darkness. The fluorescent lights were too bright; they made my head hurt.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew, I heard a voice saying, “Mr. Dorough?” I opened my eyes to see Pauline standing at my bedside again, accompanied by a woman in a white coat.

“I’m Dr. Skinner,” the woman introduced herself, as she reached for the stethoscope she wore draped around her shoulders. Slipping it into her ears, she rubbed the bell briskly against the palm of her hand, then leaned forward and slid it under the neck of my hospital gown. She listened for a few seconds, then nodded and said to Pauline, “Set up for an extubation, please.” Straightening up, she looked at me and said, “Are you ready for us to take that tube out of your throat?”

I nodded again.

“Okay. I’m just going to sit you up while Pauline is setting up here.” She reached down and pressed a button that slowly raised the head of my bed until I was in a sitting position. I leaned back against my pillows, feeling light-headed. Dr. Skinner peeled off the tape that held the breathing tube in place. I could tell she was trying to be gentle, but I hadn’t shaved in several days, and it stung when the tape pulled at the stubble on my cheek. “Suction, please,” she said to Pauline, and the nurse used a hissing little vacuum hose to suck out the extra saliva, like they do at the dentist. The doctor fiddled with the breathing tube, disconnecting it from the huge hose it was hooked to. “Okay, Mr. Dorough. I want you to take a deep breath and then cough hard for me.”

It was hard to breathe through the tube in my mouth; I felt like I was trying to breathe through a straw. I sucked in as deep a breath as I could and held it, hoping this wasn’t going to hurt. I had no trouble coughing when the doctor pulled the tube out of my throat. It felt like she was yanking my lungs right out with it. For a few seconds, I couldn’t catch my breath. I doubled over, coughing uncontrollably. Pauline placed an oxygen mask over my face, and after a few seconds, I felt my lungs fill with air. I inhaled gratefully, glad to be rid of the tube.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Dorough?” asked Dr. Skinner, listening to my lungs with her stethoscope again.

“Howie,” I rasped. The back of my throat burned. “My throat hurts,” I added, testing my voice. It was really hoarse. I hoped the tube hadn’t done any damage to my vocal cords. Then I wondered why I cared. We weren’t touring anymore. I realized then that maybe I wasn’t so ready to die.

“Sorry, Howie. It may be sore for a few days,” Pauline said, as she replaced the bulky oxygen mask with a thin canula that went into my nostrils. “I’ll get you some ice chips to suck on.”

When she left, I looked up at Dr. Skinner. “How did I get here?”

“From what I understand, some friends brought you to the emergency room.”

What friends? I wondered. The only one who could have known something was wrong was Nick, and that was only if he’d bothered to listen to my voicemail. “Was one of them named Nick?” I asked.

She shook her head and shrugged. “Sorry, I don’t know. You were treated in the ER first and then transferred to the ICU.”

“How long will I have to stay here?” I had never been hospitalized before. This whole situation was brand new to me, though I realized I had brought it all on myself.

“At least a few days. We’ll need to monitor your condition closely.” Dr. Skinner was looking at me seriously. “I’m going to be blunt with you: You’re stable now, but you were in pretty bad shape when you were brought in. There was enough alcohol in your system to slow down your breathing to the point that you would have died if your friends hadn’t found you when they did. Your blood alcohol level was .36. That’s over four times the legal limit if you had been driving. At that degree of intoxication, the central nervous system becomes so depressed, it can lead to death. In your case, it almost did. Based on the amount of pills you also ingested, I’m assuming that’s what you were going for?”

I just nodded, too ashamed to admit it out loud.

“You were treated in the ER with activated charcoal to prevent the drugs from being absorbed into your system. We’re also giving you a medication called Acetylcysteine, which is an antidote for acetaminophen,” added Dr. Skinner, her fingers brushing the IV bag. “In high doses, Tylenol is notoriously toxic and known to cause severe liver damage. Acetylcysteine can prevent serious damage from occurring if it’s given soon enough after an overdose, but your case is complicated by the high doses of HIV medications you took with the Tylenol, which, along with alcohol, are also hard on the liver. We’ll monitor your liver function over the next few days to watch for signs of damage.”

I swallowed hard, wincing as pain ripped through my raw throat. “Thanks,” I whispered. I wasn’t sure if I was grateful to have been saved or not, but I didn’t know what else to say.

Luckily, Pauline came back at that point, sparing me from having to say anything else. “Here you go, Howie,” she said, handing me a cup of ice chips. “Take it easy with those. Your stomach’s probably pretty fragile from the charcoal right now.”

As I popped one of the ice chips into my mouth, I couldn’t resist touching the other tube that was still sticking out of my nose. It was thicker than the oxygen line, and it tickled. “When can I get this taken out?”

Pauline looked at Dr. Skinner, who shook her head and said, “The nasogastric tube needs to stay in place for at least a few more hours, until we see how you tolerate the Acetylcysteine. It can cause nausea and vomiting in some patients, so let Pauline know if you start to feel queasy.”

Pauline must have seen that I wasn’t happy with this answer because she suddenly smiled and said, “Hey, I meant to tell you, two of your friends are out in the waiting room. They’ve been here all night. We usually only let immediate family visit in the ICU, but if you’d like to see them, I’ll bring them back for a few minutes. I know they’ve been really worried about you.”

I wondered who was out there waiting. Was Nick one of them? I wasn’t sure I was ready to face him, but if he was the one who’d brought me here, I supposed I owed him something – an explanation, at the very least, plus another apology. “Yeah, okay,” I agreed. “They can come in.”

“I’ll go get them. Would you mind staying a few more minutes, Dr. Skinner?” said Pauline. Seeing the significant glance that passed between the two of them, I realized that they were afraid to leave me alone. They must have worried I would try to hurt myself again, though it wasn’t like there was much I could do while I was still tethered to a hospital bed with tubes sticking out of me. I figured the monitors would sound an alarm if I so much as moved the wrong way. Still, Dr. Skinner stayed and stood guard over me while Pauline left to find my “friends.”

I was expecting to see Nick and probably Lauren, so it was a surprise when Kevin and AJ walked in with the nurse instead. “H-hey, guys,” I stammered, thrown off by their appearance. I suddenly felt awkward and humiliated to be seen that way, sitting in an ugly hospital gown with tubes sticking out of my nose.

“Hey, D,” AJ replied, looking as uncomfortable as I felt.

Kevin didn’t say anything at first. I saw his eyes scan the equipment that surrounded my bed. He looked everywhere but into my eyes.

“I’ll let you guys visit for a few minutes. Hit the call button by your bed if you need anything,” said Pauline. She and Dr. Skinner left together.

I looked up at my two band brothers. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, not sure what else I could say.

Kevin swallowed hard, his adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, and finally met my eye. “Why would you do something like this?”

I held his gaze for a few seconds before I looked away. “You know why.”

“I know why you did it,” said AJ, “but it was still a dumbass thing to do. Your life isn’t over just because you have HIV, Howie, and if you think the world would somehow be a better place without you in it, you’re dead wrong.”

“You have so many people who love you,” added Kevin, “so many people you would have hurt if you had succeeded last night.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I failed then, huh?” I muttered sarcastically. “Just add it to the long list of things I’ve fucked up in the last few months.”

AJ snorted. “Your list can’t be any longer than mine, dude. We’ve all fucked up, some of us more than others.” He shot Kevin a sidelong glance, and Kevin gave him a grim smile back. I knew they were both thinking about that day, over a decade ago, when AJ had hit rock bottom during our tour stop in Boston and ended up checking into rehab. AJ definitely knew a thing or two about fucking up, but nothing he’d done even compared to the mess I had created over the last couple of months.

“You’ve never given anyone HIV, have you? No one *hates* you for what you’ve done.”

“No one hates you either, Howie,” said Kevin quietly.

I shook my head. It simply wasn’t true. “Nick does,” I insisted. “So does my wife.”

“They’re angry – as they’re entitled to be. But neither of them *hate* you.”

“How would you know?” I muttered.

Kevin raised his eyebrows. “Would Nick have come over to check on you and taken you to the hospital if he hated you? Would Leigh have cried over the phone when I called to tell her what was going on if she hated you? No, but both of those things happened last night.”

“Nick brought me here?” I asked.

Kevin nodded, confirming my earlier suspicions. “He and Lauren did. You look surprised. What did you expect, after that voicemail you left him?”

I winced. “You heard that?”

“He paraphrased for us.”

I swallowed hard, feeling the burn in my throat again. I scooped a small handful of ice chips out of the cup the nurse had given me. “I didn’t think he’d listen to it,” I mumbled, my mouth full of ice, “at least not until it was too late. He’s been ignoring my calls for weeks.”

“Well, thank god he did,” said Kevin, and AJ nodded in agreement.

“Is he still here?” I asked hesitantly. I still wasn’t sure I wanted him to be, so I was relieved when they shook their heads.

“He and Lauren went home a few hours ago.”

A few hours? How long had I been in the hospital? I wondered. “What time is it now?”

AJ checked his phone. “Just after six a.m.”

More time had passed than I’d thought. “Wow... so have you guys been here the whole night?” I glanced from one of them to the other. They both looked pretty ragged, I realized. Under the fluorescent lights, their faces were pale. Dark circles stood out underneath their puffy eyes.

They nodded. “Nick called me a few minutes before midnight,” said Kevin, “and I called AJ. We’ve both been here ever since.”

I shook my head, squirming with guilt. I suddenly felt selfish, as I realized I hadn’t even thought about what I would be putting them through when I’d decided to do what I did. “I’m sorry,” I apologized again. “You guys should go home and get some sleep. I’m all right now.” I put on a brave face, trying to reassure them that the worst was over, that I was in a much better state of mind and glad to be alive.

But in no way was I all right.

Chapter 20

Nick

The alarm on my cell phone woke me up after only a few hours of restless sleep. “What the fuck?” I mumbled as I rolled over and reached for my phone, wondering why in the hell I had bothered to set an alarm. It was New Year’s Day – in other words, National Hangover Day – and I had nowhere to be.

But like a chain reaction, this thought quickly triggered a whole bunch more thoughts. As memories came flooding back into my brain, I snapped out of my sleep-deprived stupor and sat up straight. I shut off the alarm, then looked more carefully at my phone to see if I’d missed any calls or texts. No one had tried to contact me in the four hours since I’d finally fallen asleep, which I took to be a good sign. I knew Kevin would have called if Howie had taken a turn for the worse.

When Lauren and I had left the hospital around two in the morning, Howie was stable and, quote, “resting comfortably” in the ICU. Kevin and AJ wanted to stay until he woke

up, but I was in no rush to see him. I didn't think I'd ever be able to look at Howie the same way again after everything that had happened.

"Nick?"

I looked over at Lauren, who was lying next to me in bed. "Sorry, Boose," I said, realizing I had just been sitting there, spacing out. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"It's okay. Don't forget to take your meds."

I groaned, remembering the reason for the alarm. This new medication regimen of mine still hadn't become routine. I had to rely on the alarm to remind me to take my meds every morning and again at night. It wasn't the way I wanted to start my day, but I didn't have much of a choice. Lauren stayed on my back about it, making sure I took the prescribed pills on time.

"I will in a minute."

"Do it now," she said sternly, and so, with a heavy sigh, I hauled myself out of bed and padded into the bathroom. "Any news on Howie?" I heard her call, as I took my pill organizer out of the medicine cabinet.

"No... nothing," I answered, grabbing the glass tumbler off the counter and filling it with water from the faucet. I opened the little container for Wednesday AM and shook two pills out into my hand.

"I guess no news is good news?" Lauren said uncertainly.

I popped both pills into my mouth and swallowed them with a swig of water. "Yeah," I agreed, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "We would have heard if something was wrong."

"Are you gonna go see him today?"

I set the glass down harder than I'd meant to and looked at my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were bloodshot from the lack of sleep, but beyond that, they looked haunted by the memories of what I'd seen the night before. I would never be able to forget the sound of Howie's voice on my phone as he pleaded for me to pass his final words on to his family, or the sight of his lifeless body lying among the bottles of pills and booze, or the taste of his tequila-infused vomit making me gag as I breathed into his mouth. Even if I managed to get that smell out of my car, I would never be able to get it out of my mind. I felt nauseous just thinking about it, as if the stench had been burned into my senses. I hated him for what he'd done to me... and for what he'd forced me to do for him.

I shook my head at my mirror image, ignoring its accusatory stare. "No."

“That’s alright,” Lauren said, as I walked back into the bedroom. “You don’t have to.”

“After last night, I can’t imagine anything more awkward,” I admitted, climbing into bed beside her.

“Imagine how he feels. It’s gotta be awkward for him, too,” she pointed out, but she didn’t push the issue. When I rolled onto my side so that my back was to her, she stopped talking and let me sleep.

My phone woke me up for the second time an hour or so later. This time, it was Kevin calling. “God, why won’t you just leave me alone?” I groaned, but, remembering our earlier conversation, I answered anyway. “Hey, Kev.”

“Hey, Nick, did I wake you? I tried to wait till I thought you’d be awake.”

I pulled the phone away from my face and squinted at it. “Dude, it’s only nine o’clock on New Year’s Day. What makes you think I’d be awake? Especially after last night. I left the hospital at, like, two a.m. It took me forever to get to sleep when I finally got home.”

“I can imagine,” Kevin said dryly. “I just got home about an hour ago. I can’t sleep either, not with two kids who were up at the crack of dawn, so I figured I’d call and give you an update. Sorry I woke you up.”

“Sorry you haven’t slept,” I replied, frowning. “So you stayed at the hospital all night?”

“Uh-huh. AJ and I both did. We finally got in to see Howie around six a.m.”

“Is he... um, how’s he doing?” I asked awkwardly.

“As well as can be expected, I guess,” said Kevin with a sigh. “He was alert and talking, anyway. He said he was sorry. He still thinks you hate him.”

“I do hate him,” I muttered.

“Oh, Nick... no, you don’t. You just think you do.”

“Oh, Kevin, shut the fuck up!” I snapped, sick of being patronized. “What do you know about how I feel? You’re not the one he came onto on the cruise. You’re not the one who got HIV from him. You’re not the one who had to hear the fucking suicide note he left on my voicemail, who had to break down his fucking door and drag his unconscious ass out of the house. You’re not the one who had to turn his head so he wouldn’t choke on his own vomit, or blow air down his fucking throat because he stopped breathing. You didn’t have to see him in the emergency room with all those doctors and nurses working on him, trying to save his sorry ass. He scared the shit out of me last night! But you wouldn’t know because you weren’t there, because he dumped this all on *me*, not you. I have every right to hate him. It’s none of your goddamn business how I feel about him, anyway!”

My rant shut Kevin right up. He got so quiet that, after a few seconds of listening to my own ragged breathing, I thought he must have hung up on me. But when I lowered the phone to check, I saw that the call was still connected. “Kev?” I said, raising the phone to my ear again. “You still there?”

“Yeah...” He sounded breathless, like the wind had been knocked out of him. “God, Nick, I’m sorry. I had no idea it was that bad. Why didn’t you tell us all that last night?”

I shook my head. “I couldn’t. It was bad enough having to relive it over and over again in my own head. I didn’t want to go through it all again out loud.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Kevin, “but you should try to get back up to the hospital to see him sometime. I’m sure he looks a hell of a lot better than the last time you saw him. Maybe it’ll help. I know it would help him.”

“I don’t wanna see him. Honestly, I don’t want anything to do with him.”

“He’s your brother,” Kevin said softly.

It was a good thing he was on the other end of the phone and not standing a few feet away from me because I probably would have punched him in the face, the same way I’d hit Howie. “No, he’s not, and you’re not my fucking father. Butt out, Kevin.”

Kevin sighed. “Okay, Nick. I’ll talk to you later.”

I hung up on him without a goodbye and sat there, seething with anger. Leave it to Kevin to try to tell me what I should do and how I should feel.

“Are you okay?”

I looked over at Lauren, who had heard the whole thing – well, my side, at least. She sat up, her long tangles of hair spilling over her shoulders, and put her arm around me.

“You’re shaking,” she whispered.

I turned my head, trying to catch a glimpse of the ocean outside our balcony doors, but the sky was so hazy, I couldn’t see a thing. I suddenly felt claustrophobic. I wanted to throw open the doors, run out of the room, and lose myself in the mist. But Lauren and I were trying to work on our communication, and I knew that withdrawing into myself and shutting her out wouldn’t solve anything. So I tried to be honest with her.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not okay. I’ll never be ‘okay’ again.”

“You don’t have to be.” She leaned into me, her lips brushing softly over my bare skin as she kissed my shoulder blade. “I love you either way. Like I said... we’re gonna get through this, babe.”

I wanted to believe her, but I felt like my whole world was falling apart. In that moment, I knew how Howie must have felt and why he'd done what he did. It was unforgivable, but understandable, nonetheless. Neither of us would ever be okay. Our lives were ruined. No wonder he'd decided to end his. If I didn't have Lauren, I might have done the same.

But, luckily, I did. She was the only stable thing left in my life, my rock in the middle of a stormy sea. Turning into the safety of her embrace, I wrapped my arms around her and, like a drowning man clinging to his lifeline, held on tight.

Chapter 21

Howie

I've never felt more alone than I did after my suicide attempt, which was ironic, considering that in the ICU, I was never physically alone. There was always someone coming in to check my vitals, change my IV bag, or collect another blood or urine sample. The doctors made their rounds twice a day, and in the meantime, the nurses kept a close eye on me. There was no such thing as privacy.

I felt like a prisoner, held captive in my hospital bed, hooked up to so many tubes and wires that I couldn't get up and walk away, even if I wanted to – and I wasn't sure I did. Despite how much I hated being in the hospital, I didn't think I was ready to face the outside world and deal with what I'd done. Just facing the guys had been bad enough. I felt sick to my stomach every time I pictured Kevin looking anywhere but at me or heard AJ saying, "*Your list can't be any longer than mine,*" as if he actually understood what I was going through. But how could he? The only people who could possibly understand the guilt and shame I felt were the ones I'd infected: Leigh and Nick. But neither of them had called or come to visit.

"Do you know if my wife's called?" I asked my new nurse, Jenny, on that first full day in the hospital. It had been a few hours since my overnight nurse, Pauline, had finished her shift. After I'd sent AJ and Kevin home, I had allowed myself to take another nap, but now that I'd slept off the worst of my hangover, I was more alert and desperate for information. It was starting to sink in just how much I might have screwed up my life. I needed to know how bad it really was – and who else knew. Had the rest of my family been notified? Had the media or the fans gotten wind of it yet? How much damage control would we have to do?

"Not that I know of, but I can check," offered Jenny. "While I'm doing that, there's someone here who would like to talk to you."

I hoped it was Nick. Nervous as I was to face him, I knew I needed to apologize – again – for what I’d put him through, but I hadn’t yet had the chance. My cell phone was nowhere to be found, and there was no phone by my hospital bed. Even though there were people popping in all the time, I felt isolated, cut off from all contact with the only ones who mattered to me.

The visitor was not Nick. Instead, Jenny sent in a woman to see me. She wore wire-rimmed glasses and a white coat, but I could tell right away she wasn’t a regular doctor. Maybe it was the nice blouse and slacks she wore underneath, or the pen and notepad I could see poking out of her pocket. Maybe it was the absence of a stethoscope around her neck or the presence of a rainbow pin on her lapel. Something about her just screamed “shrink.”

“Hi, Howie. I’m Dr. Zediar,” she said with a smile, reaching right through the web of tubes and wires to shake my hand.

Yep, I decided, definitely a shrink.

“I’m a psychiatrist here at the hospital,” added Dr. Zediar, confirming my suspicions. “Dr. Skinner asked me to consult on your case.”

“Look, I’m not clinically depressed or crazy,” I said quickly, “and this wasn’t a cry for help or some desperate attempt to get everyone’s attention.”

Dr. Zediar nodded. “I took a look at your chart before I came in,” she said in an off-handed way, as she pulled up a chair, turned it around, and sat on it backwards, with her legs straddling the back and her arms crossed over the top. I could tell she was trying to keep things light. Her off-handed comment, her casual way of sitting... they were all part of a practiced act, meant to put me at ease. Behind the thick lenses of her glasses, I knew those blue eyes were watching me closely, waiting for my guard to go down so she could get what she wanted out of me. Just as I was assessing her every move, she was studying me.

“You had some pretty high levels of drugs and alcohol in your system when you were brought in last night,” she added, raising her eyebrows. “Was that an accident, or did you know what you were doing?”

There was no point in playing dumb. Even if I thought I could pass off pretending to have misread the labels on my medications, pride kept me from trying. I wasn’t an idiot. Of course it had been intentional. “I knew what I was doing,” I admitted.

She nodded again. “Why did you do it?”

I had to hand it to her: her tone wasn’t accusing, as Kevin’s had been when he’d asked me the same question. It wasn’t judgmental. It wasn’t patronizing. It was simply curious, as if she really just wanted to know why. So I surprised myself by answering her honestly: “I wanted to die. I just thought it would make everything easier.”

“In what way?” she asked, maintaining the pretense of curiosity by cocking her head slightly to the side.

I sighed. “If you read my chart, you know I’m HIV-positive, right?” I said, and she nodded. “Well, what you may not know is that I got it from cheating on my wife and then gave it to her, and she passed it on to our baby. He’s got full-blown AIDS.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Dr. Zediar, pursing her lips sympathetically. “So you’ve had a lot to deal with lately, huh? An HIV diagnosis, on top of your son’s illness and, I would assume, some turmoil in your marriage?”

I let out a sarcastic laugh. “Some turmoil’ would be putting it lightly. My wife left me about a month ago. She took our two boys to her parents’ house in New Jersey, and I haven’t seen them since Thanksgiving.”

“That must have been hard for you. Do you think that on some level, maybe even subconsciously, you were hoping to get your family back by harming yourself?”

I shook my head. “I told you, I didn’t do it for attention. I didn’t do it to hurt Leigh, my wife, either. I actually thought she and the boys would be better off without me. They could live off the money from my estate, and eventually, they wouldn’t have to worry about being bothered by the media anymore...”

“Is that something they have to deal with often? Media attention?”

I shrugged. “Not a lot. Only when something big is happening.” *Like a Backstreet Boy trying to off himself*, I thought, and my heart began to pound. I knew if any paparazzi had been around when I was brought in the night before, there would be a media circus surrounding my family and friends that morning. I wished there was a TV within watching distance so I could check the entertainment news, but the walls of ICU were bare. I had no window to the outside world, figuratively or literally. “Hey, you haven’t heard anything about me on the news, have you? Or seen anything on the internet?” I asked the shrink.

She shook her head. “Cedars-Sinai is used to treating celebrities. Our staff takes every precaution to protect our patients’ privacy.”

I nodded, relaxing a little. “Good.” So it wasn’t out there yet. Still, I knew we would need to release some kind of statement eventually. I wanted to have the first word, before the press got wind of anything and went crazy with it. I just didn’t know what to say.

“Let’s go back to your family,” Dr. Zediar tried to redirect me. “Tell me some more about how the last few months have been at home.”

“There’s not much to tell. I had the perfect life, the perfect family, and I fucked it all up – pardon my French.”

Dr. Zediar didn’t seem fazed by my profanity. “No one’s life is really perfect, is it?” she asked, and I shook my head. When I didn’t say anything, she probed further. “You mentioned earlier that you had cheated on your wife. What led you to do that? You said yourself that your family was ‘perfect.’”

“My family is perfect,” I said and then sighed. “I’m the one with the imperfection.”

She gave me a searching look. “What do you mean by that?”

I felt like I had already said too much. I didn’t even know this woman; I wasn’t ready to tell her the secret I’d only recently revealed to my closest friends and family. “Can we finish this conversation later?” I asked, stalling for time. “I’m not feeling that well.” It wasn’t a lie; my head was still pounding, and my stomach hurt, too.

“Are you really not feeling well, or are you trying to avoid talking about your feelings?” countered Dr. Zediar, calling my bluff.

“I’m not feeling well, *and* I’m trying to avoid talking about my feelings,” I admitted, cracking a smile.

She smiled back, making me feel more relaxed. “Well, we don’t have to keep talking about your feelings, but sometimes talking helps to sort them out. I know it sounds cliché, but this is a safe place, Howie. You can say anything you want and know that it will never leave this room. Our conversation is completely confidential.”

I nodded. “Thanks, but I think I’d rather just be alone right now so I can sleep.”

Dr. Zediar pressed her lips together in a thin line. She seemed to be biting her tongue, clearly wanting to probe me some more, but I guess she could tell I was done talking. “Okay,” she said finally. “I’ll let you get some rest, but I’d like to check back with you later and see how you’re doing. If you change your mind and want to talk more, just let your nurse know. She’ll know how to reach me.”

“Thanks,” I said again and closed my eyes, hoping she would take the cue to leave. Even after I heard her walk away, I kept my eyes closed and tried to doze, but sleep wouldn’t come. There were a million thoughts running through my mind. I kept wondering what was going on outside the hospital and worrying about what would happen once I got out, too. It was almost a relief when my nurse, Jenny, came in to check on me. I was tired of being poked and prodded, but at least it would take my mind off my troubles for the time being.

“I hear you aren’t feeling so well,” said Jenny, as she stuck a thermometer in my ear to take my temperature. “Are you in any pain?”

It was a lot easier to talk about my physical feelings than my emotional ones. “My stomach sort of hurts,” I admitted, “and I have a headache, but I guess that’s to be expected, huh?”

She gave me a sympathetic smile as she waited for the thermometer to beep. “You shouldn’t have to be uncomfortable,” she said, taking it out of my ear. She checked the reading and wrote it down on my chart. “According to your chart, I’m not allowed to give you anything, but I’ll let the doctor know and see what he says.”

“Okay, thanks. Hey, did you ever find out if my wife has called? Her name’s Leigh... Leigh Dorough?”

“Oh – no, she hasn’t called here. Would you like me to call her?”

I felt a sinking feeling inside. Kevin had already called her, so she had to know what was going on. She just didn’t give a damn. “No,” I said, “that’s okay.”

“Well, if you change your mind, just let me know,” Jenny said brightly. “In the meantime, I’ll see if I can track down your doctor.”

There was a different doctor on call during the day. “Hi, I’m Dr. Stone,” he introduced himself. “Jenny said you’re experiencing some stomach pain?”

“Yeah, a little,” I replied, shifting in my bed. “Probably from having my stomach pumped last night, right?”

Dr. Stone frowned as he looked at my chart. “They didn’t ‘pump your stomach,’ Mr. Dorough. That’s hardly ever done these days. The NG tube was only put in place to give you activated charcoal, since you were unconscious.”

“Oh. Well, when can I get this taken out?” I asked, touching the tube in my nose.

The doctor ignored my question as he turned down the covers to examine me. “Let me know if this is tender,” he said, moving his fingers around my abdomen and pressing down in different places. It didn’t hurt until he hit a spot on the right side, just under my ribcage.

“Ow.” I winced. “Right there it is.”

I watched his face as he continued to palpate my side. I could tell something wasn’t right. “I think we’d better leave that tube in place for the time being,” he said after a few seconds. “We may need it to supply you with nutrients. I’m putting you on a strict NPO diet – that means nothing by mouth. This right upper quadrant tenderness you’re experiencing, along with the results of your latest set of labs, suggest there’s been some damage to your liver.”

My mouth went dry. “How much damage?” It seemed stupid to worry about liver damage when, less than a day ago, I had been ready to die, but since I was still alive, I guess I had a vested interest in how my liver was doing.

The doctor shook his head. “Only time will tell. We’ll need to run some more tests to get a better idea of what we’re dealing with.”

He kept saying “we,” but really, he meant me. It was my problem to deal with. I had done this to myself.

Chapter 22

Nick

“This is the shittiest start to a new year ever,” I ranted to Lauren as I got dressed the next day, “including the year I got arrested right off the bat.”

Standing in front of the full-length mirror in our bedroom, she suppressed a giggle as she pulled back her wet hair into a messy bun. “The DUI? Did that happen over New Year’s?”

“No, not the DUI. That was the second time I got arrested.” It made me feel like such an asshole to admit that. “The first time happened twelve years ago today.”

At the time, it seemed like the worst thing that had ever happened to me. I was twenty-one and had never been in any real trouble before. I remembered crying in the cop car on my way to the county jail, as I apologized again and again. All I could think about was what they would say about me in the tabloids. But that was nothing compared to the humiliation I would face if the truth about Howie and me ever came out. We could have kept it quiet, if he hadn’t tried to kill himself, but that was going to be a lot harder now that he was in the hospital. It was a miracle that much hadn’t leaked already.

“Ohh, at the club?” Lauren was looking at me in the mirror, freshly showered and already finished with her morning workout. Meanwhile, I had barely dragged myself out of bed.

“Yeah.” I pulled on a hoodie over my t-shirt. *What a loser*, I thought, as I saw my own reflection standing behind her. Even without makeup, she was so beautiful, and I looked like shit. I felt like shit, too. “I mean, that was bad and all, but this seriously fucking sucks,” I said, dragging the heels of my hands down the sides of my face. My cheeks felt sunken, but maybe I was just imagining that. I had scared myself reading about the side effects of my medications. One of them was something called lipodystrophy, which led to fat loss in the face and weight gain in other areas. I had worked so hard to get myself in shape and was still self-conscious about the way my

body looked even before I got HIV. That was enough to make me want to stop taking my meds, but I knew Lauren wouldn't let me. She was better than my alarm at making sure I took my prescribed pills, every damn day and night. I loved her and hated her for it.

"I know," she said as she turned around, still in her towel. She took me by the shoulders and looked me right in the eye. "It'll get better, though. It's got to, right?"

"Well, it can't get a whole lot worse," I replied, wrapping my arms around her waist. I ran my hands over the towel, feeling the firm contours of her body beneath its plush softness. As she leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder, I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of her shampoo. It had a calming effect on me. When I finally pulled away, I felt better. I actually believed what I'd said, that things couldn't much worse, but of course, they could, and they would. "I guess I should get going," I said with a sigh. I would have been content to spend the day in bed, but it was time to go do some damage control.

"Good luck." Lauren leaned in and kissed my lips, leaving them with the taste of toothpaste. "I love you."

"Love you, too," I echoed, as I grabbed my keys and left.

We weren't normally so clingy with each other, but what we'd experienced together on New Year's Eve had brought us even closer together. I know it sounds creepy, but seeing Howie on the brink of death made me think about what it would be like to lose Lauren, and I'm sure it made her think about me that way, too. After all, Howie's situation wasn't so different from mine. Under a different set of circumstances, I might have tried to take my own life, too. I hadn't told Lauren that, but I think she knew. I had come close to killing myself a few times, though never on purpose. She was the light that had pulled me out of those dark days, and she was the only reason I was coping as well as I was with my HIV diagnosis – which wasn't really that well at all. I didn't want to think about what it would be like without her support.

I would be like Howie, I thought again, as I climbed into my car. I could still smell vomit in the back seat, even though Lauren had taken it to the car wash to be cleaned. I decided I was going to have to get it detailed – either that, or buy a brand new car. "Maybe I'll make Howie buy me one," I muttered to myself, as I backed out of the garage. "He owes me."

I should have been going to see him in the hospital or, better yet, to the gym to work out, but first I had to pick up Brian from the airport. He had called the night before to ask me, after he'd finished booking the first flight out the next morning. Kevin wanted us all to sit down together and talk through what we were going to tell the public about Howie. Personally, I was still hoping we'd be able to keep the whole thing private, but Kevin seemed to think we needed to release some kind of statement.

I didn't expect Brian to be on board with that. There was a time when he would have wanted to distance himself from something so scandalous – the "Blurry Brian" years, we

called it behind his back, in reference to his refusal to show his face on my stupid reality show. I didn't blame him for that anymore. While I was out getting arrested and filming the hot mess that was *House of Carters*, he was launching a successful solo career in Christian music. He didn't want me to mess that up for him. It hurt at the time, but looking back on it with some hindsight, I could see his side of it. We'd become closer again since then, but to me, it still seemed like Brian lived in his own little bubble back in Atlanta. He liked having his own life out of the limelight, and he didn't like to leave it to come to LA, especially during a break. Frankly, it surprised me a little to see him taking this Howie situation so seriously. As far as he knew, Howie was going to be fine, thanks to me. He hadn't been there to witness what Lauren and I had. I wondered if Kevin had filled him in on the gory details that had come out in our phone conversation the day before.

I hadn't talked to Kevin since then, but I'd heard it through the grapevine – the grapevine being Brian – that he'd invited us all over to his house for lunch to work out what we were going to say. I wasn't looking forward to it, but at the same time, I wanted my say in the decision, so I had no choice but to go.

When I got to the airport, I found a place to park and waited in the car for Brian to come out. LAX is always crawling with paparazzi, and I was in no mood to be bothered. I texted Brian to tell him where I was and rolled down the windows to air out the car some more. It didn't help. "Dang, your car reeks!" Brian exclaimed as he opened the door, tossing his bags into the back.

"Yeah, I should have warned you, Howie puked all over the back seat," I said. "You might wanna move your stuff."

Brian wrinkled his nose, and I popped open the trunk. Once we were on the road, with the windows still down and all the small talk out of the way, Brian looked over at me and said, "So... it was bad, huh?"

I shook my head. I didn't really want to talk about what had happened, but I felt like I had to fill Brian in. "It was horrible. I dunno what all Kevin told you, but Howie almost died. He didn't... but he could have. That's how bad it was. He drank so much, he stopped breathing at one point. If we hadn't gotten him to the hospital when we did, he'd be dead right now."

"Jesus..." Brian let out his breath in a low *whoosh*. "Thank God you went over there, Nick."

"I know. I didn't want to... but I'm glad I did. I'm glad he's gonna be okay." It made me feel better to say that out loud. Even if it meant that Kevin was right, it was nice to know that I didn't *really* hate Howie, at least not in a "I wish you were dead" kind of way. But that didn't make me any less pissed at him for putting me through all of that.

"I hope he will be, but he's not out of the woods yet. It'll depend on how bad his liver's damaged."

“What?” I looked over at Brian in shock. “When did you hear anything about liver damage?”

Brian looked back at me, seeming equally surprised. “Kevin told me last night. What, he didn’t tell you?”

“No. I talked to him yesterday morning, and he didn’t say a damn thing about it! What the fuck?” I felt so stupid. How could Kevin have kept something like that from me the whole time I was ranting about hating Howie? That would have shut me right up.

“I don’t think he knew yesterday morning. He went back to the hospital in the afternoon and saw Howie again. He said they were going to run more tests.”

“Oh. Well, did it sound serious?”

Brian shook his head. “I don’t know. I guess we’ll wait and see when we get to Kev’s house, huh? I can’t believe he didn’t call you.”

“Well, I was kind of a douche to him on the phone yesterday,” I admitted. “He was doing the whole ‘Dad’ thing, trying to tell me what to do, and I went off on him.”

“So, the usual,” said Brian, and I laughed.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Brian smiled briefly, but his face quickly turned serious again. “So... how are *you* doing?” he asked, and I knew we were done talking about Howie.

“I’m...” The word “okay” formed and died on my lips. Brian had been my best friend for twenty years; I didn’t have to lie to him. “...not great.”

Brian put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Nick. I should have reached out to you sooner after Q’s funeral, but everything that happened was so...”

“Awkward?” I supplied. “Embarrassing?”

“I was gonna say ‘unexpected.’ I just didn’t even know how to react the other day, when you told us. I didn’t see that coming at all.”

I snorted. “Neither did I.”

“That whole scene at the funeral home just felt so surreal,” Brian went on, shaking his head. “Afterwards, it all seemed like a dream or something. I couldn’t believe it had actually happened. How long had you been carrying that secret around?”

I shrugged. “A few weeks. I found out not long after Howie did. He flew out here a few days before that show we did in Sacramento and told me to get tested.”

“So you knew then, and you didn’t tell us?” His tone wasn’t accusing, just sort of sad.

“I didn’t know the results yet. I didn’t wanna worry you guys for no reason. And, honestly, if I’d tested negative, I wouldn’t have wanted you to know at all.”

Brian nodded. “I can understand that. I’m glad we know now, though.”

“Really? Don’t you just wish you didn’t? I mean, doesn’t it make things awkward?”

“Not to me. You’re my friend, Nick. So is he. Nothing about that has changed.”

I sighed. “Everything else has.”

He was silent for a few seconds. Then, very softly, he started to sing, “*I know we’ve changed, but... change can be so good...*”

It took me a second to recognize the song as one of our own. As soon as I did, I burst out laughing. “Really, Brian? You’re gonna bust out that shit?”

He gave me a cheesy grin. “Couldn’t resist.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, well, there ain’t nothing good about this. This *sucks*.”

“I know,” said Brian, “but at least it made you smile.”

There wasn’t much to smile about once we got to Kevin’s house. As soon as we sat down around his kitchen table, things turned serious again.

“The news isn’t good, guys,” Kevin said, looking around the table at AJ, Brian, and me. “Howie’s showing signs of liver damage, which could be life-threatening. They don’t know how bad it is yet, but I think – and Howie agrees – that we need to release some kind of statement before it gets any worse. If we don’t, the paparazzi will find out eventually, especially with us going in and out of the hospital, and who knows what kind of bullshit rumors they’ll start.”

I snorted. “I don’t think they could make up anything that’s worse than the truth. I mean, what are we supposed to say? Howie slept with some random dude in Europe, got himself infected with HIV, gave it to his wife and baby – and *me* – and then tried to drink himself to death? Do you really want all that out there? ‘Cause I sure as hell don’t.”

“That’s what we need to figure out,” said Kevin. “What do we say, and what do we leave out?”

“Well, leave me out of it.” I scooted away from the table, crossing my arms over my chest.

Kevin gave me an annoyed look. To my surprise, AJ seemed to side with him. “It’s not about you, anyway, Nick. This is about Howie. We should stay focused on him.”

“Okay, looks like we’re leaving Nick out of it!” Brian announced, clapping his hands together, before I could think of a comeback. “What next?”

“Well, what information do we really want our fans to know?” Kevin asked. “They’re the ones we’re really doing this for, right?”

“I think they’d want to know that Howie’s in the hospital,” said Brian seriously. “We’ll get their prayers and support if we say that much.”

Kevin nodded. “But they’ll want to know what for. How much do we tell them?”

“What did Howie have to say when you talked to him, Kev?” asked AJ.

“He said he didn’t care, as long as we show him a draft before it goes to press, but he wants his family left out of it.”

“See, Nick?” said AJ, smiling at me. “Howie’s on the same page. He doesn’t want anyone else thrown under the bus.”

“Where is Leigh, anyway?” asked Brian, frowning. “Is she in town?”

Kevin shook his head. “I talked to her yesterday. She’s not coming.”

Brian and AJ looked at each other, obviously taken aback by that news. I was not as surprised. Maybe they thought it was shitty of Leigh not to come see her husband when he was in the hospital, but I knew better than either of them how she had to be feeling about the whole thing. Howie had screwed her over even worse than me. I didn’t blame her one bit.

“I know she’s been in contact with Howie’s family,” Kevin added quickly, trying to clarify. “They were going to keep her updated on his condition. But she said she can’t just pack up the kids and fly across the country, and she doesn’t want to leave them again so soon.”

“What if Howie gets worse?” AJ asked quietly. “You think she’d come then?”

Kevin shrugged. “Let’s just hope we don’t have to find out.”

A few seconds of uncomfortable silence passed, in which we all must have been imagining the worst-case scenario. Eventually, AJ cleared his throat and said, “So what we really need to decide is whether or not to say this was a suicide attempt.”

Brian blanched at the words. “Look, I know we’ve always tried to be honest with our fans,” he said slowly, “but don’t you think telling them the truth about this is only going to hurt them? Not to mention Howie’s reputation – and maybe even his career.”

Blurry Brian’s back, I thought, suppressing a smile. This time, I was actually glad he was so conservative. In this case, I happened to agree with him. “Yeah, and if the fans find out Howie tried to kill himself, they’re going to want to know why, and that would open up a whole ‘nother can of worms that would involve not only his family, but also me.”

“For the last time, Nick, we’re not going to tell the fans your HIV status, so chill the fuck out already!” AJ said in exasperation. “You just better hope the stalkerazzi never catch you coming out of the AIDS clinic.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to act like I didn’t care, but his comment made me break out in cold sweat. My worst fear was being found out that way. I could only imagine the media frenzy that would follow if I was ever photographed in front of the clinic, especially if they knew Howie was infected.

“I don’t think we should say anything about Howie’s HIV status, either,” I said, trying to sound like I cared about protecting Howie’s privacy just as much as my own.

“We can leave that out,” Brian agreed. “That’s not why he’s in the hospital. Not directly, anyway.”

“So do we call it an accidental overdose, then, or do we just say he’s suffering from some liver disease?” Kevin asked.

We all liked the liver disease idea, but weren’t sure how to word it. “Why don’t we all just go to the hospital after lunch and ask Howie?” AJ suggested. Kevin and Brian agreed, but I couldn’t bear the thought of setting foot in that hospital again or seeing Howie that way.

“Actually, I think I’m gonna head home,” I said. “I’m not feeling that well.” I knew I wasn’t fooling anyone, but I also knew I could use the side effects of my medication to my benefit if they called my bluff.

“Aren’t you gonna eat first?” asked Kevin, raising his eyebrows. “Kris made chicken salad.”

I shook my head, clamping my hand over my mouth to hide my amusement at the fact that Kevin thought Kristin’s chicken salad would convince me to stay for another round

of awkward conversation. “Thanks, but that doesn’t even sound good to me right now. My HIV meds make me really nauseous, and I haven’t had much of an appetite.”

Seeing the sympathetic looks Kevin and AJ gave me, I knew my excuse had worked.

“I’ll walk you out,” Brian offered. “I need to grab my bags out of your trunk anyway. Kev can give me a ride back to my place later.”

I told Kevin and AJ goodbye, then followed Brian outside.

Once we were out of earshot of the other two, he turned around and said, “Ya know, I don’t think driving home in your barf-mobile’s gonna help much with your nausea.”

I returned his wink with a sheepish smile. “I just really don’t want to go back to that hospital, Brian,” I admitted. “I’m not ready to see him.”

“I know. It’s okay. You don’t have to,” said Brian, slinging an arm around my shoulders and giving them a squeeze. “I am gonna go see him with the other guys. Anything you want me to tell him for you?”

I shrugged. “Uh... tell him to hang in there, I guess.” It was a pretty lame message to pass on, but after everything that had happened, I just didn’t know what else to say.

Chapter 23

Howie

On my second day in the hospital, Brian and my brother John both flew in from the East Coast.

Johnny came straight from the airport to see me. “Thank God you’re alive,” he said, hugging me through the tangle of tubes and wires. “We’ve been so worried about you. What the hell were you thinking, little bro?”

It almost broke my heart to hear him call me that and imagine the pain I’d put my family through. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I guess I wasn’t thinking.” It wasn’t exactly the truth, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell him I had done what I thought was for the best. It sounded better to make my suicide attempt seem like a mistake, a mistake I was now paying for.

John shook his head. “Don’t ever do that again. Nothing is that bad, you hear me? Nothing.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“I wish you would have reached out to one of us. You know we’re here for you, no matter what.” He squeezed my shoulder. “Mom and Angie and Polly and everyone send their love. They would have all flown out, but we didn’t want to overwhelm you with visitors.”

I managed a smile. “I know. Thanks, bro.” I appreciated the support of my family, but I noticed he’d left out one important name. “Leigh isn’t coming either, is she?”

He hesitated, then shook his head again. “No. I talked to her yesterday, after Kevin called. She sounded pretty shaken up, but she said she doesn’t want to leave the kids again, and she doesn’t want to upset them by bringing them out here, either.”

I nodded. “They don’t need to see me like this.”

“Yeah...” John looked around at all the medical equipment. “So... what’s all this for, anyway?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my bed. “Well, they’re keeping a close eye on me, as you can imagine. My doctor thinks I might have done some damage to my liver.”

His eyes widened. “How much damage?”

“I don’t know yet. They ran some more tests this morning; I’m still waiting to hear the results.”

“I’ll stay until you find out, okay?” He sounded anxious.

I shook my head. “They won’t let you stay long. They’re pretty strict with the visitor policy in ICU. You should go drop your stuff off at my place and get settled in.” Sure enough, it was only a matter of time before my nurse came over and reminded John that I needed my rest. He seemed reluctant to leave me, but eventually he did.

Brian and the Boys came by that afternoon. Nick, I noticed, was not with them. “He wasn’t feeling well,” Kevin explained. “He said his meds have been making him sick.”

“You don’t have to make excuses for him,” I said. “I know why he’s not here. It’s okay.”

“He said to hang in there,” Brian added, giving me a grim smile. He reached out and took my hand, clasping it tightly. “How ya feelin’?”

I shrugged. “Not great... but not horrible either.”

“That’s good to hear. Listen, I’m sorry for what I said the other day at Q’s funeral.”

Brian shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I was just upset.”

It took me a moment to figure out what he was talking about, but then I remembered the comment he'd made about me giving everyone AIDS. "I know. You don't have to apologize for that. I'm the one that should be sorry. For what I did to Nicky... for what I did to myself... for everything."

"It's okay. We forgive you," Brian said, and AJ and Kevin nodded in agreement. But it wasn't their forgiveness I wanted.

"Have you heard from your doctor yet?" Kevin asked.

As if on cue, Dr. Stone stepped in before I could even answer. I thought he would kick them out, since I was only supposed to have one visitor at a time, but he didn't say anything about the guys being there. He must have known I would need their support after hearing the news he'd come to deliver.

"Well, Howie, we got back your test results, and I'm afraid it isn't good," said the doctor, grim-faced and serious. "You're in acute liver failure."

"Failure?" I repeated faintly, my mind reeling from the word.

He nodded. "Your labs indicate a significant drop in liver function since you were first brought in. The combination of drugs and alcohol you ingested was enough to cause severe damage to your liver, and now it's shutting down."

"What do you do for that?" Kevin wanted to know right away. I was wondering the same thing.

Dr. Stone shook his head. "Unfortunately, there's not much we *can* do. The damage has been done, and there's no way, medically, to reverse it. Now, sometimes the liver does spontaneously recover on its own, but there's no guarantee of that happening. At this point, all we can do is take supportive measures until your liver either recovers or gets replaced. Your best shot is a liver transplant."

My mouth dropped open, as I struggled to wrap my mind around what he was telling me. *A transplant?*

Kevin, Brian, and AJ were all staring at the doctor in dismay, their reactions mirroring mine. We must have all been thinking the same thing. First I'd contracted HIV, and now I needed a liver transplant? It was unbelievable. How much bad news could one person handle? In a matter of weeks, I'd gone from loving life to feeling like the unluckiest guy in the world.

But no... this wasn't just bad luck. This was my fault. I had done this to myself.

"So... basically, you're telling me you guys saved my life for nothing," I said flatly, staring at Dr. Stone. "I'm going to die anyway." Beside me, I heard AJ draw in a sharp breath, but I wasn't sure whether to feel devastated or relieved.

“I didn’t say that. With a new liver, you could live a long life. I know liver transplant recipients who have lived thirty years or more after their surgery.”

I shook my head. “Haven’t you read my medical history? I have HIV.” Even if a new liver would extend my life, I knew there was no way they would want to waste a healthy one on me. Why even bring it up? I wondered.

“HIV is not the death sentence it used to be, Howie,” said Dr. Stone. “Thanks to the advances in antiretroviral therapy over the last two decades, people with HIV are living a lot longer. There was a time when no transplant team in the world would even consider transplanting an organ into an HIV-positive patient, but those days are over. Studies show that HIV-positive transplant recipients have more or less the same survival rates as recipients without HIV. We’ve done several transplants in patients with HIV here at Cedars-Sinai.”

Kevin let out a low breath. “Thank God,” I heard him murmur.

“See, Howie?” said Brian, sounding relieved. “There’s still hope. All you need is a new liver, and you’ll be better. Everything will be better.” It seemed like he was trying to reassure himself as much as me.

But I wasn’t the only one not buying it. AJ snorted. “A new liver – no biggie, right?”

Brian and Kevin both glared at him, but I actually cracked a smile, appreciating his sarcasm. It didn’t make me feel any better, but at least AJ seemed to understand how overwhelming this was for me. Despite how simple Brian made it sound, this *was* a big deal.

Dr. Stone seemed to agree with AJ. “I’m afraid it’s not quite that easy,” he said, looking at Brian. “Before Howie can receive a new liver, he has to qualify as a suitable candidate for transplantation. There are certain criteria the transplant team takes into account when determining whether or not to recommend a patient to the program.”

Kevin frowned. “But you just said Howie needed a new liver. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you can’t live for long without a functioning liver, right?”

Dr. Stone nodded. “That’s correct.”

“So... what’s the problem? Why wouldn’t that need be enough to qualify him?”

Dr. Stone cleared his throat. “At any given time, there are somewhere around a hundred thousand people awaiting transplants in this country. The ratio of organ donors to would-be recipients is much smaller. Due to the shortage of organs, priority is given to patients who have the highest need, but who have also demonstrated a commitment to complying with treatment and living a healthy lifestyle post-transplant. In other words,

we want to make sure these precious organs go to people who aren't going to waste them."

That was when I understood what he really meant. "People who don't overdose on pills and try to drink themselves to death," I added dully. It wasn't the HIV, but my suicide attempt that would stand in the way of my receiving a life-saving transplant. Although it seemed sadly ironic that the hospital staff would save my life, only to let me die later of liver failure, I couldn't deny that it made sense. Why would they waste a liver on someone who wasn't going to take care of it, someone who didn't even seem to care whether he lived or died?

"Your suicide attempt is something the transplant team will take into account," Dr. Stone acknowledged. "Before we consider you as a candidate, you're going to need to think long and hard about whether this is something you even want. A liver transplant could save your life, but life after a transplant isn't easy. You would spend at least a couple of weeks in the hospital, after which you would come back for regular follow-up appointments. It can take six months or more to completely recover, and even after that, you would have to take medication for the rest of your life to prevent your body from rejecting the liver. As someone recently diagnosed with HIV, I'm sure you can imagine how overwhelming that might be. Most transplant recipients say it's worth it, but if you feel it wouldn't be, you have the right to refuse treatment. In that case, we could keep you comfortable and let nature take its course." He looked me in the eye, and I understood that he meant let me die.

"How long?" I asked hoarsely. "I mean, how long would it take to-?" Seeing the stricken look on Brian's face, I quickly rephrased my question. "How long could I live without a transplant?"

Dr. Stone's expression was equally grim. "Even with the supportive measures I mentioned earlier, unless your liver function improved on its own, it's unlikely you'd survive more than seven days."

Seven days... I felt like I'd just gotten off the phone with the creepy little girl from that movie, *The Ring*, which Nick – who else? – had made me watch with him once. I couldn't help but wonder what he would think when he found out that, without a new liver, I only had a week to live.

Chapter 24

Nick

Everyone deals with stress in different ways. My fiancée's way was making lists. Lauren *loved* to make lists: to-do lists, grocery lists, workout lists, playlists. When I got home from my meeting with the guys that day, she was waiting for me... with a list, of course.

“Look at this list I found online!” she said excitedly, thrusting a printed piece of paper toward me. *Foods That Boost Immunity*, I read, before she snatched the paper back and announced, “We’re going grocery shopping! We’re gonna get your immune system in fighting shape. I’ve been reading about how to stay healthy with HIV, and the key is to keep your immune system strong.”

Inwardly, I sighed. Sometimes, I found Lauren’s endless energy exhausting. Still, I appreciated what she was trying to do for me, so I made myself smile and say, “Sounds good, babe.”

She beamed back at me.

On our way to the grocery store, she asked, “So, how’d it go with the guys today? What’s the latest with Howie? How’s Brian? Fill me in.”

“How ‘bout one question at a time?” I laughed, wondering how many cups of coffee she’d had while I was gone. I could tell this whole thing with me and Howie was taking its toll on her, too, no matter how hard she tried to hide it. She just handled it differently. “Brian’s fine. Howie’s... I dunno... not so good, I guess. The guys said he might have fucked up his liver, but they didn’t know how bad yet. They were gonna go visit him in the hospital later.”

“What are you gonna tell the fans?” Lauren wanted to know. I was glad she didn’t ask why I wasn’t going to the hospital to see Howie. I guess she knew better, by that point.

“I dunno, something about his liver, but nothing about the suicide attempt or the HIV. The guys were gonna draft a statement and get Howie’s approval on it before they gave it to our publicist.”

She nodded. “That sounds like a good plan.”

“Yeah...” My stomach growled. In spite of what I’d told the guys, I guess I was hungry after all. “Hey, you wanna grab some lunch before we get groceries?”

Lauren gave me a look, like I’d said something stupid. “How about we get groceries first and then use them to make lunch at home instead?” she suggested. “You never know who’s been handling your food at a restaurant.”

“What are you, the Germ Nazi now?” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

“No, but it’s a new year, and my resolution is to help us *both* stay healthy,” she replied, as if this was just about living a healthy lifestyle and not living with HIV. “One way we’re going to do that is by cooking more healthy meals at home and eating out less.”

Like I said: shittiest start to a new year *ever*.

But I couldn't complain, at least not out loud. I knew how lucky I was to have Lauren in my life. She could have left me after she'd found out I had HIV, the way Leigh had left Howie. But she'd stayed by my side and seemed determined to prove she was in it for the long haul. I didn't deserve a woman like her, but I was sure glad to have one.

I was glad I wasn't Howie.

So we went straight to the grocery store and stocked up on all the items on Lauren's list: citrus fruits and berries, lots of different vegetables, some seafood, spices, and several types of tea. I was relieved to find that it wasn't all that different from our usual shopping list, since Lauren liked to eat healthy anyway.

"Are oysters actually on your list, or are you just trying to seduce me?" I asked, smirking as I picked up the package of oysters she'd put in our cart.

"For your information, oysters happen to be high in zinc and... something else your immune system needs; I forgot the name. Not to mention protein," said Lauren matter-of-factly. Then, with a wink, she added in a whisper, "Of course, they're also an aphrodisiac."

For a second, I grinned, looking forward to getting laid. For a second, I actually forgot I was HIV-positive, probably for the first time since I'd found out. But a second later, I remembered, and my heart sank, as my face turned red. We hadn't had sex since my diagnosis. I knew there were ways to be "safe," but why take chances? The thought of infecting Lauren, like Howie had infected Leigh, terrified me. I wasn't ready to risk it, and I couldn't imagine she would want to either.

I walked ahead of her, pretending to be interested in picking out some fresh salmon so she wouldn't see my face. I felt her come up behind me. "We'll have to cook them, though," she said, without the sexy whisper. "You shouldn't eat anything raw; it's not safe."

Swallowing a sigh, I just nodded. I could tell she understood what had just happened and was trying to communicate that to me without saying the words. It made me feel a little bit better, but not much, because I knew it would come up again. Someday, we'd have to deal with it. But not then. There was too much else to worry about then.

On our way out to the car, we were stopped by a paparazzo with a camera. "Nick!" he called, after snapping our picture walking across the parking lot. "Hey, Nick, how are you today?"

"Just fine," I muttered, pushing the shopping cart faster. Lauren stayed close to my side, her head down.

"How's Howie doing? I heard he's in the hospital."

Lauren's head snapped up. I tried to hide my surprise as I glanced over at the guy. Had the statement been released already? I hoped so; otherwise, how had he found out?

"Howie's hangin' in there," I said shortly. Thankfully, we got to the car before I had to say anything else. "Have a good one," I told the guy as we quickly loaded our bags into the back, hoping he'd take the hint and scam. Instead, he hung around, taking photos even as I pulled out of the parking space.

"God, they're relentless," said Lauren, shaking her head. Even though she had grown up in L.A., she still wasn't used to the paparazzi. It was only since we'd started dating that she'd had to deal with them. I, on the other hand, had been photographed for so long, it didn't faze me anymore. I had learned it was best to be polite, but brief – keep it short, and keep walking.

But that day, it bothered me. It bothered me that the guys had released a statement behind my back, without even sending me a draft. Unless they hadn't, in which case it bothered me that the paparazzo knew Howie was in the hospital. It bothered me that Howie was in the hospital to begin with, and it bothered me that I didn't know how he was doing. I stewed about it the whole way home and even after we'd finished unloading the groceries.

As I chopped the broccoli while Lauren washed the fruit, I found myself wondering what was going on with Howie and wishing one of the guys would call with an update. I knew I could call, myself, but I wasn't sure I was ready to talk to him yet. Still, I wanted to hear how his tests had turned out. Liver damage sounded serious, but then, I had done some serious drinking and drugs back in the day, and my liver – as far as I knew – was fine. It was my heart that I'd fucked up, but over time, that had healed, too. Other than the HIV, I was healthy. And hell, Howie had always been able to hold his liquor better than me. He would be fine, too, I told myself. He had to be.

But in the back of my mind, I remembered how bad he had looked when we'd brought him to the hospital, how he'd stopped breathing in the back of my car, how close he had come to dying. Even in my wildest partying days, I had never come *that* close. What if he *wasn't* going to be fine?

The thought rattled me, and the knife slipped in my hand. Instead of sawing through the stalk of broccoli, it sliced into the finger that was holding it steady. Wincing in pain, I hissed a sharp breath through my teeth and pulled my finger back to look. The cut wasn't bad enough to need stitches, but it was already starting to bleed. "Shit!" I shouted, as a drop of blood rolled down my finger. I didn't want to, but I stuck my finger in my mouth and sucked on it to keep my blood from dripping onto the counter or floor. I could taste it, bitterly metallic on my tongue. I imagined the little HIV particles mixing with my saliva, swishing around inside my mouth. It made me want to spit, though I knew it would do no good. I was already infected. It would still be inside my body.

"What?" Lauren whirled around at the sink, looking at me in alarm. "What's wrong?"

“I fuckin’ cut myself. I’m fine!” I said quickly, holding up my hand to keep her at bay. “I’m bleeding, though, so stay back.”

She sighed, reaching for a towel. “Sweetie, I’m not gonna get it from standing within three feet of your blood. Let me see.” She finished wiping her wet hands and reached out to me. I stubbornly held my hand back and shook my head, refusing to let her come near me. “Fine,” she said finally. “I’ll at least go get you a Band-aid. Try not to bleed all over the broccoli.”

I let out a sigh of relief as she left the kitchen. It was short-lived. She had only been gone a few seconds when the doorbell rang. “God damn it,” I swore, hurriedly wrapping my hand in a towel as I went to see who was at the door. There were only a certain few people who knew the code to get through the gate, so I knew it had to be one of the guys. Sure enough, I opened the door to find AJ standing there. “Your timing sucks,” I muttered, as I stepped back to let him in.

“*You* suck,” he shot back, but it wasn’t with his usual vigor. “What’d you do to your hand?”

“Cut my finger. Just a few seconds ago. Hang on while I take care of this, will ya?”

He followed me into the kitchen without a word, watching as I washed my hands and used the clean part of the towel to dry them. By then, Lauren was back with the box of Band-aids. I made her set it down on the counter instead of handing it to me directly. I wasn’t going to take any chances. I carefully wrapped a Band-aid around my finger, then added a second in case the blood soaked through the first. Then I washed my hands again, making sure to keep my bandaged finger dry, and threw the bloody towel into the trash. “We got any bleach, Boose?” I asked Lauren, looking at the blade of the knife I’d been using. I could see a little spot of blood near the tip.

“Nick... babe, you are being way too paranoid about this. Just put it in the dishwasher; it’ll be fine. The hot water will kill anything left on it, I promise.” She gave me a look, waiting for me to do as she’d said. Reluctantly, I picked up the knife and put it in the dishwasher, making sure it was a safe distance away from all the other utensils. When I closed the door, she said, “Thank you. Now, you guys go talk while I finish up in here. If it makes you feel better, I’ll wear my Hazmat suit.”

“Ha, ha,” I said sarcastically, but I couldn’t help but crack a smile. I knew I was probably overreacting, but better safe than sorry. If I’d been more careful with Howie that night on the cruise, I wouldn’t be in this mess. But I knew better than to say that part out loud, especially with AJ standing right there. He wasn’t smiling, which should have been my first sign that something was seriously wrong.

“C’mon, man, let’s go sit,” he muttered, leading me into the living room.

I flopped down onto the sofa with a sigh. “So what’s up? How’s Howie? I take it you guys sent the statement out already, ‘cause some guy stopped me at the grocery store to ask about him.”

AJ nodded. “Yeah, we did, but...” He shifted his weight awkwardly. “There’s something else you should know.”

“What is it?” In a way, I guess I already knew the gist of what he was going to say, but it still shocked me to hear him say it.

“Howie’s in liver failure.”

My heart sank.

AJ’s voice shook as he continued, “His doctor told us he needs a transplant. If he doesn’t get one soon, like within a week, he’s gonna die.”

My heart stopped. Well, not literally. But for a second, it felt like the whole world stopped. I stared at AJ in disbelief. “Seriously?”

He nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose. For the first time, I noticed that his eyes were red around the edges. He’d been crying on the way over. “I mean, you can only live so long without a working liver, you know?”

“Okay, so... he needs a new liver. And once he gets one, he’ll be fine, right?” I kept trying to tell myself this couldn’t be as bad as AJ was making it sound. Howie couldn’t die.

But AJ shook his head. “He doesn’t want one.”

“What??”

“He doesn’t wanna have the transplant. His doctor even said they do them in HIV-positive patients now, that his status wouldn’t matter, but Howie told him no. He wants to die.” AJ’s voice broke, and he bent forward, burying his face in his hands to hide the tears in his eyes. I just stared at his crumpled body, not sure what to do or say. I was still trying to process what he’d told me.

He wants to die.

Well, Howie had wanted to die on New Year’s Eve, too, and he would have, if Lauren and I hadn’t gotten him to the hospital in time. Apparently, we had just delayed the inevitable. Maybe it was meant to be.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said with a sigh.

AJ looked up. Through the tears, his eyes flashed angrily. “What do you mean, you guess so?”

I shrugged. “I’m just sayin’, he did just try to kill himself two days ago. I guess he really does want to die.”

“Well, we’ve gotta stop him!” AJ sputtered. “We’ve gotta change his mind!”

I raised my eyebrows. “AJ... c’mon. You’ve been there, bro. We both have.” I was thinking back to the dark days of addiction. The other guys couldn’t relate, but AJ and I had that in common. As far as I knew, neither of us had ever seriously considered suicide, let alone attempted it, but in the midst of the downward spiral of depression, drinking, and drug use, we’d both come close to killing ourselves accidentally.

“Yeah, and thank god we had good people around us to keep us in check.”

I looked at him skeptically. “You really think there’s anything we could do or say that would change his mind at this point? It sounds like his mind’s made up.”

AJ stared back at me, tears streaming down his face. “Seriously, Nick? I thought *my* mind was made up, until Kevin broke my damn door down and made me to go to rehab. And you... you were a hot fuckin’ mess, until Lauren came into your life and helped you turn it around.”

I saw a shadow shift in the doorway and knew Lauren was standing on the other side, listening.

“Here’s your chance to pay it forward, Nick. *You* need to go talk some sense into him. If there’s anyone who can change his mind, it’s you.”

“Me? Why me?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“You’re half the reason he’s in the hospital in the first place. I’m not saying it’s your fault,” AJ added quickly, before I could get angry. “I’m just saying, Howie feels really bad about what happened, about what he did to you. He thinks you hate him. You need to convince him otherwise, give him a reason to live. Nothing his family or the other fellas have said seems to be enough, and Leigh’s made it pretty clear she’s not coming. So it all comes down to you.”

“Gee, thanks. No pressure or nothin’,” I muttered sarcastically.

“So does that mean you’ll do it?”

The thought of seeing Howie in the hospital with all those wires and hoses again made my stomach hurt. “I dunno. Just lemme think about it.”

“What’s there to think about?!” AJ stared at me incredulously. “Are you completely heartless? This is *Howie* we’re talking about here! If he doesn’t get the transplant, he’s going to *die*! Don’t you get that? The doctor said he’ll be *dead* within a *week*. You don’t have time to dick around and ‘think about it.’ You need to *go there – now – and talk to him*. Tell him you don’t hate him. Tell him you don’t want him to die. Tell him whatever it takes to get him to consent to the surgery!”

As much as I didn’t want to do it, I knew AJ was right. I had to. I had to at least try.

With a heavy sigh, I nodded. “Alright. I’ll go.”

Chapter 25

Howie

When I first woke up in the hospital, I wasn’t sure how I felt about Nick saving my life. I didn’t know whether I was glad to be alive or wished I was dead. A day later, as I lay in my ICU bed, listening to Dr. Stone talk about treatment options for my liver failure, I still didn’t know whether I wanted to live with what I’d done or let myself die and leave it all behind.

It was Kevin’s question that made up my mind.

“What about a living donor?” he asked the doctor. “Isn’t that something you can do now, take a part of someone’s liver and put it in another person? It grows back, right?”

Dr. Stone nodded somewhat hesitantly. “That is true, but-”

“Well, then, why don’t you just do that? Howie’s got three siblings-” Seeing where Kevin was going with this, I started to shake my head, but he kept talking. “-and if none of them are able to donate, maybe one of us would work as a donor.” He gestured to himself, Brian, and AJ.

“Kev, no,” I said, but he ignored me.

“We may not be related by blood, but we’re like brothers. I know any of us would be willing to donate a piece of liver to save Howie’s life. Right, fellas?” He looked at the other two, as if daring them to disagree.

“Guys,” I started again, still shaking my head, but Brian was already nodding.

“It’d be a small price to pay, but it’d be worth it,” he said, giving me a grim smile.

Even AJ, who had always been terrified by needles and bodily fluids, surprised me by agreeing. “I don’t know if you really want my liver, bro, after everything I’ve put it through-” He laughed awkwardly, trying to break the tension. “-but if it’ll help, you can have it. Well, half of it, anyway. I guess I sorta still need the other half.” He offered a weak grin, but there were tears in his eyes.

I was touched by the gesture, by their overwhelming generosity, but I knew I could never let any of them do what they were offering. “Guys, no. Stop,” I said firmly, holding up my hand. “Just stop right there.” Finally, I had their attention. I swallowed hard, trying to work out what I wanted to say. My head was pounding, and my thoughts felt scattered. I struggled to organize them into something that made sense. “Listen, I... I appreciate what you’re offering to do, but...” I shook my head. “I just can’t let you do that.”

Kevin frowned. “What do you mean? Of course you can. Like Brian said, it’s a small price to pay to save your life.”

Dr. Stone cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, I’m sorry to interrupt, but I want to clarify something. We usually only do living-donor transplants in cases of *chronic* liver failure, when we have more time to find a suitable donor. It’s a lengthy process that requires a lot of testing and counseling to minimize the risk to the donor. This is not something I’d recommend rushing into. You may not realize it, but removing a portion of the liver requires major surgery. It’s relatively safe for the donor, but there’s still a risk whenever we put someone under general anesthesia. It’s not a decision the transplant team takes lightly.”

“See?” I said, looking up at the guys. “There you go. I’m not gonna let any of you or anyone in my family take that kind of risk for me. It’s not worth it. With the luck I’ve had lately, you’d end up dying on the operating table. I would never be able to live with myself if I let something like that happen to one of you.”

The room fell silent, except for the soft hiss of oxygen through the canula in my nose. It seemed no one could argue with that logic. Looking at me, Dr. Stone said, “I’m sure you could use some time to talk things over with your friends and think about whether a traditional cadaver transplant is something you want to be considered for or not. I have other patients I need to get to, but you can have your nurse page me when you’ve made a decision. Do you have any questions before I go?”

I shook my head.

As soon as Dr. Stone had left, AJ exploded. “That dude was a dick! What was he doing, trying to talk you out of taking one of his ‘precious organs’? Fuck him! Of course you want to have the transplant!”

I sighed. “He’s just doing his job, AJ. And he’s got a point. Why waste a perfectly good liver on a guy who already destroyed the one God gave him? It’s not like I just got sick. I did this to myself. I deserve this.”

“No you don’t, D. *No one* deserves this.”

I smiled sadly at AJ, my oldest friend. “Thanks, J. It’s nice to know you’d let me have half your liver, even though I know how much you hate all this hospital stuff.”

AJ shrugged and looked away. “Aw, it’s nothin’,” he muttered. “Anyone else would do the same.”

Kevin and Brian nodded in agreement, but I snorted with skepticism. “You think Nick would?”

“Hell yeah, he would,” AJ claimed, a little too quickly. “If he knew what was going on, he’d wanna help.”

But I could tell by look Brian gave him that he didn’t believe it. I didn’t believe it, either. “He hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you.” Kevin sighed. “He’s just upset. You put him through hell the other night, you know.”

My stomach churned with guilt. “You think I don’t know that? He’s been through hell the last *two months* because of me! I know what I did was selfish. I took advantage of him that night on the cruise, and I took advantage of him on New Year’s Eve. I could have called anyone, but I decided to dump this all on *him*, and that wasn’t right.”

“At least you called someone,” Brian said quietly. “If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t be with us right now. Nick knows that.”

I shook my head. “I only called him because he was the one person I knew wouldn’t answer. I didn’t think he’d listen to my message until it was too late. I didn’t want him to find me like that; I just wanted him to know I was sorry and to tell my family the same thing. I shouldn’t have called him, though. I should’ve just written a note instead. Then it would all be over by now.”

The guys gaped at me, like they couldn’t quite believe what I was saying. “Dude, what the fuck is *wrong* with you?” AJ was the first to ask. “Why would you say something like that? You have so much to live for, D!”

“Think about your kids,” added Kevin. “Your family... your career...”

I was still shaking my head, as tears started in the corners of my eyes. “Don’t you guys get it? I don’t want to live *like this* anymore.” I made a wide, sweeping gesture that was meant to encompass not only the equipment in my room, but everything in my life.

“Forget the liver failure; it’s the guilt that’s killing me. Everything I had is gone! Leigh doesn’t love me, she won’t let me see my kids, and my career is pretty much over. Even if I recovered from this, you think Nick would ever want to perform with me again? Not

after everything I've put him through. It would be better for the group if I was gone. Then you guys could go on without me and pretend this never happened."

AJ snorted and shook his head, taking a swipe at his streaming eyes. "Like we could just forget about you."

"Like we would go on as a group without you," Brian added, as if I was a fool to suggest it.

I shrugged. "Why not? We did when Kevin left."

"That was different. Kevin wasn't *dead*. We always knew Kev would come back when he wanted to. Dying, man... you can't come back from that."

If Nick were there, he would have cracked a joke about zombies after that comment. But Nick wasn't there. It was just the three of them, crowded around my bed in the little ICU cubicle.

"What about our fans?" Kevin asked. "Just think of how they're gonna react when they find out you're in the hospital." He held up the piece of paper on which he had drafted the statement to send to our publicist. "And you're really gonna make us write another one of these in a week, when you're dead? No way, man. No fucking way. You've gotta fight this! We need you. Your fans need you."

"Forget the fans," said Brian, shaking his head. "What about your *family*? *They* need you! If they only knew the things you were saying right now..."

"They're better off without me. Look how much I've already fucked up their lives."

"Yeah, and you don't think it'll be worse if you're dead? Who's going to take care of them then? Who's going to watch out for James and Holden?"

I flinched as he said my sons' names, each one like a stab to my heart. "Leigh'll handle it," I said, looking away, so he wouldn't see the tears in my eyes. "Everything I have will go to her and the boys. She can use my money to make sure they have what they need."

"What about your brother and sisters? And your poor mother?"

I closed my eyes, allowing a few tears to slip out, and took a deep breath, sucking oxygen through my nose. "They've been through this before... with Dad... and Caroline. They'll get through it again."

"But why would you put them through that again on purpose?" Brian demanded. "Your dad didn't wanna die. Your sister didn't wanna die. It was out of their control. But you... you have a *choice* here, Howie!"

“That’s right,” I muttered, without opening my eyes. My head was still pounding, and my eyelids suddenly felt so heavy. “It’s *my* choice.” With a burst of strength, I forced my eyes open, forced myself to look up at their faces, though the tears made my vision blur. “I don’t wanna have the damn liver transplant.”

AJ started shaking his head. “Howie, come on...”

I took another deep breath and let it out slowly while I collected my thoughts again. “I’m sorry, AJ, but it’s how I feel. I don’t see the point of putting myself through a painful operation and months of recovery just so I can go back to living with guilt and HIV. I told you... I don’t wanna live like that anymore. I knew what I was doing the other night. I wanted to die. Nothing’s changed, except now, I’ll just die a little slower...”

The three of them were staring down at me with stricken looks on their faces. AJ’s mouth was hanging open with dismay, while Kevin’s eyebrows were furrowed in a deep frown. Brian was actually glaring at me, his blue eyes bright with tears. But in that moment, nothing they could have said would have changed my mind.

I felt oddly at peace with my decision. In a way, I felt like it was meant to be. My suicide attempt may not have worked out the way I’d planned – not that I’d planned it very well at all – but since it had destroyed my liver, it was still going to kill me in the long run. It was only fitting that it would take an extra seven days to do so. Maybe it was my punishment for trying to take my own life in the first place. Maybe it was karma that I should suffer a long, drawn-out death after shortening the lives of my son, wife, and best friend. Or maybe it was just more bad luck. Either way, I had accepted it.

“I’m sorry, guys,” I said, yawning, “but I’m really tired right now. Can you just go for a while, so I can get some sleep? You can come back later, if you want.”

I saw the worried looks they gave each other, but finally, it was Kevin who said, “Sure, Howie. You get some rest. We’ll be back later, okay? Hang in there, man.” He gripped my shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze, and then stepped back from my bed.

As they turned and walked away, I could hear them whispering about me – “*What the fuck is wrong with him?*” – but I didn’t care. I didn’t care about much of anything right then. My head hurt, and I just wanted to sleep.

I don’t know how long I slept, but when I woke, my brother John was by my bedside again.

“Hey,” he said softly, giving me a sad smile. “How ya feelin’, bud?”

I could tell by his tone of voice and the look on his face that someone had filled him in. “About like you’d expect from someone who looks like this,” I said, holding up my

hands. I hadn't seen myself in a mirror lately, but my hair hadn't been washed since 2013, and there was still a tube taped to the side of my face that was sticking out of my nose. I knew I couldn't look too good. I didn't feel good either. My stomach hurt, and not even the nap had helped my headache.

"I talked to Leigh on the phone," Johnny told me. "She sends her love."

I looked at him skeptically. "Did she really say that?"

He nodded. "Yeah, and she also said to tell you to hang in there."

She must have known, too. "Is she coming out here?" I asked.

He hesitated, then shrugged and shook his head. "She didn't say that."

I sighed, knowing that meant "no." "I wish I could see her... and the boys..."

"I know, man. But hey," he said, his voice brightening, "Mom's on her way with Angie and Polly. They'll be here by tonight."

Obviously, the rest of my family had been filled in as well, or they wouldn't have changed their minds about coming. I wasn't looking forward to facing them, knowing they would try to guilt trip me into going ahead with the transplant. I wondered what Leigh would say... what she'd really said...

"Can I call her?"

"Who? Mom?" John's face looked confused. "She's on a plane, Howie; she can't answer her phone."

"No..." I frowned, feeling like I wasn't making much sense. My thoughts were muddled, my mind still groggy. "Leigh."

"Oh. Yeah, man, sure. Here, use my phone; I think yours is still at your house." He wiped down the screen of his phone with the hem of his t-shirt and handed it to me. "You want me to step out and give you some privacy?"

I nodded. "Yeah, thanks, that'd be nice."

I waited until he had walked out, then looked down at his phone. It took me several tries to unlock the screen with a swipe of my finger; my hand was shaking, and my fingers felt thick and clumsy. I fumbled through his contacts list, almost accidentally dialing two different people before I finally found my way to my wife's number. I punched the button to dial and put the phone up to my ear, listening to it ring. I was used to waiting until it went to voicemail, but maybe she would answer if she thought it was just John.

Sure enough, after two rings, I heard a pause and then a soft “Hello?”

My heart skipped a beat at the sound of her voice. “Leigh?” I breathed.

“Howie? Is that you?”

“Yeah... it’s me.”

There was another pause, and for moment, I wondered if she was going to hang up on me. But then she said, “Hi... how are you?” It wasn’t exactly the response I was hoping for, but at least she hadn’t hung up.

“I dunno... alive? For now, anyway.”

She sighed. “Are you trying to punish me, Howie? For taking the kids away? Is that what this is?”

“What? No. I... I just...” I trailed off, struggling to explain myself. What could I say that would justify my actions and the decision I had made?

“Cause that’s what it feels like: a ploy to get me to bring the kids out there, or a punishment if I don’t. Well, I’m sorry, Howie.” I could hear her voice starting to choke up. “I’m sorry you’re sick, but I’m not going to fly two little boys across the country just to watch their father die.”

I closed my eyes, as my hopes of seeing James and Holden one last time were crushed. But I knew she was right. I didn’t want their last memories of me to take place in a hospital room.

“You don’t have to,” I said, and then, on sudden inspiration, I opened my eyes. “I’ll come to you!”

In that moment, it made so much sense to me. Why would I want to spend my last seven days lying in a hospital bed, when I could be with my boys? I sat up, ignoring the pain in my stomach, and swung my legs slowly over the side of the bed. I sat there for a second, swaying with dizziness.

“Huh?” Leigh’s voice sounded confused. “What are you talking about, Howie? Aren’t you still in the hospital?”

“Yeah, but I don’t wanna be here anymore. I don’t... I don’t wanna die here.” Slowly, I tried to stand, but the tubes and wires tugged, trying to hold me back. “Hang on,” I told Leigh, setting the phone down beside me on the bed. I slid the oxygen cannula out of my nose and slipped it over my head, tossing it aside. Then I reached down the front of my hospital gown and peeled off the little sticky pads that were attached to my chest. They pulled at my chest hair, making me wince as I yanked them off, one by one.

“Howie?” I heard Leigh say, her voice sounding far away. I’d almost forgotten she was still on the phone.

“Hang on a sec, hon,” I called to her. “I’m on my way!”

“Howie, wait. What are you doing??”

I looked down at the IV in my arm. That was going to really hurt, but I couldn’t very well wheel an IV pole with me onto the plane. I had just ripped the line right out of my vein when a woman in scrubs came running into the room, wheeling a shiny red cart.

“Mr. Dorough!” she gasped, skidding to a stop beside my bed. I thought she had been my nurse, but I couldn’t remember her name. She looked surprised to see me sitting up on the edge of my bed. My eyes moved from her face to the red cart behind her. It was really bright and shiny red, like one of James’s toy fire engines, and it had a lot of drawers. I wondered vaguely what was inside all those drawers. “What are you doing?” the woman asked. “You need to get back into bed, Mr. Dorough.”

“Where’s the code?” asked a guy I didn’t recognize, as he came into cubicle and looked around.

“There is no code. The patient pulled off his leads,” the nurse replied, frowning at me. “What’s wrong, Mr. Dorough? Did you need to use the bathroom?”

“No,” I said, “I’ve gotta get to the airport.” I started to stand up again, but my balance was still off, and I stumbled. Both of them rushed forward and grabbed me by the arms to steady me before I fell.

“Hey, he ripped out his IV, too,” the male nurse or doctor or whoever was holding my left arm pointed out. “He’s bleeding.”

“Don’t touch the site without gloves,” the woman replied quickly. “He’s HIV-positive.” To me, she said, “Mr. Dorough, you’re in no condition to leave the hospital right now. You need to lie down.” She put her hand on my chest and tried to push me back into bed, but I planted my feet firmly on the floor.

“No,” I insisted, “I need to see my sons! Let me go!”

“Mr. Dorough, calm down.”

“Hey, what’s going on in here?”

Hearing a familiar voice, I looked up and was relieved to see my brother walking back in. “Johnny! Johnny, thank god you’re here. I need to go, but they won’t let me leave!”

“Go?” John’s face looked blank. “Go where?”

“I’m not sure what’s got him so agitated, but he’s saying he wants to go to the airport so he can see his sons,” the female nurse explained, talking about me like I wasn’t even there.

“He’s altered,” I heard the man say, as if I couldn’t hear him. “Let’s give him four of Versed.”

“What? Wait,” I said, starting to panic as I felt the man’s hand close around my upper arm. The woman had turned away and was rummaging through her shiny red cart. I saw the flash of a syringe and knew what she wanted to do to me. “Wait, no! I need to go!”

“Mr. Dorough, you need to calm down,” warned the man, squeezing my shoulder.

“Howie,” I heard John say in the background, “Howie, chill out, bro. Let them help you.”

“No! I need to see... Leigh!” I tried to squirm away, but the man’s grip on me was too strong, and the woman’s reflexes too fast. Before I knew what was happening, he had pushed me back down onto the bed while she jabbed a needle into my thigh. As she pushed down the plunger, I felt a rush of something warm that made me woozy.

Light-headed, I was unable to resist lying down on the bed, as my body betrayed me. I no longer had control over my own limbs. I felt like I was floating, hopelessly adrift in an endless sea of black.

“Just relax, Mr. Dorough,” I heard the female nurse say. Her voice sounded like it was coming from far away, but it was soft and soothing.

My head still felt light, but my eyelids were so heavy. Against my will, they started to close, until the sea of black swallowed me up, and my surroundings faded away.

Chapter 26

Nick

AJ offered to give me a ride to the hospital that evening. I don’t know if he was just being nice or making sure I didn’t flake out on my promise. Probably a little of both. Either way, it wasn’t until I was riding shotgun in his car that I realized I was stuck doing this, whether I wanted to or not. AJ wouldn’t let me leave the hospital without talking to Howie.

When we got there, we went to the ICU, where Howie had been admitted since Tuesday night. It was Thursday now. The past two days felt like a bad dream. If I had known

this was what the new year had in store for me, I would have gladly stayed back in 2013. I wished I could go back to better times, before anything happened between Howie and me. 2013 had been a good year, for the most part. So far, 2014 sucked. But unfortunately for me and Howie both, time doesn't work that way. You can't rewind it or freeze it. It just keeps moving forward, ticking away until the day we die.

For Howie, time was running out.

It hit me when I walked into the waiting room with AJ and saw his whole family sitting there – not Leigh and the kids, but John and Polly and Angie and their mother, who was about eighty years old. That's when I knew AJ wasn't exaggerating or anything. If they had all flown out here from Orlando to be with Howie, it had to be bad.

“Mama D,” I said, going over to give Howie's mom a hug. Though she stood up to greet me, she was so short that she didn't even reach my shoulder. Somehow, I didn't remember her being that small – maybe because I'd been pretty little, too, when I'd first met her. She felt so tiny and frail in my arms, like I might break her if I squeezed too tight, but she gave me a big hug back.

“Nick... it's so good to see you here. We can't thank you enough for bringing Howie here... for saving his life.”

When she stepped back, there were tears sparkling in her soft, brown eyes – Howie's eyes – but she was smiling at me with genuine gratitude. It made me feel so awkward. If she only knew that I was at least partly to blame for Howie's overdose, she wouldn't be smiling at me like that.

“Anyone would've done the same thing,” I mumbled, feeling my face heat up.

Her wrinkled hand reached up and rubbed my shoulder in a warm, reassuring way. “I hope you're feeling better?”

With another stab of guilt, I realized that the guys had covered for me, explaining my absence with the same excuse I'd given them earlier. I wondered how much they – or Howie himself – had told his family. Taking a quick glance around the room, I saw no sign that any of them knew the truth about me. No sympathy. No judgment. Just sadness. Everyone had the same worried expression in their eyes.

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “Yeah, much better, thanks,” I lied. “Um, I heard Howie's not... not doing so well?”

Her eyes filled with a fresh batch of tears, as she shook her head. John stood up, putting his hand on his mom's shoulder. “He's just not himself,” Howie's brother explained. “The doctor said there might be some swelling in his brain; I guess it's a side effect of the liver failure. He got really agitated this afternoon and had to be sedated. He's sleeping it off right now, but you guys can go see him for a few minutes if you want.”

I glanced at AJ, who nodded. “C’mon, Nick, I’ll show you the way.” He put his arm around me and steered me away from the others.

“Well, that was super awkward,” I muttered, as we walked down the hall.

AJ snorted. “In case you hadn’t noticed, Nick, the last seven days have been super awkward, so that’s nothing new.”

I gave him a sidelong glance, then quickly looked away, pretending to be interested in the cheesy artwork on the walls. We still hadn’t talked about what had come out at Q’s funeral – or, rather, *who* had come out, meaning Howie. Not that he’d actually come out willingly. I was the one who had outed him, in front of everyone, right after I accused him of raping me.

How did Howie not hate me? I wondered. Why was I the one holding a grudge, while he was still trying to apologize?

It wasn’t right, and the realization made me feel sick to my stomach. This really was my fault.

“Hey... you okay?”

We had stopped outside a pair of double doors next to a window with a sign that said *Intensive Care Unit*. AJ was looking back at me, his eyebrows raised.

I shrugged. “Not really.”

He turned around and gave me a tiny smile that I guess was supposed to be encouraging or something. “Hey, I know this is gonna be hard for you, but you can do it. I have faith in you, man.”

I sighed. “How am I gonna convince Howie of anything if he’s not even conscious?” I guess a part of me was still hoping to get out of having to face Howie. AJ had understated just how hard it was going to be.

“John just said he was sedated. It’s not like he’s in a coma or something,” said AJ, turning away from me again. “Although he might be,” I heard him mutter, “if he goes much longer without a liver.” He punched a button on the wall with more force than necessary, and a nurse on the other side of the window buzzed us into the unit.

AJ led me past a row of small cubicles, separated by clear glass partitions. I couldn’t help but peek inside as we walked by. Curtains were pulled between some of the beds, but I still caught glimpses of the people lying in them. Most of them were hooked up to a lot of machines, like you’d expect. I remembered seeing Howie in the ER that way, with wires on his chest and an oxygen mask over his face. I wondered if he would look better or worse than the last time I saw him.

We stopped at the last cubicle on the end. The curtains were drawn, and I couldn't see inside without stepping directly in front of the doorway, but I knew this had to be Howie's bed. AJ gave me a rough pat on the back. "Just talk to him, dude. Maybe he'll hear you," he said, and then he nudged me into the room.

Even as I stumbled forward, I looked back over my shoulder. "You're not coming in?"

AJ shook his head. "I'm gonna let you have a few minutes alone with him to say whatever it is you wanna say. Just... keep it positive, okay?"

"Okay," I promised. Sucking in a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and took another step toward the bed where Howie lay.

He looked bad. Worse than he had on New Year's Eve. At least he was breathing on his own, but he had tubes coming out of his nose and out from under his covers. The hospital gown he had on didn't hide how yellow his skin had gotten or how bloated his body had become. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was hanging open. He was completely out of it. Were the situation any less serious, I would have snapped his picture and tweeted it out just to make him mad when he woke up and went online. We had always joked about how Howie could sleep any time, anywhere. But I wasn't in the mood to make fun of him then. It was that serious.

There was a chair by his bed, so I sat down. I didn't know what else to do. What did AJ expect me to do, launch into some heartfelt speech at Howie's bedside? I felt silly talking to someone who was clearly out cold, but I figured I should say *something* in case he woke up. I didn't want him to find me just sitting there, staring at him like some creeper.

"Howie?"

I watched his face closely, but he didn't even stir.

I sighed. "This is stupid," I muttered to myself, but a part of me was relieved. Maybe I wouldn't have to be the one to change Howie's mind. Why couldn't his family do that? Why wasn't anyone up Leigh's ass about apologizing to him or accepting his apology or whatever it was AJ wanted me to do? She was the one who was married to him!

It was the thought of Howie's wife that triggered my memory, and suddenly, I could hear him the way he'd sounded in the message he left on my phone, his voice shaking and slurring his words. *"Please tell Leigh I love her... and tell James that Daddy loves him... and that I'm sorry for leaving him. And tell Holden... that I love him more than he'll ever know, and that I'm sorry... sorry for making him sick. I never meant to hurt him either. I never meant to hurt any of you. God... I'm so sorry..."*

My heart started to race as I looked around the hospital room, remembering the rush to get him there. *Not fast enough*, I thought, as my eyes returned to Howie. He looked so pathetic lying in that hospital bed. I'd never seen him like that before. It sounds cheesy,

but Howie had always seemed so strong, both physically and mentally. Sure, he was a little guy, but he was in good shape. Of all of us, he was the one who'd always had his shit together. So to see him falling apart, his body literally breaking down before my eyes... it rattled me.

“God damn it, Howie,” I said. “You suck for doing this. You hear that? You suck!”

Of course, it was then that his eyelids started to flutter, and I knew he had heard me that time, and I felt bad because I was saying exactly the opposite of what AJ had sent me in there to say.

“Shit... I'm sorry, man. I didn't mean that. You know I don't mean half the shit I say,” I backpedaled, trying to smile at him, but the effort was weak. It was hard just looking at him. Even the whites of his eyes were sort of yellow, as I saw when he finally opened them.

“Nick?” His voice sounded weak, and I wasn't sure if he was really “with me” or not.

I cleared my throat and licked my lips nervously. “Yeah... it's me.”

“I'm sorry...”

I shook my head, surprised at the sudden tears that stung my eyes. “You don't have to say it again. I know. I'm sorry, too.”

He frowned up at me in confusion. “For what?”

I wished he wasn't going to make me say it, but I knew I had to sound sincere. “For... for humiliating you the other day in front of our friends. For hitting you. For saying I hated you.” I sighed and shook my head, struggling to find the right words to express how I really felt. “I don't hate you, Howie. I just hate what's happened to us.”

Howie nodded. His eyes were watery now, too. “I wish we could go back. I wish I had never let this happen.”

I smiled sadly at him. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“We can't, though, Nicky – sorry,” Howie sighed, “Nick.”

I wasn't going to say anything about the nickname. Sure, I hated it, but not when he said it. Until recently, he was the only one I'd allowed to call me that. It made me feel like the little kid I'd been when the group began, which, normally, I didn't like, but on that day, in that moment, I would have given anything to be twelve again and innocent, my body uninfected and my mind free.

Howie looked up at me like he was wishing the same thing. “You're gonna be living with this for the rest of your life... and it's all my fault.”

Like I could forget. The stark reminder of what he had done was enough to get me all riled up again, but I knew I couldn't lose control now. Struggling to keep my composure, I said, "Yeah, well, at least I'll still be living." Even though my heart was thumping erratically, my voice sounded amazingly calm. "Which is more than I can say for you, from the sound of things."

Howie lowered his eyes. "I don't wanna live like this," he said, just loud enough for me to hear him.

My heart began to hammer even harder, as I realized this was my moment of truth. Somehow, I had to convince him that, even after infecting half his family – and me – with HIV, he still had a reason to live. It seemed like it was going to be a hard sell.

"Well, fuck, no one would want to live like *this*," I said, gesturing toward the tubes that snaked out from under his covers. "But, Howie, you can fix this. There may not be a cure for HIV, but there is for liver failure. Get the transplant."

He shook his head slowly. "It'd be a waste of an organ."

"No, it wouldn't." I leaned forward, looking at him fiercely. "*Your life* is not a waste."

Finally, he met my eye again. "What do I have to live for?"

"Uh, let's see, how about your family? Your kids? Your career?" I said, ticking them off on my fingers. "The guys? *Me*?"

He sniffled, then made a face, like he was in pain. "Wouldn't it be easier for all of you if I wasn't around?" he asked quietly. "You could keep your status a secret. You wouldn't have to worry about the stigma."

I swallowed hard, hating myself for making him think I cared more about protecting my own reputation than I did him, hating myself even more for really feeling that way. I had been so selfish ever since my diagnosis. I hadn't given a shit about what Howie was going through; it was all about me. Maybe if we had tried to work through this together instead of going at it alone, we wouldn't be having this conversation in a hospital room.

"Oh, right, 'cause there's no stigma attached to being that guy in that boyband who drove his best friend to suicide." Somehow, it's just easier to be sarcastic than sentimental. Maybe it's a guy thing.

Either way, Howie looked stricken. He opened his mouth and closed it again several times, looking like a fish gasping for air as he tried to figure out what he wanted to say. I don't know whether it was the word "suicide" that shook him up or me calling him my best friend, but for a few seconds, it seemed like he was at a loss for words. Then, finally, he said, "This wasn't your fault. You know that, right, Nick?"

I shook my head. “How can you say it’s not my fault?? I called you out in front of everyone and accused you of raping me – which I apologize for, by the way. I was angry when I said that.”

“You have every right to be angry.”

“Yeah, maybe, but I still shouldn’t have said that – especially not in front of other people. It should have stayed between us.”

He nodded, closing his eyes. “I appreciate that.” He suddenly sounded so tired. Remembering what his brother had said about his brain swelling, I was worried.

“Hey... you okay?”

He nodded, without opening his eyes. “Yeah... it’s just this headache. It hurts. Maybe you should go and let me get some more sleep, huh?”

But I wasn’t ready to go without getting his word that he would agree to the transplant. “Maybe you should go ahead and get a new liver so you’ll feel better, huh?”

Howie smiled and still didn’t open his eyes. “Nice try, Nicky. My mind’s made up.”

That made me mad. “God damn it, Howie, are you gonna make me beg? Fine – *please!* Please sign the damn consent so you can have the surgery – if not for you, then for me and your family. You owe us that much.”

“Like that’ll make up for giving you HIV?”

“Well, it’s sure as hell not gonna make us even if you kill yourself! My life may be fucked, but yours would be *over!* At least give this a chance! Give... give *us* a chance!” I spluttered. “We can still work this out, Howie. But we’ll never be able to make things right if you’re dead.”

He sighed and finally opened his eyes, looking up at me with a mixture of sadness and maybe just a little bit of hope. “You really think we can work things out?”

I honestly wasn’t sure, but I nodded my head as if I believed it with my whole heart.

“Come on, are you serious, dawg? Of course we can. We always have before. Think of all the shit we’ve been through in the last twenty years, and yet, our friendship’s stood the test of time.”

I was talking out of my ass, but I had to keep trying until I said something that could convince him.

“This virus may be incurable, but I’d like to believe our relationship is stronger than HIV. Don’t you think we can survive this, too?”

He shook his head slowly, tears sliding down his cheeks. "I don't know, Nick..."

It broke my heart to hear him sound so hopeless, like he'd already admitted defeat. "Damn it, Howie, don't do this! Don't give up! You can't die like this; we need you!" Realizing what he was really waiting for me to say, I added, "I need you. I love you... maybe not in the way you want me to, but as a friend... and a brother. I already lost a sister to an overdose; don't let me lose my brother too."

I don't know if it took bringing up Leslie or if telling him I loved him was enough, but that seemed to do it. Closing his eyes, Howie whispered, "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay... I'll sign the consent."

My breath caught in my throat, as I leaned forward to make sure I'd heard him correctly. "Look at me... and say it again."

Howie opened his watery, yellow eyes and gave a single nod. "I'll do the transplant," he muttered.

I let out the breath I'd been holding in a sigh of relief. "Thank god. You want me to go get your...?" The question died on my throat as I watched Howie's eyes roll back into his head. "Howie?"

All of a sudden, his whole body went rigid and started to jerk, just slightly at first, and then violently enough to rattle the rails on his bed.

"HELP!" I shouted, knocking my chair over backwards as I jumped up and ran to the doorway of the room, banging on the glass partition. I glanced back at Howie, who had spit foaming out the corners of his mouth.

His monitors were going haywire; why wasn't anyone coming? "Hey, he needs some help in here, NOW!"

Chapter 27

Howie

Time passed by in a blur. In the ICU, I drifted in and out of consciousness, never really sure if I was actually awake or just dreaming.

When I opened my eyes and saw him sitting beside my bed, I thought at first that I had to be hallucinating. The fluorescent light framed his head from behind, washing out his

face, but giving his blond hair a sort of glow. Through my blurry vision, it almost looked like he had a halo.

Like an angel.

Even in my stupor, I knew better than to say those words out loud. He may have saved my life – or, at the very least, delayed my death – but he would kill me if he knew what I was thinking. So all I said was his name.

“Nick?”

He cleared his throat and licked his lips, like he always did when he was nervous. That’s how I knew he was real. “Yeah... it’s me.”

His voice sounded rough, like he hadn’t slept in days. There were dark shadows under his eyes, which stood out against the paleness of his face. For the second time since his diagnosis, I thought he looked... well, *sick*. I’m sure I looked a lot worse, but since I had no mirror, I could only focus on his sallow face, and it scared me. More than that, it reminded me, once again, that it was my fault. I had made him this way.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He shook his head, and though his jaw was clenched, I saw his chin quiver. “You don’t have to say it again. I know. I’m sorry, too.”

He spent the next few minutes apologizing for his behavior at Q’s funeral, begging me to agree to the transplant, and berating me when I said I didn’t want it.

“Damn it, Howie, don’t do this! Don’t give up! You can’t die like this; we need you!” He leaned closer, looking me right in the eye. “*I need you. I love you,*” he said, and my heart skipped a beat. “Maybe not in the way you want me to,” he was quick to add, “but as a friend... and a brother.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding in a soft sigh, but I never took my eyes off his face. There were tears in his blue eyes, making them extra bright.

“I already lost a sister to an overdose,” he said, his voice shaking ever so slightly. “Don’t make me lose my brother, too.”

I couldn’t bear to look at him anymore. Just hearing the pain in his voice was bad enough. We’ve all been through hard times, we’ve all lost people we loved, but Nick had had more than his fair share of drama to deal with. Between his messed-up family and the steady stream of women and so-called “friends” that had drifted in and out of his life, always using and abusing him, Nick had been hurt too many times before. Until Lauren came along, we – the Backstreet Boys – had been the only source of stability in his otherwise turbulent life. It must have felt like I had swept a rug right out from under

his feet, slamming him to the floor. I closed my eyes, hating myself for hurting him again.

But it didn't have to be this way, I realized. If I just agreed to what he was asking me, maybe things would get better... someday... for us both. I didn't want to live with the pain anymore... but I also didn't want to put him through any more pain. So I sucked in a breath and said, "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay... I'll sign the consent."

I felt his breath on my face as he leaned closer. "Look at me," he said in a low voice, "and say it again."

It was hard work, opening my eyes. My eyelids felt like lead weights; I struggled to lift them. It would have been so easy to just let myself slip away, without feeling a thing, but when I saw the hopeful look on his face, I knew I couldn't let him down again. My head was heavy, but I forced myself to nod. "I'll do the transplant."

Then I drifted off again.

When I woke up the next time, Nick was gone. Instead, my sister Pollyanna was sitting beside my bed. For a few seconds, I struggled just to focus on her face. Finally, I was able to form the words I wanted to ask.

"Where's Nick?"

I was shocked by the sound of my own voice - it was so weak and scratchy, the words slurred like I was trying to speak with a mouth full of peanut butter. What was wrong with me? *Silly question, Howie*, I thought, as I remembered: I was dying. My body was shutting down.

"He went home," Polly replied apologetically. "He waited around with us awhile, but when you didn't wake up..."

I frowned, feeling confused. "What time is it? How long was I asleep?"

My sister gave me a look of sympathy. "Dr. Stone said you wouldn't remember. You had a seizure, Howie, from the swelling in your brain."

"What?" It was hard to believe her, but I knew she wouldn't lie. "When?"

“A few hours ago, while Nick was visiting. You gave him quite a scare. You scared us all, actually.” Her eyes filled with tears as she reached out and took my hand. “We weren’t sure when or if you were going to wake up.”

I sighed. “I’m starting to wish I hadn’t...”

“Howie!” Polly’s eyes flashed. “Why would you say something like that?”

I felt humiliated. “As if Nick doesn’t already hate me enough, I had to go and hurt him again.”

“What are you talking about? Nick doesn’t hate you. You should have seen him afterwards; he was a wreck. But it wasn’t your fault, Howie; it’s not like you could help it. He knows that.”

I remembered that she didn’t know what Nick knew. She didn’t know what I had done to him, why he had every reason to hate me. But then, *did he* really hate me? The fuzzy memories of the conversation we’d had before I lost consciousness started to come into the foreground of my mind, more clearly than before. *I need you*, I recalled him telling me, with tears in his eyes. *I love you*.

I love you too, Nick, I thought, filled with regret over putting him through the pain of watching me slowly die. I realized that when it finally happened, I would be getting off easy, while he and the rest of my friends and family would have to suffer. That wasn’t fair to them.

“I told him I would get the transplant,” I said, as the rest of the memory came back to me.

Pollyanna nodded. “He told your doctor. Now that you’re awake, he’ll probably want you to sign something. Consent forms and such. Do you want me to see if I can track him down? I’m not sure if he’s still here this late, but-”

“Who... Nick?” My thoughts felt muddled again.

She frowned. “No... Dr. Stone. But I can call Nick, if you’d like. Maybe he could come back in the morning?”

I shook my head. “No... don’t. He’s been through enough.”

“Okay. I’ll step out for a second and see if someone can page Dr. Stone. Sound good?”

Even as I nodded, my eyelids were starting to grow heavy again. By the time my sister came back, I had drifted back to sleep.

My memories after that are pretty scattered, mostly the blurry faces and disembodied voices of my many visitors.

I know Dr. Stone came to see me at some point, and Dr. Zediar the shrink, and several other doctors whose names I did not know. They asked me questions, and I tried my best to answer, but it was becoming more difficult to stay awake and even harder to form coherent thoughts, let alone actual words.

I remember my mom sitting by my bed, holding my hand in her lap, rubbing the back of it between her fingers and thumb. I could barely speak by then, so I just lay there and looked at our hands. It struck me how much they had changed since I was a little boy whose hands fit neatly into hers. Mine were much bigger now, while hers seemed shrunken, withered with wrinkles. My skin looked saffron under the harsh fluorescent lights; hers was spotted and paper thin. I could feel every bone protruding from underneath it, as if all the fat were gone. She had never looked so frail, not even after my father died, though the sadness in her eyes was the same. I knew that was my fault. For the first time, I found myself hoping for a new liver to come through, if only to save her from having to bury another one of her children. No parent should outlive her child.

I thought of Holden and James, wishing I could hold them one last time. I looked for Leigh as the faces leaning over my bed changed, one into the next: Johnny... Polly... Angie... AJ... Kevin... Brian... But none belonged to my beautiful wife.

Then there came a point when I was beyond speaking, beyond even opening my eyes, still able to hear their whispered words of encouragement, but unable to respond.

“Hang in there, Howie,” was the last thing I heard, as someone squeezed my hand, and I wondered, *Hang in where?*

I didn't know where I was or where I was going. I was just “there.”

Chapter 28

Nick

I sat in the waiting room, all hunched over with my head in my hands, while they worked on Howie. It had been almost half an hour, but I was still shaking.

I'm sure Pollyanna could feel it as she sat next to me, rubbing my back in small circles. “It'll be okay,” she whispered, and I wanted to believe her. I didn't think people usually died from seizures themselves, and I was pretty sure that was what I had witnessed Howie having, but the knowledge still didn't make me feel much better. I knew Howie was in bad shape, and I felt like I was to blame.

It didn't help that AJ's first reaction when I came back to the waiting room after all the commotion was, "What'd you say to him??"

I thought he was kidding, until I looked at his eyes flashing with anger and fear. "Nothing!" I sputtered. "I mean, not *nothing*. I told him I loved him like a brother and begged him to have the transplant. He said he would."

"Oh, thank goodness," whispered Howie's mom, her hand over her heart.

I just hoped it wasn't too late.

"You know this wasn't your fault, right?" Polly said quietly, still rubbing my back like I was another one of her little brothers.

I nodded, but nothing could make me feel better until I knew Howie was okay - or, at least, that he wasn't dead.

When the doctor came to talk to us, I sat up straight. On the other side of me, AJ did the same. "How is he?" he asked immediately.

The doctor hesitated, looking around the room. "Are you all his family?"

"Yes," answered Polly, before AJ or I could say a thing. I shot her a grateful smile.

The doctor nodded. "Alright then. First of all, I want to let you know that Howie is in stable condition for now."

Everyone seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief.

"He did suffer a seizure," the doctor went on, "but we were able to stop it with medication. I believe his seizure was caused by a condition called hepatic encephalopathy, which happens when the toxins that would normally be filtered out by a functioning liver start to build up in the bloodstream. It can cause confusion, agitation, and altered states of consciousness. It's also associated with cerebral edema, or swelling in the brain. I'd like to order some more tests: an EEG to measure Howie's brain activity and a CT scan to look for signs of fluid accumulation. Since Howie is still unconscious, is his next of kin available to sign the consent forms?" He paused and looked around the room again.

I watched the Dorough family exchange glances. Howie's wife would probably be considered his next of kin, but since Leigh wasn't there, one of them would have to make the medical decisions. I was glad to be relieved of that responsibility, since I had barely absorbed what the doctor was saying.

"I'm his mother," Mama D said softly. "I'll sign whatever you need to help him." Nodding, the doctor sat down next to her to go over the necessary paperwork. "What about the transplant?" she asked, when she'd finished signing the forms. "Do I need to sign something for that, too?"

The doctor cleared his throat uncomfortably. "When I last spoke to Howie this afternoon, he wasn't sure whether a transplant was what he wanted. Has he changed his mind since then?"

"Yes," AJ said quickly. "He said he would do the transplant - right, Nick?"

I nodded. "I was just with him, and that's what he said."

"Okay," said the doctor. "Well, in that case, I will meet with the transplant team in the morning to discuss Howie's case. We will still want to talk to Howie himself before making a final decision on whether or not he'll be a suitable candidate for a transplant. There are a lot of factors to be considered."

I frowned, wondering if my conversation with my Howie would turn out to be for nothing. Even if he did want the transplant, it sounded like it was ultimately up to the doctors whether or not he would get one.

"God, I hate that guy!" AJ spat, as soon as the doctor walked out of the waiting room, after promising he would update Howie's family once his test results were in. "Who does he think he is, threatening to withhold a new liver from Howie? What an asshole. And his bedside manner seriously *sucks!*"

"It's in God's hands," Howie's mother said with a sigh. "If it's meant to be, it will happen, and if not... well, either way, we've done all we can do. Thank you, Nick, for talking to Howie, for helping to change his mind. At least now he has a chance."

I nodded hollowly, afraid I hadn't helped much.

"Maybe the two of you should head home for the night," Mama D added. "It doesn't look like Howie will be up for any more visitors this evening. You can come back in the morning, if you'd like."

While she wasn't exactly kicking us out, I could tell the Dorroughs needed some time to be alone as a family. It didn't bother me; in fact, it was a relief to walk out of that waiting room. I wasn't sure I wanted to come back.

"I'm sorry," said AJ, as we waited for the elevator at the end of the hall. "Sorry for assuming you said something to make Howie upset."

"Gee, why would you assume that? I mean, when have I ever said something that upset Howie?" I asked sarcastically, thinking back to our confrontation at Q's funeral.

AJ gave me a wry smile as the elevator doors slid open. "Hey, man, don't dwell on it, okay?" he said, slapping my shoulder. "You did your job. You talked him into the transplant. Now we just have to hope that douchebag doctor of his lets it happen."

I sighed, raking a hand through my hair as I studied my reflection in the shiny walls of the elevator. God, I looked exhausted. "It'd be so much easier if he were in the Backstreet Army," I said, and, laughing, AJ agreed.

When I got home, Lauren had a seafood dinner waiting for me. I wasn't hungry, but I knew she had worked hard on it, so I gave her a big hug and said, "You're the best, babe! How'd I get so lucky to be marrying a woman who can cook like this, huh?"

As I kissed her cheek, it occurred to me that I didn't deserve her, especially now. If I was lucky, then Lauren was the unlucky one who'd gotten stuck with me, even if she didn't yet see it that way. Sometimes I wondered whether I should hold on tight to what I had or just let her go. Not like she would leave, anyway. She had been more supportive of me this last month than she ever had before. This meal, made with love and the healthy foods off her shopping list, said it all.

As we sat down across from each other at the dinner table, she asked, "So how's Howie doing? Did you get him to agree to the transplant?"

"Yeah... but he's in bad shape," I said, shaking my head, and I filled her in on what the doctor had told us. She started on her supper while I talked, which gave me an excuse not to eat. I twirled my fork around and took a few bites, but while the food tasted fine, I had no appetite. We only picked at the oysters we'd bought earlier. Needless to say, neither of us were overly aroused.

Not long after dinner, I took my evening meds, and we went to bed. Lauren and I lay with our backs to each other on opposite sides of the bed and barely spoke after we turned off the lights. I'd told her I was tired, but even though it was the truth, I couldn't sleep. I heard her roll onto her back and start snoring after about half an hour, but I lay awake like a brick on my side, unable to stop my mind from turning over everything that had happened in the last two days.

I'd spent the past month hating Howie for what he had done to me, but despite everything, I didn't want him to die. Even though I'd given Kevin shit for saying so, it was true: Howie was like my brother. He was family. I'd been closer to him over the past two decades than I had my flesh-and-blood family - and in spite of our differences, I knew deep down that I would be devastated if any of my other siblings died. Losing Leslie had been bad enough, but one of the Boys? Howie, who had become my best friend in the group? I didn't want to think about it, but I felt like I had to prepare myself for the very real possibility that he could be dead in a matter of days.

I slept badly and woke up with my alarm, still feeling like shit. I got up long enough to take my morning meds and then went back to bed, hoping to get at least another hour of sleep.

No such luck.

It seemed like I had just shut my eyes when I heard my phone ring. Groaning, I reached over to grab it off the bedside table, in case it was one of the guys calling. But it was only my manager, Lori. I ignored the call and rolled back over, not in the mood to talk business, but I should have known she would just try me again ten minutes later.

When the phone rang a second time, I decided it would be best to just take the call and get it over with. "It's Nick," I answered in a low voice.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" Lori asked brusquely. Before I could even decide whether to be polite or honest, she went on, "I waited as long as I could to call you. I've already been inundated with calls this morning - mostly media requests for quotes on Howie's hospitalization. Anything you'd like to say on the subject?"

"Ugh," I groaned. "We just released a statement yesterday. Isn't that enough?"

Lori laughed. "Of course not. The world wants more information on what's wrong with Howie, all the juicy details you left out of your statement."

"Yeah. We did that intentionally."

“I know,” Lori replied apologetically. “I just wanted to make sure there was nothing else you wanted to add.”

“No comment,” I said quickly. I realized we were going to need to release another statement at some point soon, but that wasn’t my call to make, and anyway, I was way too tired to come up with a tactful way of wording it.

“Okay. Onto the next order of business, then: the reality show. VH1’s been up my butt about the shooting schedule. They want to know when we’re starting, when we’re wrapping, where we’re going to be shooting, and so on. What do you want me to say?”

I sighed, running a hand through my disheveled hair. “I dunno, Lori. Everything’s up in the air right now. I think it’s pretty safe to say the European tour isn’t happening, and-”

“Well, what about the wedding?” she interrupted. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound insensitive, but you’re getting married in four months, and that’s what this show is supposed to be about. So if you’re still going to do this, you need to start shooting soon.”

“I don’t even know if there’s gonna *be* a wedding!” I blurted, before I could stop the words from coming out of my mouth. Then, hoping my fiancée hadn’t heard, I quickly added, “-reality show! I don’t even know if there’s gonna be a wedding reality show. I... I mean, there’s just a lot going on right now with Howie and whatnot, and I don’t want a bunch of cameras around.”

Lori was quiet for a few seconds. Then she said, “So... I should tell VH1 what, exactly? To wait and see?”

“I... uh, yeah, I guess so.”

I could tell she wasn’t completely satisfied with that answer, but she agreed to stall VH1 some more until Lauren and I decided what we wanted to do. In truth, I already knew we weren’t going to be shooting that reality show anytime soon, if ever. If I were being honest with Lori, I would have just told her that, but that would require an explanation I wasn’t ready to give.

Howie was just a convenient excuse for the real reason I was so reluctant to commit: my HIV, of course. I didn’t see how I could hide it from the cameras while I was popping pills twice a day and trying not to puke them back up again in between doses. I was also starting to question whether we should even have the wedding, knowing I was sick with an incurable illness that could infect my future wife if I wasn’t careful.

But Lori didn't know that. Up until a few days ago, no one other than Lauren, Howie, and my doctor had known about my HIV diagnosis. The other guys knew now, but I wasn't in any big hurry to tell my publicist or anyone else. *Baby steps*, I thought.

HIV had put my life on hold, and for now, it seemed best to put our plans for the show - and maybe even the wedding - on hold, too, at least until we knew how things were going to turn out with Howie. I wanted to tell Lauren that, but when it came to it, I just couldn't do it.

"Hey, who called you?" she asked, coming into the bedroom a few minutes after I got off the phone. I searched her face for any sign that she'd heard what I had said about the wedding not happening, but she didn't look upset, only curious and mildly concerned.

"Lori, just wanting to know when we're gonna start shooting the reality show. I told her now wasn't really a good time, with everything that's going on with Howie. Sorry, I should have talked to you about it before I said anything, but... honestly, I'm just not sure about doing the show at all now." I looked up at her, shaking my head. "I mean, how am I supposed to hide this big secret with a bunch of cameras in my face? I'm not ready to tell the whole freaking world I have HIV, you know?"

To my relief, Lauren gave me a sympathetic smile. "I know, sweetheart. It's okay; you don't have to. Honestly, I don't care if we do the show at all. It was your idea, remember? It won't break my heart if we have to bail." She sat down on the bed next to me and rested her hand on top of mine. "We don't have to prove our love by airing it on TV, you know. No matter what, I love you, and you love me, and as long as I get to marry you... I'm good either way."

How could I say I was starting to have second thoughts when she was sitting there, smiling at me like that? I couldn't. And when she said, "Hey, our Save the Date cards came in yesterday. Wanna help me address them? Maybe it'll help take your mind off things," I couldn't say no to that either.

"Sure, babe - as long as you don't mind my messy handwriting."

"Oh, I expect perfect penmanship, Mister - no excuses!" Then she grabbed my hand and hauled me up from the bed, and we went into the kitchen, where the cards she'd ordered were already stacked on the table. I saw the date - April 12, 2014 - and my stomach did a somersault. In four months, we were supposed to be getting married. What had once made me so excited now made me feel sick.

Lauren must have seen the look on my face, because she said, “Hey, what’s wrong? You don’t like them?”

“Huh? Oh - no, the cards are great. Really cute,” I replied quickly. “I’m just... kinda... queasy.”

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry! Of course you are; you haven’t even had breakfast yet!” Lauren looked stricken. “Let me make you something first, and we’ll work on these later,” she said.

I watched her scurry around the kitchen, grabbing all the ingredients she needed to whip me up a healthy breakfast smoothie, and I thought again, *I don’t deserve her*. But I made sure I drank every drop of her smoothie anyway.

After we’d both eaten breakfast, we got started addressing the “Save the Date” cards. We were halfway through our guest list and my hand was starting to cramp up when I heard my phone go off again. I got up and ran back into the bedroom to check it, my heart leaping into my throat when I saw Brian’s name.

“Bri?” I answered, feeling my pulse pounding in my neck.

“Hey, buddy,” said Brian, but although he kept his voice light, I could tell he was about to say something serious. “So, you want the good news or the bad news first?”

“Good, I guess.” I was glad there was some good news to report.

“Okay, well, Kev and I went to the hospital this morning to visit Howie, and his family had just found out they’re gonna go ahead and put him on the transplant list. Status 1 - which basically means he’s first in line to get the next available liver. So that’s the good news.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, my heart rate starting to come down, “so what’s the bad?”

“Well, the bad news is that he’s been unconscious since late last night, and the doctors aren’t sure when or if he’s gonna wake up. They say he’s in a coma, from the swelling in his brain. They’re taking him into surgery soon to implant some kind of device in his head that’s supposed to monitor the pressure so they can try to keep it under control; if they can’t, it could cause brain damage.”

“Heh, that’s all we need, is for Howie to wake up all ‘dee dee dee!” I made a politically incorrect imitation of a mentally challenged person, knowing I was being inappropriate,

knowing Brian - my best friend before Howie and maybe my best friend again after him - needed me to lighten the mood as much as I expected the same out of him. He chuckled, but I could tell he wasn't laughing on the inside. Both of us felt like crying.

"Hey, as long as he wakes up," said Brian. "I'm sure AJ told you this yesterday, but the doctor said he doesn't have a lot of time. If he doesn't get a new liver in the next few days..." He trailed off, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"I know."

"So... yeah. I know you're not big on the church stuff, but if you could say a prayer... Howie could really use some right about now."

"Sure," I replied quickly. "Of course I'll pray. Is there... is there, um, anything Howie's family needs? Anything else I can do?"

"I don't think so," said Brian. "At this point, it's just a waiting game. We have to wait and hope for the best."

I nodded. "Keep me posted, okay?" I said, clutching the phone tight up to my ear.

"I will. Hey, let me know if you wanna hang out. We could go to the hospital together, or we could do something else. Just... lemme know."

"Will do," I said, but all I wanted then was to be alone. When I got off the phone, I didn't go back into the kitchen; instead, I went into my den and closed the door. I turned on the TV and started one of my video games, a violent one that involved shooting a lot of zombies. It was exactly the sort of mindless distraction I needed right then.

After a while, Lauren opened the door a crack and stuck her head in and asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I replied, blowing off a zombie's face.

"And Howie?"

"Not fine, but still alive," I said, which was more than I could say for the zombie - although zombies aren't really alive anyway.

"Okay." She closed the door again. I guess she could tell I needed some time alone.

I stayed in all that weekend, distracting myself with video games and avoiding human contact. The media requests were relentless, so I even shut off my phone, pretending I had a normal, nine-to-five job that didn't require me to think about work on the weekends. If any of the guys needed to get in touch, they knew where to find me. They all had Lauren's number, anyway.

I thought I might actually make it through the weekend without getting any more bad news, but on Sunday night, Lauren stuck her head through the den doorway again. "Nick?"

"Yeah?" I didn't even bother to look up. My eyes were fixed on the TV screen, my thumbs pounding away at the Xbox controller.

Then I heard the tremor in her voice as she said, "I just got off the phone with Kevin."

My heart skipped a beat. I paused my game. "Is Howie dead?" I asked, still staring at the frozen picture on the TV screen. I couldn't look at my fiancée just yet; I didn't want to see it written on her face.

"No... but he's in bad shape," said Lauren, and I let out my breath in a low sigh of relief. No shit he was in bad shape, but that wasn't news to me. "He's still in a coma, and his kidneys are shutting down. Kevin thinks it would be a good idea if we came to the hospital tonight..." She let the sentence hang in the air.

To say goodbye, I finished it in my head. Swallowing hard, I finally looked away from the TV. There were tears in Lauren's eyes. She held out her arms, and without a word, I got up off the floor and walked straight into them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, as she wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tightly. "I wish it were better news."

"It's okay," I muttered back, even though it wasn't. "I guess I knew it was coming."

She held me for a few minutes, rubbing my back while I buried my face in her shoulder. I breathed slowly in and out, inhaling the scent of her warm skin. I wanted to cry with her, but the tears wouldn't come. Strangely, my eyes were dry. I felt numb inside.

“You do want to go to the hospital, don’t you?” Lauren asked, and after a moment’s hesitation, I nodded. I didn’t want to - nobody *wants* to go say goodbye to a dying friend - but I knew the other guys needed me and that I would probably regret it someday if I didn’t.

It was time for me to let go - of the hurt... the hatred... and Howie.

Chapter 29

Howie

The last time I’d stayed overnight at a hospital was when Holden was born. He wasn’t due to arrive for another three days, but the morning after Valentine’s Day, Leigh came out of the bathroom and announced, “I think I’m in labor.”

I looked up at her, my heart leaping into my throat. “Really?”

Smiling, she nodded.

“Well, should we go to the hospital?” I jumped up to grab my keys.

Leigh laughed and shook her head. “We’ve got a few hours, honey. If we go too early, they’ll just send us home.”

“They didn’t send us home last time.”

“That’s because I was in pre-term labor last time. It’s different when you’re full-term.”

Our older son James had been born a month early, and things had definitely been different then. We were first-time parents, and our excitement was overshadowed by our worry over having a preemie. Thankfully, everything had turned out fine, and James was healthy, but still, it was nice to be able to sit back and enjoy the experience this time around, knowing that our baby was fully-developed and apparently ready to be born.

We waited until early evening to head to the hospital. Leigh’s contractions were coming five minute apart, and she was in a fair amount of discomfort by then, but she barely complained. My wife was a rock star.

Once we were settled into her hospital room on the labor and delivery floor, I did my best to fulfill my husbandly duties, holding her hand through the contractions and encouraging her to breathe. At first, it wasn't bad, but the further her labor progressed, the less zen-like she became. Soon, she was screaming, "Oh my *god*, get this thing out of me!"

"Shh, honey, you'll scare the other expectant mothers," I said, though really she was just scaring me. "The doctor said it isn't time to push yet."

"Urgh... I don't think I can do this much longer," Leigh groaned, bearing down on my hand until the contraction had subsided.

"Me neither," I muttered to myself, shaking out my swollen hand to try and stop the throbbing. I didn't remember it being this bad when James was born, but maybe I was meant to forget. I'd always heard that if women didn't forget the pain of childbirth, nobody would be have more than one kid. The same must have been true for husbands, too.

When Leigh was fully dilated and it was finally time for her to push, I positioned myself at the head of her bed. I didn't want to watch what was happening below. But when I heard the doctor say, "We're almost there; one more big push should do it," and I knew my baby was about to enter the world, I couldn't help sneaking a peek. I hadn't looked when James was born, but with the second one, I was curious.

The next contraction hit, and Leigh cried out as she pushed. As soon as I saw my son's head between her legs, I started to feel woozy. When the doctor wiped the bloody, whitish goop off his face, I stumbled backwards.

"Whoa there, Dad," I heard one of the nurses say and felt a pair of hands on my shoulders, pushing me down into a chair. "Might wanna put your head between your knees for a minute.

I wanted to keep watching, but blackness was closing in from the corners of my vision. From somewhere far away, I heard a voice call out, "It's a boy!" followed by the first cry of a newborn. *My newborn*, I realized, and slowly, the room started to come back into focus.

"Is he okay?" I heard Leigh ask.

“Your husband will be fine in a few minutes; he’s not the first dad to pass out in here,” laughed the nurse. “Your son looks great.”

By the time I was finally able to join Leigh at her bedside again, embarrassed about having almost fainted, they had cleaned the baby up, wrapped him in a blanket, and laid him on her chest. “Isn’t he beautiful?” she whispered as she cradled our little bundle of joy, looking down on him with an expression of pure love in her eyes. He was beautiful, and so was she. In that moment, I was as happy as I’ve ever been.

“He sure is. Holden John.” The name we’d picked out for him rolled right off my tongue, and Leigh nodded in agreement. I knew my brother would be honored we had given our son his name.

When the nurse took Holden to the nursery to be washed and weighed, I went to call my mom, who had kept James overnight. It was just after seven in the morning, but knowing my son, he’d already have her up. As I spoke to her, I stood in the hallway outside the nursery, watching them bathe my baby boy.

“Six pounds, fifteen ounces, and twenty inches long,” said our nurse, smiling, when she brought Holden back to me.

I walked him down the hall to Leigh’s room so she could try to nurse him for the first time. James had a hard time with breastfeeding, but Holden latched on like a champ. As we watched him eat, I slid off the stocking cap the nurse had put on his head. “He doesn’t have much hair,” I observed, running my hand over the fine, wispy strands that clung, sleek and still wet, to his soft scalp.

“No.... but it looks light, doesn’t it?” asked Leigh, looking more closely at his hair too. “I mean, compared to James. His has always been dark.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Holden’s is almost... blond.” I raised an eyebrow at her. “Leigh... is there something you need to tell me?”

“I... it was Nick!” she blurted. “He came onto me one night on the tour bus... nine months ago...” She stared at me with wide eyes, waiting for my reaction. I watched her face, knowing she wouldn’t be able to keep it straight for long. Then we both burst out laughing at the same time.

Obviously, I never believed my wife would cheat on me, especially not with one of my bandmates, and definitely not with Nick. But then... she’d probably thought the same of me, and we all know how that turned out.

He was the first friend I called, after spending most of the morning on the phone with my family members. “Hey, man, I’ve got some beef with you,” I said as soon as he answered his phone.

“Huh? What beef?” he asked, sounding clueless, as usual. I snickered to myself.

“Well... my son was born with blond hair. *Blond*, Nick. Would you happen to know anything about how that might have happened?”

“Wait, did Leigh have the baby?”

“What do you think, dumbass?”

Nick laughed. “Congratulations, dawg! Tell me everything! Well, maybe not *everything*.”

Talking a mile a minute, I filled him in on all the pertinent details - the name, weight, length, and amount of hair. “There’s not much, but what’s there looks *suspiciously* light,” I said, trying again to get a reaction out of him.

Finally, it dawned on Nick what I was trying to imply. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute! Howie, you know I would never sleep with your wife, right? I mean, she’s hot and all, don’t get me wrong, but I’ve got Lauren, and-”

I couldn’t help it; I busted out laughing. This is why I’m terrible at practical jokes. “I know, man, I just had to mess with you. It really looks like he’s gonna be a little towhead though.”

“Toe-head, I always hated that term,” said Nick. “People called me that when I was a little kid, and it just made me think of toe-jam.”

I laughed. “It just means *blond*, Nick. Anyway, it must be my dad’s Irish genes coming through.”

“Wouldn’t he be a redhead then?” Nick snickered. “God, I would love it if you had a little ginger kid, Howie.”

“Who knows, Nick - you and Lauren might have some hidden ginger genes to pass on to your spawn someday.”

Nick laughed and then cleared his throat. “Um, speaking of that,” he said seriously, “I have some big news too.”

My jaw dropped. “Is Lauren pregnant??”

“No,” Nick said emphatically. “But I know she’s ready to settle down and maybe have some rugrats somewhere down the road, so... I think I’m gonna propose to her.”

For a swift second, I felt like the rug had been swept right out from underneath my feet. But I quickly recovered from the shock and collected myself enough to say, “Really??”

“Yeah, really.” I could tell he was grinning on the other end of the line. “I already got the ring.”

“What?! No way. Nick Carter, the man who swore he never wanted to get married, went out and bought an *engagement ring*?”

He laughed. “I know, right? I’ve had it for like a week already, and I’ve just been trying to work up the courage to do it.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

“I dunno... I mean, what if she says no? Or what if she says yes and then I start to regret it? Then I’d have to break off an engagement, and that would be really awkward, and-”

I laughed. “You worry too much, Nick. Trust me, though; this is totally normal. Why do you think it took me six years to pop the question to Leigh?”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Well... do you love her?”

“Hell yeah,” he replied emphatically. “I love her... and I don’t wanna lose her.”

“Then just do it!”

Now it was Nick’s turn to laugh. “Okay. So here’s what I’m thinking. Tell me how this sounds: We’re going to the Keys next week, and I thought it’d be romantic to take her

out on my boat - if I can get the damn thing up and running - and propose to her on the water or on a private island or something.”

“Wow... you’ve turned into quite the romantic. Sounds perfect, Nick,” I said seriously. “Oh, but make sure you talk to her dad first and get his blessing. Be a gentleman. I know it’s old-fashioned, but it’s the right thing to-”

“Already did!” Nick announced proudly. “Me and Larry are tight. I brought it up the other day, before I bought the ring, and he was like, ‘I thought you’d never ask!’ Looks like I’m gonna be part of the Kitt Clan!”

“Wow,” I said again. I felt like a little part of me was dying inside, but at the same time, he sounded so happy that I couldn’t help but be happy for him, too. “Well, I have to say, I’m impressed. I have taught you well, Young Grasshopper.”

“Indeed, you have. Who knows, maybe someday we’ll be having babies too. Crazy thought, but stranger things have happened, I guess. Anyway, congratulations again, man. Can’t wait to meet the little guy.”

“Thanks. And, hey, you too! Good luck!” I told him.

“Hehe, thanks!” He sounded practically giddy. I, myself, was grinning from ear to ear when we hung up, but soon after, I felt my smile fading, as reality sunk in. Nick, the eternal bachelor, was getting married. My wife and I were now up to two kids. Any hope I’d had that Nick and I could ever be more than friends - no matter how improbable it seemed - had just been crushed.

I couldn’t have known that in a matter of months, my wildest fantasy - and my worst nightmare - would come true.

Chapter 30

Nick

When we got to Cedars-Sinai, everyone else was already there: Kevin, Brian, AJ, Howie’s mom, his brother and sisters... basically everyone except Leigh. They were sitting around the waiting room with solemn looks on their faces. I could tell some of them had been crying.

When he saw us, Kevin stood up and walked across the room to hug first Lauren and then me. “I’m glad you guys came,” he said quietly. “It’s not good, Nick.”

My breath caught in my throat. “He’s not-?” I started to ask, but I couldn’t say the word.

Kevin shook his head. “Not yet. Do you wanna go see him now?”

I hesitated. I had been thinking about what I would do and say when I saw Howie the whole way there, but I wasn’t ready. Saying I was sorry had been hard enough. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

Kevin put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “It’s gonna be tough, I know,” he said, as if he could read my mind. “But you’ve gotta go in there. If you don’t, you’re gonna regret it for the rest of your life. Trust me, bro. I’ve been there.”

He had to have been thinking about his dad. I was thinking about Leslie. She had died so suddenly and unexpectedly, I hadn’t been given the chance to make amends or to say goodbye, but I still regret not going to her funeral. As I wrote in my memoir,

It is a horrible feeling to lose a loved one in any situation, and even worse to lose an important person in your life with hard feelings still lingering... Don’t let disagreements or feuds keep you apart from those you love. Forgive them and ask their forgiveness because you never know when they might be gone forever.

I knew it was time to take my own advice. I couldn’t make the same mistake with my brother as I had with my sister. So I nodded, and Kevin patted my shoulder again in approval.

“I’ll wait here,” Lauren said, “so you can have some time alone with him.” She gave me an encouraging smile, then slipped away and went to sit with everyone else. A part of me wished she would come with me because she made me stronger, but I knew it wouldn’t be the same if she was there. She and Howie had only known each other a few years. He’d been one of my best friends for over half my life. I had to do this by myself.

Kevin escorted me to Howie’s corner of the ICU. “I’ll wait for you in the hallway,” he offered, at the foot of Howie’s bed.

“Don’t bother. I can find my way back,” I said.

“Okay. Take your time.” Kevin turned and walked away, leaving me alone with Howie.

I took a few tentative steps towards his bed, overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu as I looked down at his body. He had looked pretty bad before, but nothing like he did now. There were even more tubes connected to him, coming out of just about every orifice I could see and, thankfully, some that I couldn't see under the covers. A horrific-looking contraption protruded from the top of his head, where it had been implanted to monitor the pressure that was building up inside his skull from the swelling in his brain. Half of his face was hidden behind a breathing tube that was sticking out of his mouth and taped to his cheek. I could hear the oxygen hissing through the hose that connected it to the ventilator by his bed, forcing his lungs to breathe. There was still a thinner tube running up his nostril, delivering nutrients straight to his stomach, while clear fluid ran through an IV line in the side of his neck. Another IV in his arm carried blood into a big, noisy thing on the other side of his bed that I decided must be a dialysis machine. It was doing the job of his kidneys, filtering his blood and pumping it back into his body through a different IV line.

I realized it wasn't just about his liver anymore; all of his organs were starting to shut down. His body was being kept alive by machines. And, in that moment, that's all he was to me: a body. This wasn't my best friend. His lifeless shell, with its swollen face and jaundiced skin, looked more like a corpse that had been left out in the sun too long than it did Howie.

"God... what have they done to you, D?" I whispered, as I looked down at the hospital bed in dismay. "What have *I* done?"

I remembered when I'd first brought him to the hospital on New Year's Eve, watching the doctors and nurses work on him in the emergency room, and for the first time, I regretted it. I thought I had saved his life that night, but now I realized I'd only prolonged his death. This was no way to go, this indecent, drawn-out process of dying of organ failure in the ICU. By comparison, dying of a drug overdose alone at home seemed almost peaceful. If I hadn't intervened, Howie would have simply stopped breathing and slipped away in his sleep. But how could I have known?

"I'm sorry." There was so much more I wanted to say, but the lump in my throat made it nearly impossible to speak. I wasn't sure he'd be able to hear me, anyway. But just in case his senses were still working, I lifted his limp hand off the bed and brought it up to my lips, brushing a light kiss across his knuckles. For the first time in a month, I wasn't worried about HIV or anyone thinking we were gay. I was saying goodbye to my best friend, my brother. "Love you, Howie," I said and gave his hand a squeeze before setting it down again. Then I walked away, willing myself not to look back.

Kevin was waiting for me in the hallway, after all. He took one look at my face and said, “Wanna talk about it?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t ready.

We went back to the waiting room and sat with the others for awhile. They were sharing funny stories about Howie, trying to lighten the mood and laugh through their tears.

“Hey, Nick, remember that time we threw you out of the dressing room in your tighty-whities?” asked Brian with a big grin, trying to draw me into the conversation. “Would you believe that was really all Howie’s idea?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’d believe it now.” *Was that just so he could see me in my underwear?* I couldn’t help but wonder, and I hated Howie all over again for making me question his motives, for tarnishing my memories of him. I was still a kid when the infamous underwear incident had happened, and it creeped me out to think he could have had feelings for me back then. I couldn’t take hearing any more stories, so I stood up abruptly. “Sorry, guys, but I gotta get out of here.”

“Nick, wait,” Kevin protested. “We didn’t mean to embarrass you...”

“You didn’t,” I said shortly. “It’s not that. I just can’t stand sitting around here, waiting for him to...” I shook my head. “Sorry,” I said to Howie’s family, and then I reached for Lauren’s hand.

“We should be together,” AJ started to argue, but Brian said, “Let him go.” I looked at him gratefully, and he shot me a sympathetic smile. For a moment, we felt like Frick and Frack again - as if, even after all these years and everything that had happened with Howie, Brian still understood me better than anyone. I wasn’t sure that was true, but I appreciated his show of compassion all the same.

“I’ll call you if anything changes, okay?”

I nodded. “Okay. Thanks, Bri.”

By the time Lauren and I left the hospital, my head was swimming, but my eyes were still dry. I kept my composure as we walked quickly past a couple of paparazzi who were skulking around the front entrance. It wasn’t until we were in the car that the tears finally came.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” said Lauren, as she leaned over to hug me. “I wish there was something more we could do.”

I could still smell the faint stench of stale vomit lingering in my back seat, and it took me straight back to that night, when I’d held Howie’s head in my lap and breathed for him. I shook my head, trying to rid my mind of the memory. “I think we did too much.”

Lauren sat back in her seat. “What do you mean?” she asked, her eyes searching mine.

“You should have seen him, Lo,” I said quietly. “All hooked up to machines... That’s not how he wanted to go. Maybe it would have been better if we’d just let him die his way on New Year’s Eve. Then he wouldn’t have to suffer anymore.”

Lauren gave me a sympathetic smile. “I’m sure they’re keeping him as comfortable as possible... making sure he’s not in pain...”

“I know, but... that’s not what I mean.” I struggled to explain myself. “It’s just, with everything that’s been going on, I think Howie’s suffered enough.”

She nodded. “I see your point.”

I sighed. “Yeah, well, I don’t wanna talk about it anymore. Let’s just go home.”

“Whatever you wanna do. But how about I drive?”

I allowed her to trade places with me and take the wheel while I sat in the passenger seat, watching out the window as she drove us home in silence.

When we got home, Lauren took a long shower while I took my evening meds and got ready for bed. I was tired, but there was no way I was going to sleep. As I lay awake, replaying the evening’s events in my mind while I waited for her to come out of the bathroom, I thought back to our conversation in the car.

I hadn’t meant to blow her off, but I knew she wouldn’t understand the magnitude of the pain Howie had felt - not just physical pain, but emotional and mental anguish over what he had allowed to happen to himself, to his wife and son, and to me. I understood it because I had felt it, too. A fresh wave of it hit me in the face every time I looked at Lauren and wondered about our future together. What if she ended up testing positive, too? Would she still love me? And what if she stayed negative? Would she really marry a man whose days were numbered? Would she risk becoming infected, just to be

intimate? Or would she start to resent me, the same way I'd hated Howie for what he had done to me?

I didn't blame him for wanting to leave those feelings behind. But while Howie had found a way out for himself, he was also letting the rest of us shoulder his burden. Lauren and I weren't getting off that easily. We still had to face this, now and for the rest of our lives.

Chapter 31

Howie

Some would say I was living a lie, but the truth was, I loved my wife and the life we had before this happened.

It wasn't like it all happened out of the blue, though. I had been struggling with my sexuality since I was a teenager, but I'd tried to stifle the feelings I felt for other boys, knowing I would face disapproval from my parents and condemnation from my Catholic faith if I dared to pursue them. So I didn't. In fact, I went in the opposite direction, fashioning myself as a ladies man, the "Latin Lover" of the Backstreet Boys. Once the group got going, I felt I was expected to live like the cheesy love songs we were singing, so I found girlfriends all over the world. We would hook up whenever I was in their country, and I would whisper sweet nothings in their ear one night and be gone the next morning, off to wherever the tour took me.

When I met Leigh in 2000, everything changed. She had been hired to work on our website, and we became fast friends. She was fun and easy to talk to - and yes, easy on the eyes, too. Even though I was still having feelings for guys, I found her attractive. It didn't feel like a lie when I finally asked her to marry me on New Year's Eve, six years after we started dating. I wanted so badly to be in love with a woman, and Leigh was the one - the only woman for me.

She was already five months pregnant with James when my feelings for Nick developed. That didn't happen out of the blue, either, but I do remember the day when I first realized I felt more for him than friendship.

It was February of 2009, and we had flown to San Juan, Puerto Rico for a few days of rehearsal before we started our South American leg of the *Unbreakable* tour. Up until

that time, Nick had always been like the annoying little brother I'd never had and never wanted. He loved to play pranks on me, taking pictures of me and putting things in my mouth while I slept, licking my face and telling everyone I tasted like hot sauce. Brian and AJ may have thought he was funny, but I found him obnoxious. Of course, I loved him like a brother, but we weren't particularly close back then.

Our world tour for *Unbreakable* was a rough one for all of us, both professionally and personally. It was our first time touring without Kevin, and it followed an album that was a critical and commercial failure, only reaching number 7 on the Billboard chart, a far cry from the success of our earlier albums, like *Millennium*. We had always known how fickle the music business could be, but it was still disappointing to see our star power fading. To make matters worse, AJ was drinking again, my father was diagnosed with cancer, and Nick... well, Nick was a hot mess.

At the time the tour started in 2008, he was still acting like an immature college kid, hanging out with a group of friends who were no good for him and partying way too hard, while I was dealing with grown-up stuff. I was too busy trying to be a good husband to my new wife and a good son to my dying father to worry about Nick. When he was off in his own world, doing drugs and drinking too much, he didn't want me around anyway, so I just left him alone and focused on my family.

After my dad died that summer, exactly one month after our last show on the European leg of the tour, we still had another month off before the North American leg began. I didn't see or hear much from Nick during that time off, but as I later discovered, he had spent the break trying to get his life back together. When we reunited at the end of July, he looked better - healthier - than he had the last time I'd seen him at my father's funeral in June. He had lost some weight and was sober for the first time in who knows how long.

In all honesty, I didn't think it would last, at least not at first. It never had before with Nick; he would change his ways for awhile, then slip up and fall back into his old bad habits. But something had happened to him over that break, something truly life-changing. He had finally gotten the wake-up call he needed when he was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy. The doctor warned him that the damage to his weakened heart would worsen and lead to an early death if he didn't adopt a healthier lifestyle immediately. So he did.

The effects of his lifestyle change weren't instantaneous, and while I was seeing him every day on our U.S. tour, I didn't notice the subtle changes in his appearance as he started slimming down. But after another three months apart, when I picked up a copy

of *People* magazine at the airport and opened it to the article about him, my mouth dropped open in disbelief.

Damn, I thought, as I stared down at the photo spread that showed off his dramatic weight loss. *Nicky looks good!* I felt the familiar stirring of forbidden feelings as I admired the shirtless photos of him flaunting his chiseled new physique. It wasn't just his trading the six-packs of beer for six-pack abs that turned me on; it was that, for the first time in a long time, Nick looked happy, healthy, and... okay, fine, I'll admit it: *hot*.

But I had never felt that way about Nick before, and it scared me. I had always been able to keep my feelings for other men a secret, shoved down deep inside me where they could be safely suppressed, but it wouldn't be so easy if I felt that way about my friend, especially not while I was spending every day on the road with him.

When I saw him at the hotel in San Juan, I said, "You look great, Nicky!" and gave him a hug. For the first time in as long as I'd known him, I could feel not just fat and bone, but actual muscle rippling in his back and shoulders as I wrapped my arms around his lanky frame. He still dwarfed me in height, but he really wasn't much bigger around than me anymore.

"Thanks." When I released him, he was grinning from ear to ear. Even his face had changed. I could see his cheekbones and jawline, which had been hidden for years by his puffy face. His eyes, no longer bloodshot and clouded by whatever controlled substance he was high on at the time, were clear and shone with pride. I'd forgotten how crystal blue they could be. It sounds cheesy, but for the first time in a long time, Nick just seemed high on life.

He was actually pleasant to be around on that leg of the tour, and his positive new attitude rubbed off on the rest of us. Until then, I hadn't been happy about going back on tour; I'd been in a funk since my father's death, and although I was looking forward to the birth of my first baby, it had been hard leaving my pregnant wife back home while I flew off to a completely different continent. But once I was with my Backstreet brothers, I started to enjoy myself. Nick and I spent a lot of time together on that leg of the tour. Brian had brought Leighanne and Baylee along, like always, so they had a bus to themselves, and AJ was all obsessed with his new girlfriend, Rochelle, so while he would go back to his bunk and Skype with her, Nick and I would sit up at the front of the bus and talk to each other.

One night, after we'd gotten tired of eavesdropping on AJ having phone sex with Rochelle, I asked him, "So, are you still seeing that girl you had the blind date with

before our last leg?” I remembered him talking about some woman his sister had set him up with.

“Who, Lauren? Actually, yeah, we hung out a lot over the break. We’re taking it slow, but so far, things are going good.” He kept his voice casual, but a little smile tugged at the corners of his mouth that told me things were more than “good.” I could tell this girl made him happy. But then, so had Paris Hilton, at the time.

“Slow is good,” I said, with a note of warning in my voice, “but hey, I’m glad to hear it. You seem genuinely happy.”

He nodded, letting the smile spread all the way across his face. “I am. To be honest, I haven’t been this happy in a long time.”

“I know.” I patted his arm. “Not to sound like Kevin, but I’m proud of you, Nicky.”

And for once, he didn’t roll his eyes or crack a joke. All he said was, “Thanks, bro; that means a lot.”

I smiled back at him. It was nice to have this new, more mature version of Nick on my side, to be able to sit and talk with him like two adults instead of always being the target of his stupid jokes. Suddenly, the six or so years that separated us in age seemed like nothing.

Then he said, “Be right back” and went into the tour bus’s tiny bathroom. He was in there for a few minutes, and when he finally came back out, the smell that wafted with him was like something out of one of the horror movies he always made me watch. Seriously, it was one of the worst things I’ve ever smelled in my life, and since I’d spent about fifteen years of it onstage with four sweaty guys, that’s saying something.

“Good god, Nick, did something *die* in there?” I gasped, opening the window to try to let in some fresh air before we all died of methane poisoning. “You know you’re not supposed to do that on the bus!”

Nick shrugged. “I was just going to piss, but then I got in there and felt that feeling coming on - you know, when you *think* it’s only a fart but you aren’t quite sure - and then-”

“Okay, enough!” I yelled, holding up my hand to stop him from saying any more. “I get the idea without you going into graphic detail.”

He grinned. “Hey, you should be thanking me, bro; I’m just trying to prepare you for the smells you’ll have in your house once Leigh pops that kid out.”

I laughed. “There is no way my baby’s worst blow-out will ever smell as bad as this bus does right now. *God*, what did you *eat*?”

“Heh,” Nick giggled, “Lauren’s got me on this wheatgrass kick, and it kinda gives me diarrhea.”

“Way to overshare, and sorry I asked,” I said, looking at him in disgust. “So that’s the shit you’ve been drinking in those shakes that look like... well... shit?”

“Yup,” he replied proudly.

“Ugh,” I groaned, pressing my face against the glass window to try to get a whiff of fresh air. “You better not have busted the toilet.”

“I didn’t! I mean... I don’t *think* I did. Guess we won’t know for sure until the next flush.”

“We’ll let AJ test it out,” I said, and we both laughed.

I don’t understand how I fell for Nick - someone who, even at his best, was still pretty obnoxious and so unlike me. Opposites attract, I guess. Despite our differences in age, maturity, and lifestyle, I was struck by how attracted I suddenly was to him.

Obviously, I never told Nick this, at least not until the cruise, but he enjoyed all the attention he was suddenly getting from me. We spent more and more time together as the tour rolled on, and when it ended a few weeks later, we were better friends than we had ever been before. Back in the day, it was always Brian and Nick, Frick and Frack, and I hung out with Kevin or AJ. It was nice getting to know Nick as the person he was now, not the crazy kid he’d been then.

Of course, I knew the secret feelings I harbored for him had the potential to change our friendship forever. I just never imagined it would happen this way.

Chapter 32

Nick

First thing Monday morning, my phone rang. When I saw Brian's name and number pop up on the screen, my heart dropped into my stomach.

"Howie's dead, isn't he?" was how I answered. I held my breath, bracing myself for what I was about to hear.

"No, Nick, it's good news!" Brian said. "They found a liver for him."

All of the air rushed out of my lungs, as I let out the breath I'd been holding.

Lauren and I got to the hospital just as they were getting ready to wheel Howie out of the ICU. He was already on a gurney in the hallway; that's how close we came to almost missing him.

"I'm glad you guys came," Pollyanna greeted us, giving AJ, Kevin, Brian, and me big hugs. She looked exhausted, poor thing, and I wondered if she and her family had just beaten us there themselves or if they had been there all night. "Someone from the transplant team told us the liver isn't here yet, but it should be soon, so they're gonna go ahead and get him prepped for surgery. We've already said our goodbyes, so you guys go for it. We'll be in the waiting room."

Her voice sounded shaky, and even though she was smiling, I saw tears in her eyes. As she put her arm around her mother to walk her back to the waiting room, I could tell she was trying not to cry. Angie and John went with them, leaving the four of us guys and Lauren alone in the hall with Howie and the two orderlies who were supposed to be taking him into surgery. They stood out of the way as we each took a turn with Howie.

Brian, Kevin, AJ, and Lauren all went ahead of me. When it was my turn to step up to the gurney, I didn't know what to say. Howie was still unconscious, looking the same way he had the night before. I wrapped my hand around his and gave it a squeeze. "Hang in there, Howie," I whispered, and then I stepped back and watched as they wheeled him away, fully aware of the fact that it might be the last time I saw him alive. This surgery was supposed to save his life, but he had to survive it first.

"The doctor said it can take anywhere from four to eight hours," Polly warned us when we joined the Dorrough family in the waiting room. "Don't feel like you have to hang out here the whole time."

The guys and I exchanged glances, shrugging at each other. Kevin spoke first. “We’ve got nowhere else we need to be,” he said, and Brian and AJ nodded in agreement. I looked at Lauren, and she nodded, too. It was settled. We were staying.

And so, we waited.

For the first hour, we sat and speculated about the donor of Howie’s new liver - who he or she was, where he or she lived, and what had happened to him or her. We said a prayer for the donor and one for Howie’s doctors and another one for Howie himself.

In the second hour, the storytelling started again. “Kev, you remember the apartment we shared with Howie back in the day?” Brian asked.

Kevin chuckled. “How could I forget? He probably hated living with the two of us. He was such a neat freak, and we kept that place a pig sty. He was always goin’ around cleaning up after us.”

“Yeah, and complaining about your cat’s litter box,” Brian added with a grin.

“Quincy!” Kevin smiled. “God, he hated that cat. Quincy could tell, too, and would always jump up onto his lap just to piss him off.”

Everyone laughed at that.

“Howie never was much of an animal lover,” said Angie. “He was afraid of dogs when he was little.”

“I think he was even afraid of my chihuahuas!” exclaimed Brian.

When the laughter had died down, AJ said, “How about Howie’s Jesus hair?”

“Hey, now, don’t knock the Jesus hair,” Kevin protested. “Long hair was in back then!”

That led to a heated debate over who had the best and worst hair for *Black and Blue*.

After the third hour, AJ said, “Hey, is anyone else hungry? I could go on a donut run.”

No one else seemed too interested in eating, including me, but I jumped on the opportunity to get out of there for awhile. “Good idea. I’ll go with you.”

Lauren gave me a look, probably because donuts weren't on her list of immune-boosting superfoods, but I ignored it and followed AJ out of the waiting room. "I couldn't stand sitting in there for another second," he confessed, once we were a safe distance down the hall."

I laughed with relief. "And here I thought it was just me."

"No way, man. Waiting *sucks*."

"Feels good to get out of there and stretch my legs," I agreed.

"Yeah. Let's find the furthest doughnut shop within walking distance, okay? We can kill some time that way."

Our definitions of what qualified as "walking distance" were different, but we ended up going to Bob's Doughnuts, about eight blocks from the hospital, which killed almost an hour and gave the two of us plenty of time to talk.

"So, where do you and Howie stand these days?" AJ asked as we walked. "Have you forgiven him?"

I frowned. "Forgiven him? For giving me HIV? Dude, I don't know if I *can*. I mean, I don't *hate* the guy anymore, but I dunno if I *forgive* him either..." I shook my head; it was too hard to talk about this stuff. "Look, can we just *not* talk about Howie for awhile? I thought that was the whole point of this, to get away from all that bullshit back at the hospital."

"Whatever floats your boat, man," said AJ. "For what it's worth... I'm sorry this happened to you. Both of you. And whatever was going on with you guys before, I won't judge. I just want you to know that."

"I'm not gay," I said quickly, "if that's what you're thinking. He came on to me, and I was too drunk to do anything about it. That's how it happened. But seriously, dawg, I don't wanna talk about it anymore."

"Okay, okay, I get it. Let's talk about something else."

But as it turned out, there was nothing left to talk about. Everything else seemed trivial to us while we knew Howie was in the hospital, having his liver replaced. We walked the rest of the way in silence.

When we got back to the waiting room, Lauren looked at us incredulously. “What took you so long?? We were getting worried.” I could tell she was speaking for herself; *she* had been worried - about me, specifically.

“We didn’t feel like driving, so we walked,” I said, shrugging. “Anything happen while we were gone?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Shouldn’t we have heard something by now?” asked Polly. “I mean, at least an update of some kind? It’s been almost four hours.”

“I think no news is probably good news at this point,” replied Kevin. “If something had... happened, they would have come to talk to us by now.”

“Donuts, anyone?” asked AJ, opening the box. Kevin looked at him in disgust. He passed the box around, but only he and Brian and I took one. None of us were able to finish. I nibbled at the edge of mine, but it tasted too sweet. It made me feel sick to my stomach. I tossed it into the trash, just as the door to the waiting room opened and two women walked into the room.

One of them was wearing blue scrubs, while the other had on a suit and heels. Since the second one obviously hadn’t been in the operating room with Howie, it occurred to me that she might be a grief counselor or something, and what little I’d eaten of the donut threatened to come up again.

“Are you all here for Howie?” asked the woman in scrubs, smiling around the room at us, and that made me feel a little better. Surely she wouldn’t be smiling if she’d come to tell us that Howie was dead. We nodded, and she said, “I’m Erika; I’m a nurse on Howie’s transplant team. I know you guys have been waiting for awhile, so I wanted to give you an update.”

Out of the corners of my eyes, I saw everyone sit up a little straighter, leaning forward in their chairs. I never took my eyes off Erika’s face, trying to read her expression.

“Everything is going as expected so far. The donor liver looks great, and Dr. Parker, the surgeon, is in the process of attaching it as we speak. It’ll probably take another two hours or so.”

“Oh, thank God,” I heard Howie’s mother murmur.

Erika smiled. "While you're waiting, I wanted to introduce you to Amanda Knight. She's a social worker on our team."

Ms. Knight stepped forward. "Hi there. It's nice to see such a large support system here for Howie. He's going to need that support after the transplant, and that's what I came to talk to you about today. Would you mind if I took a few minutes of your time?" she asked, looking around the room.

"Go ahead. We've got plenty of it," said John.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, it's quite the intricate process, isn't it?" At that point, the nurse, Erika, excused herself, and the social worker sat down in a chair across from Howie's family. "I wanted to give you some information about what to expect after the surgery. Assuming the new liver is functioning properly, Howie will probably spend at least another two weeks in the hospital. It could be longer. We don't know how Howie's body will react to his new organ. Episodes of rejection are a common complication. Even after Howie is discharged, he'll need to stay here in L.A. so he's close to the hospital in case he does have any complications. He will need to have a support system in place. He won't be able to drive for at least four weeks and will be limited in what other daily activities he can do, so he'll need someone to stay with him and help out. From what I read in his file, I understand that he and his wife are estranged?"

I saw Howie's siblings exchange awkward glances. "Yes," said Angie. "She's living in New Jersey now."

Ms. Knight nodded. "Then have you given any thought to who will be taking care of Howie?"

They looked at each other again. "I'm sure one of us will stay," said Polly, but I noticed she didn't volunteer herself right away.

"I'll stay," said Howie's mother. "He's my son."

John cleared his throat. "I'm not sure that's the best idea. No offense, Mom, but you're... well, you're not as young as you were when Caroline or even Dad was sick. What if Howie were to fall or something? You wouldn't be strong enough to lift him off the floor."

"Well, then I'd call for help," Mama D replied.

“That’s silly, Mama,” said Angie. “One of us will stay.”

“And what about your families? Your careers?” Howie’s mother looked around at her three children. “You all have lives back in Florida; you can’t just up and leave them for weeks, maybe months at a time. We don’t know how long this will last.”

“The total recovery time takes about three to six months,” Ms. Knight put in helpfully.

“See?” said Mama D. “That’s much too long to uproot your lives. I’ll stay.”

“Mrs. Dorough, you don’t have to do that,” Kevin spoke up suddenly. “None of you should have to stay that long. Why don’t you let us help?” He gestured to himself and us guys. “We all have homes here; Howie can live with one of us until he’s back on his feet. Right, AJ?” I saw him give AJ a significant glance and was glad he’d left me out of it.

“Oh, uh- sure!” AJ replied, though he had obviously been caught off-guard. He recovered quickly, though, and added, “Paula, Howie’s my oldest friend; you know I’d do anything for him. He could crash at my place.”

“You guys have little kids!” Lauren exclaimed. I looked over at her in surprise, but she ignored me. “That’s not gonna be good for them, having someone in the house who needs so much of your attention. It might even be scary for them. And it may not be good for Howie to be around them either. I assume he’s going to be taking immunosuppressant drugs, and little kids can be germy. We don’t want him to get any sicker. That’s why I think he should just stay with Nick and me.”

I coughed loudly, almost choking on whatever donut crumbs were still stuck in my throat. AJ, Kevin, and Brian all looked from me to Lauren and back again, their eyes bugging out, but no one said anything because neither Howie’s family, nor this social worker, knew about me and Howie.

Ms. Knight looked at Lauren with interest. “And how are you related to Howie?”

“He’s a good friend of the family,” answered Lauren. “My fiancé Nick here is his best friend.”

With Howie’s mother and siblings looking at me, I had no choice but to nod my head, as if I agreed. I tried to think of some excuse why Howie couldn’t stay with us, but I couldn’t think of anything except the truth, and I knew better than to let all that come spilling out. It had been bad enough at Q’s funeral, but here at the hospital, in front of

Howie's family, while we were waiting to hear if he'd made it out of surgery or not? It would have been the worst time imaginable.

"And you live here in L.A.?" asked the social worker.

"Yes, we have a beachfront condo with plenty of room for Howie," Lauren said with a smile.

What are you doing?? I asked her silently, my eyes boring into the side of her head, but she wouldn't look at me. She obviously knew exactly what she was doing, but I wondered why she would do this to me. To *us*.

"And Nick, are you in agreement with this as well?" Ms. Knight asked me.

There was my chance, my one opportunity to be honest and say, "Hell no!" But then I saw the way Mama D was smiling at me, her eyes - Howie's eyes - full of tears, and I knew I couldn't say no. I sighed, pretending to stifle a yawn, and said, "Yeah, sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

As soon as I was sure no one was looking, I shot Lauren the meanest glare I'd ever given her. She caught my eye for just a second, smiled at me, and then looked away.

What the fuck? I wondered.

After the social worker was done with us, I stood up slowly and said, quite calmly, "I'm gonna get some air. Wanna come with me, babe?" I looked down at Lauren.

She smiled sweetly up at me. "Sure, babe." She took my arm and said, "We'll be back," over her shoulder as we walked out of the waiting room.

I waited until we were alone in the elevator, and then I exploded on her. "What the *fuck*, Lauren?! Why did you do that??"

"Don't you dare scream at me," she snapped, holding up her hand. "I'm doing this for you."

"What?! How do you-?"

"Stop. You need to get over this, Nick. This whole thing with Howie... It's going to ruin your life, not to mention our relationship, if you don't let it go."

“*HE GAVE ME HIV*, Lauren!” I screamed. “That isn’t gonna fucking go away! My life is already ruined!”

“Oh, really?” She raised her eyebrow. “Well, if your life’s ruined, then I guess mine is too, huh? Is that what you’re saying?”

At that moment, the elevator doors slid open on the first floor. Lauren stalked out into the lobby without waiting for an answer, while I chased after her like a pathetic puppy. We didn’t say another word to each other until we were in the car with the doors closed, and then she turned to me with tears in her eyes.

“Tell me, why should I be with you if you’re going to let this ruin both of our lives?”

I blinked in surprise. Why was she acting like this was some decision I’d made, like I’d had any choice in the matter? It was already done; my diagnosis wasn’t going to change.

But then I realized I *did* have a choice. I could do the right thing. I could choose to let go.

Swallowing hard, I took a deep breath. “You shouldn’t,” I said. “You shouldn’t be with me.” I saw her eyes widen, but I went on, “This may have destroyed my life, but it doesn’t have to drag you down with it. If you don’t have the virus, you shouldn’t have to stay with me. And, god forbid, if it turns out that you do... then I wouldn’t blame you for leaving me, like Leigh.”

“But I don’t *want* to leave you, Nick,” Lauren insisted. “I love you! I’ll be with you through thick and thin, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. Isn’t that what we agreed to when we got engaged?”

“We haven’t taken those vows yet. You don’t owe me anything, Lauren.”

“No, *you owe me*. For the last month, I’ve had to listen to you whine about how much you *hate* Howie, how he *ruined* your life, yadda, yadda, yadda. I’m sick of it, Nick! You have every right to be angry, but enough is enough! You can’t go on like this, or it *is* going to ruin you. You’ve got to find a way to move on with your life. I just opened a door for you to do it.”

I looked at her incredulously. “You think living with the man who gave me HIV is gonna help me get over it?”

“You think avoiding him will?” she countered. “You’ve got to face this, Nick. Face *him*. I figured this would force you to do it.”

“Oh, so now you’re forcing me?”

Lauren shrugged. “Think of it as exposure therapy. I’m exposing you to the thing that makes you uncomfortable to help you get over those feelings.”

“Sounds like a bunch of bullshit to me,” I scoffed.

“Well, we’ll see, won’t we?” she said with a little smile, and then, wiping her eyes, she opened the car door and climbed out. I watched her walk back across the parking lot toward the hospital, and after a few seconds, I knew I had no choice but to follow. With a huge sigh, I got out of the car and slammed the door as hard as I could.

When we walked back into the waiting room, Howie’s mother stood up and gave us both big hugs. “Thank you so much for your kindness,” she said tearfully, squeezing me tightly. “Howie’s had such a hard time lately with everything that’s happened, but he’s lucky to have friends like you.”

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Dorough,” I mumbled, forcing a smile onto my face as I reminded myself that what she didn’t know couldn’t hurt her.

As it turned out, Howie *was* lucky. After seven hours in the operating room, the surgeon finally showed up to tell us that Howie had pulled through. “He’s not out of the woods yet,” the doctor warned us. “We’ll continue to monitor him closely in the ICU for the next couple of days to make sure the new liver takes and see if his kidney function returns. He’s still got a rough road to recovery ahead of him, but hopefully the worst is over now.”

“Thank you so much, Doctor,” said Mama D. “God bless you for saving my son. May we see him?”

“He’s still in recovery, but once he’s been moved back into ICU, immediate family members may visit one at a time, just for a few minutes each.”

Once the surgeon left, Howie’s siblings started talking all at once, trying to organize the visitation order of who was going to see Howie first, second, and so on. I tuned them out and sat back in my chair, finally able to relax for the first time all day. Howie was okay, and since I wasn’t considered immediate family, I wouldn’t have to face him again

right away. For the time being, I was off the hook. The sense of relief I felt was overwhelming.

Even so, it was only a temporary reprieve. Now that Lauren had volunteered us to take in Howie after he left the hospital, I knew we'd be seeing a lot of each other soon enough. I wasn't sure how I was going to handle that, but at least I had a few days to figure it out.

Chapter 33

Howie

When I first woke up in the ICU, I didn't feel any different. I was still sore and groggy. It wasn't until my nurse came in to check on me that I found out what had happened.

"Hi, Howie. It's me, Jenny," she said. I didn't recognize her face behind the mask she was wearing, but I thought I remembered her voice. "Do you know where you are?"

Judging by all of the medical equipment around me, the hospital was a pretty safe bet. There was a tube in my throat that made it impossible to talk, so I nodded my head instead.

"That's good. I'm glad to see you awake; you were out of it for a few days. Do you remember what happened?"

I wasn't sure what she was referring to, so I shook my head, hoping she would elaborate.

"You had a liver transplant, Howie. The surgery went really well, and your vitals and labs are already starting to look a lot better. Hopefully we'll be able to start taking some of these tubes out in the next few hours so you'll be more comfortable. Are you in any pain right now?"

As I absorbed the startling revelation that I had undergone a liver transplant without having any awareness of it, I tried to assess my condition. I was definitely in some discomfort, but the ache in my stomach was no worse than it had been before surgery. I decided they must have put me on a drip of some pretty good drugs because I still felt like I was floating. I shook my head, letting the nurse know there was no need to up the

dosage. In some ways, it was a relief to not have to feel, but I wanted to be back in my right frame of mind.

“Good. Well, here’s your call button, in case that changes and you need more pain meds,” said Jenny, placing the control in my hand. “Just try to relax and get some rest.”

She patted my arm and then went to work, fiddling with my IVs, checking bags and drains, jotting down information from the monitors around my bed. I lay back and watched her work for a little while, but my eyelids started getting heavier and heavier, and before she had finished, I’d fallen asleep again.

The next few days dragged by. At first, I just sort of drifted in and out of sleep, riding a wave of strong sedatives that were supposed to keep me calm so I wouldn’t start freaking out and fighting the ventilator that was still breathing for me. Once I was stable and able to breathe on my own, they took the tube out of my throat and started weaning me off the sedatives so that I was able to stay awake for more than a few minutes at a time.

After that, I was a lot more aware of my surroundings and what was going on with my body. In addition to short visits from my family, I had a steady stream of people coming in and out of my cubicle at all hours to check my vitals and my incision, change my bandages and IV bags, draw my blood, measure my urine output, listen to my bowel sounds, and so on. It was all pretty gross and intrusive, but also necessary. There’s no such thing as privacy or modesty in the ICU. I felt like a newborn baby - not just a newborn, but a preemie like James, hooked up to every machine imaginable and unable to do anything for myself.

There’s really not much to do in the ICU anyway, especially when you feel like shit, but after two days there, I was starting to feel better and stronger. Thanks to my shiny new liver, the swelling in my brain had gone down, and my kidneys had started functioning again. I was transferred to a private room in a different part of the hospital, where I was finally freed from most of the tubes and wires and able to move around more. Soon the nurses had me sitting up in a chair, then standing, then shuffling across the room to use the bathroom by myself. By the third day, I was taking slow walks up and down the hallway every few hours. That doesn’t sound too exciting, I know, but it sure beat lying in bed.

By that point, the boredom was really setting in, so I looked forward to anything that kept me from lying there alone and feeling sorry for myself. My brother and sisters

brought my mom up to see me every day, and their visits were always uplifting. They offered me plenty of love and encouragement, assuring me that all I should be thinking about was getting better. But then the different members of my transplant team - not only doctors and nurses, but also a dietician, a social worker, and so on - started coming in to teach me about taking care of myself and my transplanted liver. That was when the reality of my situation sank in.

I had seriously screwed up my life, and it was never going to be the same. If I thought contracting HIV had made things complicated, it was nothing compared to this. I no longer had the luxury of popping one pill a day; I was now taking a dozen, and that didn't even include my HIV medicine, which they'd taken me off of, at least temporarily, because it could damage my new liver or interact with the immunosuppressant drugs I'd be on for the rest of my life.

"Doesn't that mean the disease will progress faster?" I asked, when I realized I wasn't getting my HIV meds anymore.

"Not necessarily," was my transplant doctor's answer. "Studies have shown that HIV-positive transplant recipients survive about as long as those without HIV. The main reason some recipients *don't* survive long-term is that their immune systems attack and destroy the new organ. So that's our first priority: preventing organ rejection."

"But I don't understand... If you're shutting down my immune system, what's to stop the virus from replicating? Won't it just have free reign?"

"That's a risk we'll have to take for now, until we can ensure your new liver is functioning properly. Once we know the immunosuppressive regimen is working, we can talk about reintroducing antiretroviral therapy to target the HIV."

I wasn't completely comfortable with that, but I had enough other things to worry about, like watching for signs of rejection or infection. Even after I went home, I would have to weigh myself daily and take my temperature twice a day because a fever or fluid accumulation could mean complications. My medications were to be taken at all different times of day, some multiple times, some with food and others on an empty stomach. There were also certain dietary restrictions that came with the new meds: I couldn't have grapefruit and was supposed to watch my sugar, sodium, and potassium, but increase my calcium intake because, apparently, my new meds could cause all kinds of other problems down the road, like diabetes, kidney failure, and heart disease. As someone who had always been pretty healthy without having to watch what I ate or take pills, I honestly didn't know how I was going to keep track of it all.

“You don’t think we’re just gonna drop you off at home and let you deal with all of this by yourself, do you?” asked my sister Angie on the fourth day, when I admitted to her how overwhelmed I was feeling about all of it.

“Well... no, I guess not, but I don’t want any of you putting your lives on hold to stay out here and take care of me,” I replied. My transplant doctor had already told me I would need to stay in L.A. for at least another month after I left the hospital, so it wasn’t like I could just fly back to Florida with my family. They had already been out here for over a week, and I knew they wouldn’t leave as long as I was in the hospital. But what about afterwards? My brother and sisters all worked; I didn’t want any of them to have to take a leave of absence from their job just to take care of me, and I couldn’t expect my eighty-year-old mother to do it either.

“Howie, honey, don’t worry,” Angie said reassuringly. “We’re not. We got it all figured out while you were still in surgery. You’re gonna stay with Nick and Lauren for a while, until you’re ready to live on your own again.”

I nearly choked when I heard that. “Wh-what?” I coughed, which I was supposed to be doing anyway to keep my lungs clear, even though it hurt like hell. “Uh, does Nick know about this?”

Angie laughed. “Well, duh. Who do you think volunteered?”

I blinked incredulously. “Nick did??”

“Actually, it was Lauren’s idea, but Nick’s on board with it.”

“Really?” I raised my eyebrows, and Angie gave me a weird look.

“Yeah... why wouldn’t he be?”

I couldn’t bring myself to tell her the horrible truth, so I shrugged and said, “He and Lauren are busy planning their wedding, Angie. Why in the hell would they want to take on one more major responsibility?”

She frowned. “Because you’re Nick’s best friend. He’d do anything for you, Howie. When are you going to realize we’re not all going to up and leave you like Leigh?”

Leigh. My heart skipped a beat at the sound of my wife’s name. She had sent me a get well card, one of those recordable kind, with a cute message from the kids. It was wonderful to hear their voices, but that was all I’d heard from them since my surgery. It

was more than I'd heard from Nick, though, which was telling. All of the other guys had called or texted, promising to come visit when they could, but not Nick.

"We're here for you, Howie. Everyone just wants to help you," Angie insisted. "Let us... please."

I sighed. "I know, Ang. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize for anything," she said, squeezing my hand. "Just let us take care of you, and take care of *yourself*."

I nodded, not wanting to upset her. Even though I'd put my family and friends through hell, they were still trying to help me, and I was grateful for their support. But still, I couldn't help but wonder why Nick had agreed to let me live with him, if that had really even happened.

There was only one way to find out. After Angie left, I sent him a text.

Hey Nick. I know I'm probably the last person you want to see, but is there any way you could come to the hospital? I need to talk to you.

Chapter 34

Nick

"So how have you been feeling, Nick?" Dr. Usako asked at my four-week follow-up appointment.

"Better, actually," I answered. In spite of how screwed-up the last ten days had been, at least one thing in my life was going right. "Those Compazine tablets have really helped so I'm not sick to my stomach all the time."

"No more nausea - that's good to hear," said the doctor, making a note on chart. "How about your other symptoms? Are you still having headaches? Body aches? Fevers? Fatigue?"

“Not as bad as before. I’ve been pretty tired lately,” I admitted, looking over at Lauren, “but I’ve also had a lot going on. A friend of mine has been in the hospital, and... yeah.” I stopped there, not wanting to get into personal stuff with this woman I hardly knew.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Dr. Usako politely, as she added another note. “How well would you say you’ve been following your medication regimen? Have you been taking all of your pills at the proper time each day?”

I felt kind of like a kid in school, being tested by the teacher. “Yeah... I mean, for the most part. I’m not used to taking so many pills, but my girlfriend helps me organize them and makes sure I take them at the right time-” I glanced at Lauren again, and she gave an emphatic nod. “-so I guess it’s been going pretty well.”

“Good,” Dr. Usako said again. “I’m sure I told you when you started how important it is to stick to your treatment plan. It sounds like your side effects are under control, so our next step is to find out how well the medications have been working. I’m just going to give you a quick physical exam, and then I’ll go see if the lab has the results of your blood work ready.”

I nodded, massaging the tender spot on the inside of my arm where a lab tech had taken blood for testing right after I’d arrived at the AIDS clinic that morning. I was nervous, wondering what would happen if we found out the medication wasn’t working.

Dr. Usako listened to my heart and lungs, looked in my mouth, felt around for swollen lymph nodes, and tapped on my belly. When she was finished poking and prodding, she said, “Well, Nick, everything seems fine so far. Sit tight for a few minutes, and I’ll be back after I check your labs.”

I sat up again and looked at Lauren, who had insisted on accompanying me to the appointment. She had sat quietly in a corner of the room while Dr. Usako was examining me, but now that we were alone, she let out a little sigh of relief. “So far, so good,” she said, smiling at me.

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Think positive, babe. You have been feeling better; that’s gotta be a good sign that something’s working.”

“I hope so.” I didn’t want to keep talking about it until we knew something for sure, so I shifted my weight until I could slip my phone out of my back pocket. When I checked it, I saw that I had a text from Howie.

Hey Nick. I know I'm probably the last person you want to see, but is there any way you could come to the hospital? I need to talk to you, it said.

I frowned. "Howie texted me."

Lauren looked up from her own phone. "What'd he say? Is he okay?"

"He wants me to go see him... said he needs to talk to me about something."

"Oh. So he's up for visitors? That's a good sign." As far as I knew, none of the guys had gone to see Howie in the four days since his transplant. Apparently, only his immediate family could visit because of the risk of infection. "Are you going to go?"

"I dunno. I don't really want to, but... I guess I should."

She nodded encouragingly. "We can swing by Cedars-Sinai on our way home."

I sighed. "Yeah... we'll see." I wasn't ready to commit to anything yet, so I tucked my phone back into my pocket without texting Howie back.

Dr. Usako came back about ten minutes later. "Sorry to keep you waiting," she apologized. "I just got your lab work, and everything looks good!"

"Really?" I said, my heart lifting with relief.

"Yes, the results are exactly what we were hoping for. Your viral load has dropped from over 100,000 to about 10,000, which, although it still sounds high, is certainly much lower than it was four weeks ago. If it continues to go down, the virus could be undetectable in your bloodstream in another few months - which, of course, is the ultimate goal of treatment," Dr. Usako explained.

"Oh, thank God," said Lauren, grinning at me. "That's great news, Nick!"

"And it keeps on coming," added Dr. Usako with a smile. "Your CD4 count is up to 550, which puts it just within the normal range, meaning your immune system is making enough T-cells to keep you healthy. CD4 counts can fluctuate quite a bit, so we'll continue to test your blood every three months to make sure the medication is still working."

“Sounds good,” I said, feeling encouraged. For once, something seemed to be going right.

“One last bit of good news: your liver enzymes are about the same as they were last time you were tested, before you started treatment, which tells us the drugs haven’t done any damage to your liver.”

Thank god, I thought. I never wanted to go through what Howie had. Liver failure... not fun.

“That’s something else we’ll need to keep a close eye on, but for now, I don’t think we need to make any changes to your meds. Just make sure you keep taking them as prescribed, and call the office if you experience any other severe side effects,” said my doctor. “Do you have any questions or concerns?”

I shook my head slowly. “No, I don’t think so.”

I looked to Lauren, who shrugged and said, “It sounds like everything’s going as well as we can expect, at this point. I’ve been trying to make sure he eats right and exercises when he feels up to it, although with him not touring right now, we probably need to get to the gym more.”

Dr. Usako nodded. “A healthy lifestyle can only help. You’re lucky to have such a strong support system,” she added, smiling, as she looked from Lauren to me. In the background, my fiancée beamed.

“Yes, I sure am,” I said, smiling back, but on the inside, I groaned. It looked like I’d be stuck eating off Lauren’s list of immune-boosting superfoods for a long time.

“Baby, I’m so relieved!” Lauren gushed, once we’d left the clinic and were back in our car. “You couldn’t have gotten better news.”

“Yeah... unless it was that the lab fucked up the first time, and I don’t really have HIV,” I replied, causing her to roll her eyes at me.

“Oh, come on, Nick, you know what I mean. Under the circumstances, this is the best news we could have hoped for. We need to celebrate the good stuff and be grateful the treatment is working,” she said, reaching for my hand across the center console and giving it a squeeze. “You’re healthy, and that’s what matters most.”

I didn't know how she could consider me "healthy" when I had an incurable virus, one that could still kill me someday, but I appreciated her positive outlook on it. Even I had to admit, the clinic visit couldn't have gone much better. Maybe this wasn't the death sentence I'd assumed it would be.

I was feeling a lot better about life by that point, so when Lauren suggested stopping by Cedars-Sinai again, I was game. *Bring it*, I thought. The worst part of my day was over, and if I could handle having my blood drawn, I could definitely deal with Howie. These days, he had it much worse than me.

Lauren drove us to the hospital. We walked into the main building and asked at the front desk where we could find Howie. I'd heard from AJ that he had finally been moved out of ICU, but wasn't sure what ward he was in. The woman at the desk gave us directions, and we went up to Howie's floor.

When we got to the transplant wing, we gave Howie's name to a different woman at a different desk. "Are you family?" she asked, after she'd typed it into her computer. "It says here he can only have visits from immediate family members for now."

"I'm his brother," I said quickly, "and this is our sister." I slung my arm around Lauren's shoulders.

The woman looked at us suspiciously. "Big family," she said.

I nodded. "Blame our parents. Catholic."

I don't know if she really believed me or not, but she got a kick out of that comment and called over a nurse to escort us to Howie's room.

"Have you visited before?" she asked, as we walked down a hallway.

"Not since his surgery," I said.

"Okay. Well, Howie's immune system is suppressed so that his body won't reject the new organ, so you'll both need to wash your hands thoroughly before you go in, and you'll need to wear a mask when you're in his room. We don't want him catching any germs," she explained. Then she gave us each a surgical mask and showed us where we could wash our hands.

“You know, Nick, I think you should go in and see him by yourself first,” said Lauren. “You’re the one he wanted to talk to. I’ll find a waiting room for now, and if he’s feeling up to it, I’ll stop in and see him a little later. Okay?”

I sighed. “Yeah, all right.” I felt like she was abandoning me at the last second, but I knew she was probably right about Howie wanting to see me more than her.

When I was properly disinfected and wearing my doctor’s mask, the nurse took me to Howie’s room. “Knock, knock!” she called, as she opened the door a crack and peeked in. “Don’t worry, he’s decent,” she said to me, smiling. “You can go on in.”

“Thanks.” I sucked in a deep breath, steeling myself for another awkward visit, and opened the door all the way. When I walked in, I heard the nurse close it again behind me, and for a second, I felt almost claustrophobic, like the walls were closing in on me.

“Hey, Nick.”

I took another deep breath before I dared to look at Howie. His voice sounded a lot stronger than it had the last time I’d actually talked to him, but I was remembering how bad he had looked, with all those tubes hanging out of him. I never wanted to see him that way again.

“Come over here, bro. Lemme get a good look at you in that mask,” he said, with a laugh.

I cracked a smile, though I knew he couldn’t see it behind the mask. “Why, does it make me look like a doctor?” I asked, as I walked slowly over to his bed.

He was sitting up, looking a hell of a lot better than he had the last time I’d seen him. Most of the tubes were gone, including the medieval torture device he’d had implanted his head. Some of the swelling in his face had gone down, and his color was back to normal.

“Paging Dr. Carter? Psh... in your dreams.” He grinned up at me. “Hey, thanks for coming, man.”

I nodded. “How ya feelin’? You look... well, I wouldn’t say *good*, but definitely better than the whole ‘death-warmed-over’ look you had goin’ on a few days ago.”

“So I hear,” said Howie. “I’m feeling a lot better, too. Look, I know things were pretty bad for a while there, and I wanna apologize again for putting you guys through all of this. You especially.”

“Dude... stop it.” I was getting sick of all the apologies. Maybe that meant I really *had* forgiven him. “You don’t have to keep saying you’re sorry. It’s done, all right? Apology accepted.”

He raised his eyebrows, looking at me with skepticism in his eyes. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” I held out my hand to him. “Swear to god, I just scrubbed my hands with antibacterial soap for like three solid minutes so I wouldn’t spread any cooties, so we can shake on it if you want.”

“You actually washed your hands? I’m impressed.” I rolled my eyes, and he smiled as he reached out to take my hand. “Thanks, Nicky,” he whispered, squeezing it tightly.

I cleared my throat. “So,” I said, looking around the room, “when do you get to bust out of here?”

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. It won’t be for at least another ten days or so, but according to Angie, when I do get out of here, I’m going to your place?” He looked at me like he thought his sister must have misunderstood.

I forced a smile onto my face and hoped it would reach my eyes, knowing I couldn’t show my true feelings about the matter. He may have been better, physically, but I could tell he was still a little fragile in the emotional department, and I didn’t want to say or do anything that would cause a setback.

“That’s right,” I said. “Lo and I thought this way your family could get back to Florida sooner. Obviously they would have stayed, but since we already live here, it just makes more sense for you to stay with us.”

“Wow... that’s really nice of you, Nick, but... are you sure? I mean, after everything?”

I swallowed hard, trying to decide how I should answer that. I settled for the truth – or something close to it, anyway. “I’m not gonna lie to you, Howie. It was Lauren’s idea, and at first, I didn’t like it at all. But it really does make the most sense... and like she said, it’ll force us to face this thing head on so we can start to work through it. You want that, right?”

“Of course I do.” I heard a tremor in his voice and suddenly realized he was blinking back tears. “I just wasn’t sure *you* did.”

I shifted my weight uncomfortably. “Listen, we’ve been friends for a long time. I don’t know if I’m totally ready to forgive you... but I also don’t wanna just wash twenty years of friendship down the drain. Seeing you so close to dying made me realize that. So yeah... I do wanna try and work through it.” Shaking my head, I added, “Between the two of us, I think we’ve gone through just about every stage of grief there is over the last few weeks. Anger...” I gestured to myself. “Depression...” I tilted my head toward him. “All that’s missing is acceptance. I know nothing can change what’s already happened, so I guess we both need to find a way to accept it so we can move on with our lives.”

He nodded. “Those are some wise words, Nicky. I appreciate everything you said... especially your honesty. I know how hard this has been for you.”

“Yeah... but it’s not just about me,” I admitted, acknowledging how self-centered I had been. “It’s been hard for you, too. I see that now.”

Howie smiled sadly. “Thanks for saying that.” Then he sighed and looked at the ceiling. “I’ve sure made it a hell of a lot harder for myself.” That was when he started telling me about all the new medications he was taking, the daily measuring and monitoring he was expected to do, the weekly blood draws and doctor’s appointments he had to look forward to after leaving the hospital, and I realized I really didn’t have it that bad at all. My own medication regimen was no picnic, but now that I’d adjusted to it, at least I didn’t have to go back to the doctor for another three months.

“Hey,” I said, “don’t worry about all that. That’s why you’ve got Lauren and me. Trust me, she’s on top of med schedules and healthy meals and all of that stuff, and I... well, I definitely know my way to the hospital by now, so if nothing else, I can drive you to your appointments.” I smiled, and he smiled back. “Between the two of us, we’ve got you covered. You just worry about getting better, and we’ll help you with the rest, all right?”

“Frankly, Nick, the thought of trusting you to take care of me is frightening,” Howie joked, shaking his head. “But if you say so, then all right.”

Chapter 35

Howie

Two weeks after my transplant, I finally got to go home from the hospital. Except I didn't go home. I went to Nick and Lauren's house, where I would live until I was able to be on my own.

The two of them picked me up on the day of my discharge. I was doing a lot better by that point, but I was still pretty weak and sore from the surgery. Even though I was perfectly capable of walking (slowly), Nick had to push me in a wheelchair all the way down to the patient pick-up area, where Lauren was waiting with the car. Hospital policy or something. I also had to wear a surgical mask so I wouldn't catch anything while my immune system was suppressed, which made it hard to fly under the radar.

Our publicist had released another statement, announcing the news that I'd recently undergone a liver transplant, so it wouldn't have surprised me to see some paparazzi skulking on the outskirts of the hospital property, trying to take pictures. Miraculously, though, we managed to make it to Nick's car without being spotted.

He threw the bag my mom had packed with clothes and things from my house and a box full of stuff from the hospital into the trunk and then helped me into the back seat. "Dude," I said, sniffing the air as I buckled up, tucking a pillow between the seat belt and my body to protect my incision. "Your car stinks. Did somebody puke back here or something?"

"Uh, that would be *your* puke, Howie," Nick replied matter-of-factly, as he slid into the front passenger seat. "Once you're recovered, you can clean the upholstery for me."

He shot me a quick smile to show he wasn't being serious, but I felt my face heat up as I looked down and saw the stain on his seat. I'd always been able to hold my liquor before, so seeing the evidence of my uncontrollable vomiting made it hit home just how bad of shape I must have been in when he brought me to the hospital.

"Hey, Howie, you know he's just kidding, right?" Lauren called from the front, looking at me anxiously in the rearview mirror.

Realizing I hadn't responded to Nick's comment, I quickly replied, "Oh... yeah, I know. But seriously, you guys... I am so sorry."

"I thought I told you to stop apologizing already," said Nick.

"And I told *you* to stop being such an asshole!" I heard Lauren hiss at him under her breath.

I ignored their bickering, still staring at the stain on the back seat. Up until that point, people had spared me most of the gory details, but there was no doubt in my mind that if Nick and Lauren hadn't gotten to me when they did, my suicide attempt would have worked.

I still wasn't totally sure whether or not I was glad that it hadn't, but I was happy to at least be out of the hospital. I rolled down my window, inhaling what I realized was my first fresh air of 2014, seeing as how I had been hospitalized since the start of the new year.

I could smell the ocean as we got closer to Nick's condo, which was really not a bad place to recuperate. He and Lauren had their guest room all set up for me with fresh, clean sheets on the queen-size bed (Lauren's touch) and a PlayStation 3 connected to the flat screen TV (Nick's). She helped me unpack, putting my clothes away in the dresser drawers, while he showed me a selection of video games. I'd never been a big gamer, but playing Madden together was one way to avoid any awkwardness or tension between us, since it required no real conversation (trash-talking was acceptable), so that was what we did.

Eventually, I got tired and told Nick I wanted to take a nap.

"Okay. Get some rest, man," he said, as he got up to leave. "You, um, need anything before I go?"

"No, I'm all right." I smiled, and Nick nodded, shutting the door behind him on his way out. He was being unusually nice to me, especially under the circumstances. I knew I didn't deserve it.

Based on what I'd overheard in the car, I assumed Lauren had a lot to do with Nick's new attitude toward me. He'd already admitted this whole living arrangement had been her idea, and I wondered what she'd done to persuade him to go along with it. Withhold sex, probably, I thought, smirking to myself.

But then I had to wonder, were they even still having sex? They seemed happy enough together, and Lauren had sure been supportive of Nick since he got his diagnosis, but I wondered how that would work out, long-term, with him being HIV-positive and her testing negative. What would Leigh and I have done in that situation?

Unfortunately for us, we would never have the opportunity to find out.

My wife and I were as estranged as ever. Other than the get well card I'd gotten in the hospital, I hadn't heard a thing from her since my surgery. I was pretty sure at least some of my siblings were staying in touch and keeping her updated on my situation, but it still hurt that she hadn't reached out to me herself.

As long as Leigh was on my mind, I decided to send her a text and tell her I was out of the hospital. She took a long time to reply; I was half-asleep by the time I heard my phone beep. Her return text said, simply: *I'm glad to hear that. Take care of yourself.*

I swallowed hard, looking sadly at those two, short sentences. There was no emotion in them, no words of love or encouragement, not even an emoji or *XO*. Nothing to suggest she still loved me or even cared. I had always thought we'd find a way to work things out, but now I was beginning to wonder if we ever would.

The days passed slowly at Nick's place. There wasn't much for me to do, except watch TV and play video games with Nick. Lauren brought me some books, but I couldn't read for long without getting distracted or dozing off. I took about as many naps as I walked laps around the condo, and I would sit out on Nick's balcony, which overlooked the beach, and watch the ocean for what seemed like hours at a time.

I avoided the internet, not wanting to see what people were saying about me on social media. The only information we had released was that I had been diagnosed with acute liver failure and undergone a transplant, but there was so much more to the story, I worried about what else would eventually leak out. Nick would read me well-wishes and words of support from our fans, which I appreciated, but still, I had to wonder what they would say if they knew the whole truth.

I wasn't used to spending so much time sitting around inside, so it was actually a relief to get out and go to my first follow-up appointment at the hospital, one week after leaving it. It happened to be the day before Nick's birthday.

Nick, staying true to his word, took me to my appointment. We didn't talk much on the way there; he had his music turned up so loud that I couldn't even attempt to make conversation - not that it would have mattered much. While Nick was definitely being much nicer to me than he had been before, he was still pretty distant.

It was easy enough for him to avoid having an actual conversation with me while we were just watching movies or playing games. Not so much when we were sitting in a waiting room. First I had to wait to have my blood drawn. Then I had to wait until my

labs were back to meet with my transplant surgeon. The whole time, Nick sat next to me and played on his phone, barely saying a word. I picked up a magazine and flipped through it, wishing he would at least make small talk. The silence was starting to get awkward.

“So... anything special planned for tomorrow night?” I asked at one point, in an attempt to strike up some kind of conversation.

“Nope,” said Nick, not taking his eyes off his phone.

“Oh. Well, do you *want* to do something special?”

“Nope.”

I frowned. “We should do *something* for your birthday.”

“It’s just another day. It’s not a big deal.”

“But it’s your *birthday!*”

“Yeah... my thirty-fourth. Big friggin’ whoop. I don’t need to have a party for turning thirty-four.”

“Says the guy who went to Vegas for his last two birthdays,” I reminded him. “So is thirty-four, like, the cut-off or something? Thirty-two and thirty-three we can celebrate, but thirty-four? Hold the phone! You’re in your mid-thirties now; no more celebrations for you.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “God, shut up about it already. It’s not *your* birthday, so why do you even care?”

Because I care about you, I thought, watching him sadly. He was in a similar place in life as I had been at thirty-four: engaged to a longtime girlfriend and just a few months away from getting married. But while Leigh and I had looked forward to our future with hope and happiness, Nick and Lauren were dealing with an incurable illness that threatened to shorten their time together. Maybe that was what was weighing on his mind, as we sat there arguing over whether or not he should celebrate his birthday.

“I dunno, Nick, I just thought it would be nice to focus on something happy for once. We haven’t had a lot of that lately.”

“Gee, whose fault is that?” he replied, flashing me a wry smile. Whether he was kidding or not, I wasn’t sure, but the comment hurt. Maybe Nick was getting to the point where he could joke around about this, but I just wasn’t there yet.

Sighing, I said, “Well, at least let me do something for you, then. Is there anything you want? I’d love to get you a gift.”

Nick snorted. “You’ve already given me a gift, Howie... the gift that keeps on giving.” He looked up at me and grinned again.

I guess I walked right into that one, but it still stung. The worst part was, even though he was smirking, there was something in his eyes that made me think he had wanted to hurt my feelings. Well, he’d succeeded.

I stood up suddenly - and instantly regretted it, since any sudden movements made my incision scream with agonizing pain. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” I managed to say, as I started to walk away, slightly hunched over, with my hand on my abdomen.

“Hey, wait - you need any help?” he called after me.

I wheeled around - slowly this time. “Why, you wanna hold my dick for me?” I hissed, keeping my voice low so the people sitting on the other side of the waiting room wouldn’t hear me. “Don’t bother - you already pissed all over me, so what difference would it make at this point?”

Nick’s eyes widened; he wasn’t used to me going off on him like that. I left him like that and went to find the men’s room, where I could hide out for a few minutes.

Did I really have the right to be mad about Nick’s snide little remarks? I asked myself, as I stood at the sink, looking in the mirror. Probably not. I had done this to him. He had every right to be angry at me, and if he was using his sick sense of humor to work through that anger, who was I to stand in his way? I had to learn to laugh along with him and not let it get to me.

When I got back to the waiting room, Nick glanced up and said, “Sorry, dude. I shouldn’t have said that stuff. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“Yeah, you did,” I said, as I sat down next to him. “But it’s okay. I deserved it.”

Nick shook his head. “No, you don’t. Not anymore. You’ve already suffered the consequences, and now I’m just rubbing salt in your wounds. I’m sorry.”

Struck by this sudden show of maturity, I smiled and nodded. “Thanks, Nick. I appreciate that.”

“No problem,” he replied and picked up his phone again.

So much for making conversation, I thought. We went back to sitting in silence until the nurse finally called my name. “You can come with, if you want,” I said to Nick, as I stood up.

He shook his head. “I’ll wait here.”

“Suit yourself.” I wasn’t surprised, though; of course he would be uncomfortable coming into the exam room with me. And once Dr. Parker took off the sterile dressing and started poking around at my incision, I was glad Nick wasn’t there to see it. It was pretty gross-looking, an upside-down Y that went from the center of my chest to the bottom of both sides of my ribcage. With the staples still in, it looked like I had train tracks running across my torso. I felt like Frankenstein’s monster, sewn back together with parts from dead bodies. Really, it wasn’t that far from the truth.

Dr. Parker, however, seemed pleased with how the incision was healing and said, “Everything’s looking good, Howie. How would you like those staples removed?”

The thought of him taking out the only thing holding my skin together scared me a little, but I replied, “Sure, if you think I’m ready.”

“It’s been three weeks since your surgery, right?” he asked, and I nodded. “Then, yup, I’d say you’re ready.”

It hurt less than I would have expected. He replaced the staples with tiny strips of tape and said, “The Steri-strips should fall off on their own, but if they’re still there in ten days, you can peel them off.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Now, let’s talk about your labs,” said Dr. Parker next. “Everything looks fine so far: no signs of rejection or infection, and your liver enzymes are in the normal range, meaning your new liver is working like it should. Your CD4 count did drop, which we expected after stopping your antiretroviral therapy and starting the immunosuppressant regimen, but before it goes any lower, I’d like to revisit our conversation about your medication.”

He asked me all kinds of questions about my meds - how well I'd been following the dosing schedule, what side effects I'd experienced, and so on. Apparently, he had already been in contact with my HIV doctor, and they had come up with a plan for putting me on new anti-HIV medication that wouldn't interact with the immunosuppressant drugs I was already taking.

I left the hospital that day with several more prescriptions, doubling the total number of pills I'd be taking per day. Up until that point, I hadn't realized how good I'd had it with the one-a-day triple cocktail I'd tried to overdose on. I couldn't take a combination pill like that anymore because of the possible drug interactions, which made everything much more complicated.

"Holy shit," said Nick, as he handed me a bulging bag of prescription bottles in the pharmacy drive-thru. "And here I thought *I* had a ton of pills to take."

"Well, don't take too many and destroy your liver, 'cause lemme tell you, this really sucks," I replied, tucking the bag between my feet.

"I don't doubt that. Anything else you need to do before we head home?" he asked, as we pulled out of the parking lot.

"Actually, yeah. Take a left up here," I said, pointing.

"Where, at the car wash?"

"Yep. I decided what to give you for your birthday: a full detail on your car, inside and out." I glanced over at him and smiled. "We've gotta get rid of that puke smell."

Chapter 36

Nick

Having Howie around our house was kind of like adopting another dog. Like Nacho and Igby, he spent a lot of time lying around, but Lauren and I still had to feed him and keep him entertained, and we couldn't leave him alone for more than a few hours at a time.

At first, it wasn't so bad because he slept a lot, but after a few weeks, I was ready to send him home. He wasn't a bad houseguest, per se; he was polite and generally picked up

after himself and remembered to put the toilet seat down. The problem was, he took up so much of our time. Lauren made me play games with him and keep him company so he wouldn't be alone, while she made his meals and helped him organize his meds and kept the condo spotless so he wouldn't get sick. With his immune system suppressed, an infection could kill him, so he wasn't able to get out of the house much. When he did, I was the one who had to drive him everywhere: doctor's appointments, counseling sessions, transplant support group meetings. Otherwise, Howie was at home with us all the time.

By mid-February, it had taken its toll on Lauren and me. We desperately needed a night out, so when Lauren said, "Let's do something for Valentine's Day," I was down. We hadn't been on a date all year, so I knew it needed to be something special. I surprised her with the biggest bouquet of flowers I'd ever seen and played my celebrity card to get us last-minute reservations at one of our favorite restaurants in L.A. We lingered over dinner and, afterwards, took a long stroll down the Santa Monica Pier.

The sun had already set, but there was a bright, full moon to watch as we walked along the beach, the waves lapping at our ankles. Lauren was holding her heels in one hand, her other hand in mine, and with her hair blowing in the ocean breeze and her skin glowing in the moonlight, she had never looked more beautiful to me.

"I love you, baby," I said on sudden impulse, as I looked over at her.

She turned her head to smile at me. "I love you, too," she said, squeezing my hand. "I can't wait to be your wife."

I smiled back, but unbeknownst to her, behind the smile I was swallowing back a sense of panic that had swelled up in my throat like puke. Our wedding date was less than two months away. The "Save the Date" cards had been sent out, and the formal invitations were already addressed and ready to be mailed any day now. We'd reserved the Bacara Resort for a romantic, outdoor ceremony overlooking the ocean, followed by a reception in the ballroom. The vendors were booked, the dresses ordered, and the rings bought, but I still had my doubts about becoming her husband.

It wasn't that I didn't want to marry her. Obviously I did, or I wouldn't have proposed. But that was before I got sick. Things were different now.

I didn't doubt that Lauren loved me, but regardless of how she really felt, she was stuck between a rock and a hard place when it came to her decision to marry me. If she did, she'd be stuck with me for the rest of my life, no matter how short or long it lasted, no matter how much of that time was spent in sickness instead of health. We had both

watched our parents' marriages fall apart, and before we got engaged, we'd agreed that we wouldn't follow in their footsteps or make the same mistakes. If we ever got married, it would be for the rest of our lives. We didn't see divorce as an option. But if Lauren decided to bail, she would be seen by anyone who knew the truth as the girl who left the sick guy. She'd be like Leigh. I wouldn't blame her, but others would. She'd already endured so much criticism just for being with me, I couldn't imagine what it would be like for her if she broke up with me. So either way, the decision of whether or not to go through with the wedding would have to be mine to make.

I didn't know what to do. My heart was telling me to marry the woman I loved, but my head said, "Let her go." I wasn't ready to make any decisions yet, though. A lot was riding on the results of a test she had yet to take.

After Lauren's initial HIV test came back negative, Dr. Usako had told us she should be tested again at the end of February, just to be on the safe side. I wanted to wait until I knew for sure that she wasn't infected. If it turned out that she *was*, I would never forgive myself.

We hadn't had sex since my diagnosis in December, but before that? There had been plenty of opportunities for me to unknowingly infect her, and it made me sick just to think about them. So, believe it or not, when we got home that night, sex wasn't even on my mind. I'd gone so long without it, I'd almost stopped wanting it, sort of like how Lauren was with soda. But when my beautiful fiancée stepped out of our bathroom in nothing but a skimpy, black satin negligee, she was next to impossible to resist.

"Wow! Where'd you get *that*?" I asked her, once I'd recovered my ability to speak. I had bought her lingerie before, but not that little number. I would remember her wearing that one.

Lauren flashed me a seductive smile. "Happy Valentine's Day," she said, striking a sexy pose in the bathroom doorway. "You like?"

I was practically drooling. Did I say I'd stopped wanting sex? Yeah... not anymore.

"I love it. C'mere, sexy." I sat back on the bed and let her climb onto my lap, so that her long legs were straddling me. I stroked her thigh, thinking we'd take it slow, but she put both hands on my shoulders and shoved me backward onto the bed, until I was flat on my back with her on top of me. "Whoa, girl... slow down," I said, as she started unbuttoning my shirt.

“Shut up, Nick. We need this.” She lowered her lips to mine, the lace of her lingerie tickling my skin as her upper body brushed against my bare chest.

I embraced her and kissed back, thinking, *A little foreplay won't hurt. You can't get infected from foreplay.*

But Lauren had other things planned. After we'd made out for a while, she pulled away long enough to open a bedside table drawer and whip out a small box, wrapped in shiny red paper. “Here,” she said, handing it to me. “I got you something.”

“I thought *you* were my gift,” I replied, running my hands down the slinky fabric that barely covered her body.

She smiled. “Something else. Open it.”

I ripped off paper and felt my heart sink when I realized it was a box of condoms. “Babe... we can't. I mean... we shouldn't.”

“We *can* and we *should*,” she argued. “You and I *need* this, Nick.”

That whole battle between my head and my heart was happening again - or maybe it was between my head and my dick. I *wanted* this, more badly than she could know, but was it worth the risk? I felt so conflicted, and she wasn't helping, sprawled on top of me in that sexy outfit.

I looked up at her sadly. “Aren't you afraid?”

She shook her head. “No. And neither should you be. I know you're worried about infecting me, but as long as we're safe, there's no way that's going to happen.”

My heart was racing. “You know what Howie said when he told me he was HIV-positive? He said the odds of me getting infected from what we did were, like, one in a thousand. Well, guess what? We didn't even have sex, and I got it. So even if the odds are really, really small, it can still happen. What if the condom breaks?”

“Even if it did, it wouldn't mean I'd get infected,” Lauren said dismissively. “Your viral load is down; it's not likely that-”

“Not likely? Are you really willing to play those odds? 'Cause I'm not. I love you too much to gamble with your life.”

“Oh my god, Nick, stop being so melodramatic! This isn’t 1986. This isn’t the death sentence you seem think it is, either. People can live long, healthy lives with HIV. You don’t wanna go the whole rest of your life without ever having sex again, do you?”

“No,” I admitted.

“Well, me neither! It’s been *two months*. I wanna fuck your brains out. Tonight. So get back on that horse and ride me, boy!”

She was a classy gal, my wife-to-be. How could I resist her? In six years, I’d never seen her so horny. As for myself, I’d gotten hard just thinking about being with her, so of course it didn’t take much more to get me to open the box and put on a condom.

“Hey, do you think I should, like, double bag it? In case the first one breaks?”

“Ugh, Nick! This new neurotic thing you’ve got going on is *so not sexy*,” she moaned. “You’re killing the mood! Just get one on and get over here!”

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” I snickered to myself as I crawled on top of her, pushing up the hem of her negligee.

“Thank god!” She threw back her head and raised her hips, ready for me to slide inside her.

It should have been just right, but suddenly, I froze. I was leaning over her, looking down at the face of the woman I loved, and as much as my body wanted to be with her, my head was still screaming, “*But what if you hurt her?*”

I couldn’t risk it. Literally, I couldn’t. The mere thought of infecting my fiancée, no matter how small the chance, made it impossible for me to keep it up. As I felt myself go limp, I rolled off her in defeat.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I took a shuddering breath, embarrassed. “I can’t.”

“Oh, come on, Nick-”

“No, I *can’t*! Look!”

She sat up and sighed when she saw what had happened. “Oh, baby...”

I'd never felt so humiliated. This had never happened to me before - or, at least, not in a long time.

"I'm sorry, Boose."

She shook her head. "No, *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have tried to rush you."

Frustrated, I raked my hand through my hair. "I dunno what's wrong with me."

"Nothing's wrong with you," she reassured me. "It's just gonna take you some time to get over this... this *fear* you have. I realize that now. But it's all in your head, you know. All up here." She took both sides of my face in her hands and kissed my forehead. "We'll get through this."

I sighed. "Thanks for being so understanding, babe."

She smiled. "Thanks for being so sweet. Maybe a little *too* sweet, but... we'll work on that, too." She waggled her eyebrows. "I miss my bad boy."

"Well, if you want it to be good, girl..." I started, then stopped. "Yeah, I don't know where I was going with that," I admitted, and she giggled. "So I guess we should just make out some more?"

"Mm, yeah, I'll settle for third base... for now," she said. "You can knock it out of the park next time."

"I love it when you talk baseball to me," I replied. Then I brought my lips back to hers, rendering us both speechless.

Chapter 37

Howie

Holden's first birthday was February 16, 2014, almost three months after his AIDS diagnosis. It was a bittersweet occasion, because while any baby's first birthday is worth celebrating, I wasn't sure how many more birthdays my baby would have.

Leigh said he was doing well, but I wouldn't know. I hadn't seen either of my sons since Thanksgiving and wasn't sure when I would. Six weeks after my transplant, I was still recovering, and with my immune system suppressed, I wasn't supposed to travel. I hadn't even gotten cleared to drive yet, and flying was out of the question for another two months.

The European leg of our tour was supposed to be starting in two days, but suffice it to say that the Backstreet Boys wouldn't be performing in Lisbon, Portugal on Tuesday. We had released yet another announcement through our publicist, postponing the rest of the tour indefinitely. So with nowhere to be, no one to see, and nothing to do, I was starting to feel pretty depressed and stir-crazy at Nick's place.

I had started seeing a counselor that Dr. Zediar, the psychiatrist at the hospital, had referred me to, and even tried attending a transplant support group that Dr. Parker told me about, but I hadn't found any of it particularly helpful. It was still hard for me to talk about everything that had happened since we'd found out about Holden's AIDS.

As the days passed, I missed my family more and more. I was desperate to see my kids, but unless Leigh decided to bring them to me, there wasn't much I could do. I was at the mercy of my estranged wife.

But on Holden's birthday, after three months of barely speaking to me, she decided to be merciful and let me Skype with the boys. I was sitting in Nick's spare room with my laptop, my eyes glued to the screen, when James and Holden appeared. "Hi, Daddy!" James shouted, waving into the webcam.

"Wave, Holden!" I heard Leigh prompting the baby in the background. "Wave to Daddy!" My eyes filled with tears as my little blond boy flailed his chubby hand around. I thought he looked healthier than he had the last time I'd seen him, though it was hard to tell on the grainy camera feed.

"Hi, boys!" I choked out. "It's so good to see you guys. Daddy misses you."

"Daddy, where are you?" asked James.

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "I'm still in California, buddy. I've been sick, like Mommy told you, but I'm getting better."

"But when are you coming back?"

His question broke my heart. “I don’t know yet. It’s too far for me to travel right now, but as soon as I can, I’ll come and see you. Maybe I’ll be able to come back for *your* birthday. How’s that sound, buddy?”

“Hey, guess what? Today is *Holden’s* birthday!” James announced proudly.

“I know! Happy birthday, Holden!”

At the sound of his name, Holden babbled something unintelligible. I listened hopefully for him to say “Dada,” but didn’t hear it.

“Yeah, he’s one now,” James was saying, “and *I’m* four.”

I chuckled. “I know, bud. You’re such a big boy. Holden’s lucky to have you for his big brother.”

“Yeah... but he doesn’t share so good,” said James, frowning. “Holden, um, he always tries to take my toys, and Mommy says he can’t play with them ‘cause he’ll put the pieces in his mouth and choke on ‘em, probably, but he does anyway.”

“Well, it’s good that you’re there to keep an eye on him.”

“Yeah... but I hope you come home soon, Daddy, ‘cause I like playing with you more.”

I felt tears spring to my eyes again and quickly blinked them away. “Aww, me too, buddy. But I bet you’re having lots of fun with Grandma and Grandpa, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess,” James answered with more honesty than enthusiasm, and I laughed.

“I sure do love you, J-Man.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

Dad... My little boy was growing up before my eyes. It made me sad that I had to watch him through a computer screen, when I wanted so badly to see him in person. I was missing out on so much by not being there.

“Hey, James,” I heard Leigh say from off-screen. “Should we have Holden show Daddy his new trick?”

“Ooh, yeah! Hey Dad, watch what Holden can do!” James called excitedly.

A few seconds of confusion followed, as a hand appeared to reposition the camera. When the picture cleared, I could see Holden standing barefoot on the floor. Leigh was standing behind him, holding onto both of his hands. She was only visible from the waist-down, but I would know my wife's legs anywhere.

"Holden, go to James," Leigh coached him. "Go see Brother."

At the same time, I could hear James clapping his hands and calling, "Come here, Holden! C'mon, you can do it! Here, Holden!"

I watched through misty eyes as my baby boy took one tentative step and then another. Leigh let go of his hands as he toddled toward James, still holding his arms out to help himself balance.

"Wow! He's really chugging away, huh? Good job, Holden!" I cheered, wiping my eyes. "How long has he been walking?"

"Just about a week," answered Leigh, her face appearing on my screen for the first time as she scooped up Holden and sat down in front of her computer, holding him in her lap. "He's really getting the hang of it."

"So... he's doing okay, then? He's still on track with where he's supposed to be, developmentally?"

She nodded. "Dr. Parr said the AIDS doesn't seem to have delayed any of his major milestones, so far."

"Well, that's good. How about taking his medicine? Has that been going better?"

"We've adjusted," she said shortly, shifting Holden in her lap.

"And how about you?" I asked. "How are *you* doing?"

She hesitated, and then I heard her say, "Hey, James, why don't you take Holden and go play with Grandpa for a few minutes while I talk to Daddy about some grown-up stuff?"

"No, but-" I heard James start to whine, until Leigh got stern with him.

"James, I *said* go in the other room and play. Right now. You can come back and say goodbye in a little bit."

James went stomping off, dragging Holden by the hand. Alone in the room, Leigh looked at me through her computer screen. “Listen, Howie,” she said. “I hate to have to break this to you on Holden’s birthday, but I don’t want it be a surprise later. I’m having some papers delivered to the house in L.A. sometime this week. Divorce papers.”

My heart sank. “You’re filing for divorce?” I asked in disbelief.

“I already did. Like I said, you should be served with the paperwork later this week.”

I couldn’t believe how cold she sounded. “Leigh, please... please don’t do this,” I begged. “I know we can work through this, if you’d just give us the chance.”

Leigh shook her head slowly. “I’ve given this a lot of thought, Howie, and I honestly don’t think we can.”

“Why not?” I sputtered. “Look, I know I screwed up, but Leigh... I still love you, and I love our family and the life we had before all this happened. Why can’t we at least try to make it work?”

She cleared her throat. “I loved you and our life together, too, but I feel like we were living a lie - or, at least, *you* were. If you really loved me the way a husband is supposed to love his wife, you wouldn’t have done what you did. I’ll always love you, Howie, but I deserve better. I know that now.”

“But... but what about the vows we took? In sickness and in health... Don’t those words mean anything to you?” I asked desperately.

“Not anymore. You broke our vows the day you decided to sleep with someone else.”

I hung my head, knowing then that there was nothing else I could do or say to save our marriage. I never thought I’d be the guy who got divorced, but then, I also didn’t think I was the type of husband who cheats on his wife. Leigh was right. She *did* deserve better.

“For what it’s worth... I’m sorry,” I offered, struggling to hold back tears. “I’m sorry for everything.”

“I know,” she said, her voice softening. “I’m not out to punish you, Howie. I hope we can work together and make the divorce proceedings go as smoothly as possible. I’m not asking for much; I don’t want half your money or the condo, and I’m not going to try

to take your kids away. We can work out some kind of custody arrangement that allows both of us to see the boys. I want this to be amicable, okay? For their sake.”

I sighed, letting it all sink in. After a few seconds, I finally said, “Okay.”

It wasn't okay with me, not at all, but what else was there to say? My wife had already made up her mind. After six years, our marriage was over.

Chapter 38

Nick

By the end of February, my life finally felt like it was starting to get back to normal - or as normal as it was ever going to get, anyway. I knew I could never fully go back to how life was before; my new “normal” meant taking medicine each morning and night, having my blood tested every few months, and constantly worrying about my health and the health of those around me. But I had adjusted, and life was getting better.

A few days after his wife filed for divorce, Howie went home. He still wasn't fully recovered from his surgery, but he was well enough to take care of himself and be on his own. The doctor had cleared him to drive, so he didn't need me or Lauren anymore.

“Thank you guys again for everything you've done for me,” he said when we dropped him off at his front door - a different one from the door we'd kicked down to get inside his house on New Year's Eve. Someone in his family must have had it replaced. “I don't know how to make it up to you.”

“Just take care of yourself, okay?” said Lauren, hugging him tightly. “That's all we want.”

Howie promised he would, but later, when she and I were finally alone in our living room, Lauren asked, “Aren't you worried it's too soon for Howie to be living by himself?”

“Are you kidding?” I snorted. “This day couldn't come soon enough.”

“Don't be mean,” she scolded me. “He's been so depressed about this thing with Leigh. What if he tries to hurt himself again?”

“If he does, he damn well better do it right this time.”

“Nick!”

“Oh, come on, you know I’m just kidding. But in all seriousness, Howie’s an adult. We couldn’t have held him hostage here.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Lauren sighed. “I just hope he’s really ready.”

“He said he was. I know *I* was ready for him to go home.” I winked at her. “How ‘bout you?”

She cracked a smile. “Of course I was ready. But hey, don’t expect the condo to stay so clean now that he’s gone.”

“What?!” I pretended to be insulted. “What about *my* immune system, woman? Don’t you care about keeping our home germ-free for me?”

“Woman?” she repeated, raising her eyebrows. “Well, *this* woman wants to strengthen your immune system in a different way: by increasing your *tolerance* to germs.”

“Oh yeah? How you gonna do that?”

“Come here, and I’ll show you,” she said, smiling flirtatiously. When I scooted closer to her on the couch, she wrapped her arms around me and kissed me full on the mouth. “See? Exposure therapy.”

“Mm... I see.” I should have been turned on, but something was bothering me. “Babe, you realize we’re using medical lingo like it’s sexy? That is so fucked up.”

She laughed. “Why is that fucked up? Haven’t you ever heard of playing doctor? I could be your naughty nurse...”

“Ugh, please stop,” I said, pushing her away from me. “No offense, but I do *not* want you to be my nurse, naughty or otherwise. I’ve had enough of doctors and nurses in real life lately.”

“Oh, lighten up, Nick, I’m just trying to have a little fun,” she huffed. “This is the first night we’ve had alone in this house in, like, five weeks. Let’s make the most of it!”

I shook my head and scooted even further away from her. “Sorry, I’m not in the mood.”

Lauren sighed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Fine. But when we go to the doctor next Friday, you better ask her for some help with this... this ‘issue’ you’re having, or I will.”

“Whatever.” I got up from the couch and quickly turned away so she wouldn’t see my face getting red. “Maybe I’m just saving myself for marriage!” I shouted over my shoulder, as I walked into the den and slammed the door shut.

I immediately put on the Xbox and turned the volume all the way up, so she’d hear my video game going and know not to bother me. But I was too embarrassed to actually play.

My problem in the bedroom was starting to put a wedge between Lauren and me. I wanted to be intimate with her, but every time we’d tried lately, I lost it at the last minute and couldn’t perform. I knew it was my anxiety messing with me, but I didn’t know what to do about it.

Lauren was probably right about asking my doctor for advice, but that wasn’t the purpose of the appointment we’d scheduled for the last day in February. It would be exactly three months since we’d last had unprotected sex - or any sex at all. If I had infected her then, it would show up on a blood test by now.

I felt like we’d been stuck at a fork in the road for the last few weeks, waiting on these results. It was finally time to find out, once and for all, which path our future together was going to take.

For the second time since my diagnosis, Lauren and I sat in the doctor’s office, holding hands. Mine was sweating. Hers was shaking.

But Dr. Usako smiled.

“Well, I have good news for you both. Lauren, your blood test came back negative,” she told us. “You definitely do *not* have HIV.”

“Oh my god,” I exhaled, burying my face in my hands. I took a few deep breaths of relief, in and out... in and out. “You don’t know how happy I am to hear that,” I said, my voice muffled by my hands.

When I finally looked up again, Lauren was holding her arms out to me. She had tears in her eyes - happy tears, I thought, but then, her smile looked almost sad. "See?" she said, pulling me into a tight embrace. "I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me anymore. Everything's gonna be fine."

I stroked her hair as I hugged her, thanking the heavens above that she had been spared from the same fate as Howie, Holden, Leigh, and me. And yet, there was this small part of me, a part of myself I hated, that almost wished she was infected, if only because it would have made my decision much easier.

Don't get me wrong: I would never wish HIV on anyone, especially not someone I loved, and *especially* not Lauren. I'm only saying that if I didn't have to worry about infecting her anymore because I'd accidentally already done it... well, then I would have had no doubts about whether or not to go ahead with the wedding. At that point, it would have been up to her to decide whether she still wanted to marry me or not.

But we weren't like Howie and Leigh. Lauren was still healthy, and that made her more forgiving and more supportive than Howie's wife had been. She was willing to stay with me, even though I was sick. She showed that when she let go of me, looked at my doctor, and asked, "So now that we know I don't have the virus, can we talk about safe ways for Nick and I to be intimate without him having to worry about infecting me? We're getting married in six weeks, and I want to make sure we don't have any, um... 'issues' on our wedding night."

"Seriously, Lo?" I said, looking at her in disbelief. She hadn't even given me a chance to bring it up before she launched right into it.

"It's been a bit of an 'issue,' lately," Lauren added, glancing over at me. "Sorry, baby, but it has. Don't hate me for mentioning it." She grabbed my hand again and gave it a squeeze before she turned her attention back to the doctor.

Dr. Usako was smiling. "You don't need to be embarrassed, Nick," she said. "This is a common concern among mixed-status couples, and it's quite understandable. You're worried you're going to give the virus to Lauren?"

I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. "Yeah... I mean, that's... that's what happened to me, so... I guess I just don't want to risk it happening to her, too."

"Which I *love* and *appreciate* him for," added Lauren, still looking at Dr. Usako, "but he's, like, overly paranoid about it, to the point where even when we're using a condom, he can't... perform."

In spite of Dr. Usako's assurances that I shouldn't be embarrassed, I felt my face getting hot. It was humiliating, hearing my fiancée talk to someone else about our problems in bed, even if that someone was a professional.

"So, Nick," said Dr. Usako, turning to me, "just so I'm understanding the situation correctly, are you having trouble maintaining an erection?"

It sounded so clinical when she said it like that. Grudgingly, I answered. "I can get it up... I just can't keep it up."

Dr. Usako nodded. "It could just be anxiety that's causing that reaction to occur, but I should also tell you that erectile dysfunction is a problem for a lot of HIV-positive men. We're still not exactly sure why, whether it's a side effect of the virus itself or the medication used to treat it. We do know that it's associated with low testosterone, so if you want to dig deeper into this, we could do some further testing and find out what your hormone levels are like. If it turns out that there is a problem, we could discuss treatment at that point. As another option, I could prescribe an oral E.D. treatment, like Viagra, for you to try."

At that point, I just wanted to sink through the floor and disappear. "Um, no, that's okay," I managed to say. "I'm pretty sure it's just performance anxiety."

"Well, then let's talk about what's making you anxious. You contracted HIV through having unprotected sex with... a different partner... who turned out to be HIV-positive, correct?" she asked, glancing briefly in Lauren's direction before looking back at me.

"Um... something like that, yeah," I mumbled, looking down at my lap so I didn't have to make eye contact with either one of them.

"But you and Lauren have been using protection - condoms, she said?"

We both nodded.

"Then you have very little to worry about. When used correctly, condoms are highly effective at preventing the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. You might be wondering, 'Well, what if my condom breaks?'"

I couldn't help but glance at Lauren out of the corner of my eye when she said that. Lauren cracked a smile, obviously remembering the same conversation I was. Hadn't I

said almost that exact same thing?

“Even *if* that were to happen,” Dr. Usako went on, “I want you to know that, once you have an undetectable viral load, the odds of you transmitting HIV are very low, even through unprotected sex. That’s not to say that you and Lauren should stop using protection once you get to that point because there is still *some* risk. The virus will always be in your system, even if it doesn’t show up on a blood test. But as long as you’re practicing safe sex, there’s no reason you shouldn’t enjoy having it. Trust me, Nick; I’ve seen many mixed-status couples in my practice who have quite a healthy sex life.”

Lauren laughed. “See? There you go, babe. That’ll be us.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just sat there, licking my lips and then wiping them with my hand. It’s a nervous habit I’ve always had, but I’d never been more uncomfortable than I was sitting in that doctor’s office, listening to her talk about my (nonexistent) sex life.

Until Lauren brought up babies.

“Dr. Usako, I also wanted to ask about our options for starting a family someday. We’re not anywhere close to being ready for that right now,” she added quickly, glancing at me, “but what if we do decide we want to have a child? Is there a safe way for me to get pregnant without putting me or the baby at risk?”

When she asked that, everything got worse. My heart started racing. My palms started sweating - again. Until then, I hadn’t even thought about having children. We’d talked about it before, but we’d both basically said we weren’t ready for kids anytime soon and would discuss it again down the road, after we’d been married for a while. Our wedding was still six weeks away, but naturally Lauren, being a woman, wanted to know about having babies.

“There are a couple of options, actually,” said Dr. Usako. “The safest way to have a child that is biologically both of yours would be through sperm-washing, which is basically artificial insemination with the added step of separating the sperm cells from the semen, which is where the virus is found. Studies have shown it to be one hundred percent effective at preventing transmission of the virus to either the mother or child, but it can be quite expensive and isn’t always covered by insurance.”

“Money’s not a problem for us, thankfully,” Lauren said, giving my hand another squeeze. “What about the other option?”

“There is another method that is much less expensive and more natural,” said Dr. Usako, “and that is to use pre-exposure prophylaxis. Nick would have to have an undetectable viral load and continue taking his antiretroviral drugs. Lauren, you would also start taking HIV medication to lower your risk of becoming infected. You would then have unprotected sex, only while you were ovulating. After conception, you would continue taking the prophylactic HIV medication to prevent yourself or the baby from contracting the virus.”

“And does that work??” Lauren asked incredulously. I wasn’t buying it either - not that it mattered. I already knew there was no way in hell I’d have a baby with her that way. Either we’d try it the expensive-but-safe way, or we wouldn’t try at all.

“It’s not without its risks,” Dr. Usako admitted, “but like I said, the odds of transmission with an undetectable viral load really are quite small. Still, it’s not one hundred percent safe. Unfortunately, the only risk-free options are to use donor sperm or adopt a child.”

Lauren nodded. “Okay. Well, at least we know there are some other options out there,” she said, sounding encouraged. “Thanks for answering all my questions.”

“Anytime,” said Dr. Usako with a smile. “Is there anything else I can do for either of you?”

“I can’t think of anything right now. Nick?” Lauren asked, looking at me.

I shook my head. I couldn’t wait to get out of there.

“Well, then, until next time, Nick... Lauren...” Dr. Usako stood up and shook both of our hands. “Oh! Before you go...” she added, opening her desk, “I’m going to give you the card of a couples counselor I sometimes refer patients to. She specializes in sex therapy. If you’re still having trouble in the bedroom after our conversation today, you might consider giving her a call.” She handed the card to Lauren, who tucked it into her purse.

“Thank you again, Dr. Usako.”

I didn’t say anything until we were in the privacy of our car. Then I turned to Lauren. “Okay, first things first: I love you, baby, and I’m so glad you’re okay... but seriously, what the fuck was that? I’ll tell you what,” I went on, before she could answer. “That was the most *awkward, embarrassing* conversation I have ever had in my entire life.”

I was angry and upset, but Lauren just laughed. “Oh Nick, get over yourself. She’s your *doctor*; that’s what she’s *there* for, to answer all your embarrassing questions.”

“All *your* embarrassing questions, you mean. You didn’t hear me asking all that stupid shit.”

“Stupid *shit*?” she repeated, raising her eyebrows. She wasn’t laughing anymore. “So you think asking about our love life and about starting a family someday is *stupid*?”

I sighed. “It was just a little much for me, that’s all. I’m already freaking overwhelmed trying to deal with all this, Lauren, and then you start talking about sex and babies, and I feel like you’re just adding to the pressure.”

“Oh, Nick... I’m sorry,” she said, her voice softening. “I... I didn’t know you felt that way. You’ve been so strong through all of this, I just thought- well, never mind. I’m glad you’re being honest with me now. That’s good. We’re gonna have to be honest with each other and open up about our feelings if we’re gonna get through this together.” Smiling at me, she reached across the center console and took my hand again, like we were a team.

For over five years, we *had* been a team. But now? We weren’t even in the same *league* anymore. I was HIV-positive. She was negative. There was no way I was going to risk infecting her now, especially not for the sake of having a baby. What had happened to Howie and his family was *not* going to happen to mine, even if that meant not having a family to begin with.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds to collect my thoughts and summon the strength I needed to say them out loud. Then I opened my eyes and turned to look at my fiancée. “You want me to be honest about my feelings?” I asked. “Okay... here goes. I honestly don’t know if I want to marry you anymore.”

I watched first shock and then hurt flicker across her face, but then her expression softened into one of understanding. “Don’t say that, Nick. I know what you’re trying to do, and it’s not going to work. You think you can just push me away like that? Tell me you don’t love me anymore so I’ll leave? No. Sorry, babe,” she said, “but it’s not gonna happen. I don’t care about your HIV status; I don’t care about what happened with Howie; I don’t even care about having kids. I care about *you*. I love you, Nick Carter, and I am *not* going to leave you.”

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, and the expression in them was so fiercely passionate, I had no trouble believing that she meant every word. That was why I had to do what I did.

“Fine,” I said, nodding, as I reached for my door handle. “Then I’m leaving you.”

I opened the car door and jumped out, slamming it shut behind me. I walked away quickly, ignoring the sound of her shouting my name. I had no idea where I was going, but I knew it was the right path, so I held my head high and didn’t look back. I couldn’t let her see my quivering chin or the tears in my eyes.

Chapter 39

Howie

I had been home for about a week when Nick called.

He and Lauren had been checking in with me every day since I’d left their condo, making sure I was still doing okay, so I wasn’t surprised to see his name pop up on my phone. It was weird that he was actually calling me, though. While Lauren liked to talk on the phone, Nick would usually just text. I should have known then that something was wrong.

“Hey, Nick,” I answered uncertainly. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Hey, sorry to bug you, but I need a ride,” Nick said. He sounded upset. “I’m at the AIDS clinic. Can you pick me up?”

I assumed the worst when he said where he was. Something horrible must have happened to him: he was sick or having some kind of reaction to his meds, or he’d just gotten bad news and was too devastated to drive. Whatever was going on, it couldn’t be good if he was calling *me* for a ride. Where was Lauren? I wondered suddenly. Had something happened to *her*?

“Sure, bro, I’ll be right there,” I said, my heart racing as I reached for my keys. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll explain when you get here. Just do me a favor and don’t park in the lot, okay? Pull into the alley behind the building, and I’ll come find you.”

“Um... okay,” I said uncertainly. There was definitely something sketchy about Nick asking me to meet him in the alley behind the AIDS clinic, but I owed him the favor, so I didn’t ask any more questions. I just got in my car and drove to the clinic.

I had to circle the block a couple of times before I found the alley he was talking about. When I pulled into it, he was nowhere in sight, so I put the car in park and climbed out. As soon as I started walking toward the clinic, he came out from behind a garbage bin. “Dude, what are you doing?” he hissed. “Get back in the car!”

“Sorry, I didn’t see you,” I said, giving him a weird look. He appeared to be perfectly fine, aside from the panicked expression on his face. “What’s going on, Nick? Why are we sneaking around?”

“Howie, please, just get in the car!” he insisted, climbing into my passenger seat.

I walked back around to the driver’s side and slid behind the wheel. “Okay, we’re in the car,” I said, turning to him. “Now will you tell me what the hell is going on?”

Nick sighed. “I just left Lauren, and I didn’t want her to see where I went.”

“What?!” At first, I wasn’t sure I’d heard him correctly. It took me a second to process what he’d said. “This whole time, you’d been hiding from *Lauren*? And here I thought you were just worried about paparazzi or something - like they’d be hanging out here, of all places.”

Nick shrugged. “Hey, stranger things have happened.”

“Yeah... like you leaving Lauren? What do you mean, you *left her*?”

“I mean I literally got out of the car and walked away and left her sitting in the lot over there.”

I gaped at him, as I imagined him doing what he’d just described. It sounded downright silly - *and* immature, even for Nick. “Why??” I asked, still stunned.

He shrugged again. “She tested negative,” he said.

“But... that’s good!” I exclaimed, struggling to understand how he could see that as a bad thing. Then it dawned on me that maybe he hadn’t done the actual leaving. “Did she... did she not want to be with you now that she knows she doesn’t have it?”

“No...” He scowled. “Exactly the opposite. As soon as we heard the test results, she started talking about sex and trying to start a family and...” He trailed off for a second, shaking his head. “We can’t. We can’t get married.”

“Why not?” I asked gently, although I was starting to see what he was getting at. “You’re worried you’re gonna give it to her? Like I did Leigh?”

He swallowed hard and nodded. “Everyone keeps saying it won’t happen, we can be safe, the risk is so small, blah blah blah, but I know it *can* happen, even if we’re careful. It happened to me, and it happened to you, and then you gave it to your wife, and she gave it to your son. I can’t let that happen to Lauren. I won’t.”

I’m sure anyone else would have told him he was being overly paranoid or irrational, but I didn’t. I could have reminded him that the only reason he and I were infected is because we *hadn’t* been careful, but I didn’t. I could have tried to convince him that he and Lauren could avoid the mistakes I’d made, that they *could* be careful, and that they could make it work... but I didn’t.

I didn’t tell him any of those things because I knew they wouldn’t make any difference. Nick wasn’t dumb; he already knew the facts, but that didn’t change how he felt. No matter how much I tried to ease his mind, he would always worry about putting the people he loved at risk. Had I known I was infected sooner, I’m sure I would have felt the same way. It was too late for me and my family, but not for Nick and his. He was doing what he felt he had to do to save the woman he loved from the same fate, and I couldn’t fault him for that.

“I understand,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. For the first time in four months, he didn’t pull away from my touch. “I wish *I* had walked away. God, I’d give anything to go back and reverse the bad decisions that got us both into this mess. But I can’t.” I gave his shoulder a squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

Nick nodded. “I know. I’m sorry, too. But I’ve learned from our mistakes, and I’m not about to let them happen again with Lauren. I love her too much.” He shook his head, staring out the window. “I know I’m hurting her by doing this, but I’d rather hurt her feelings than her health, you know? At least a broken heart can heal. In the long run, she’ll be better off without me. Hopefully she’ll be able to look back someday and realize that, too.”

I could have told him how wrong he was... but I didn’t. Because at the end of the day, misery loves company, and now, Nick and I were both in the same boat.

Chapter 40

Nick

I stayed at Howie’s house that night, and in the morning, he dropped me off at my condo so I could pack some things and pick up my car.

“Thank god you’re home,” said Lauren as soon as I got inside, hurrying over to give me a hug. “I was worried about you. Where the hell did you go?” She glanced out the window next to the front door, watching Howie drive away. “Have you been with Howie this whole time?”

I shook off her embrace. “I told you I was fine.” I’d texted her once to tell her that, just so she would know I wasn’t still out wandering the streets of L.A.

After I’d left her, I had walked around the block and ended up in the alley beside the AIDS clinic, where I hung out behind a garbage can (which was probably full of biohazardous waste) like a little kid playing hide and seek, until Howie came to get me. It was pathetic, but I didn’t know if Lauren was still waiting in the parking lot or driving around looking for me, and I didn’t want her to find me. I had already said what I needed to say; there was no point in rehashing it all again. I’d ignored all of her calls and texts, except to send the one letting her know I was okay, and eventually, she had stopped trying to contact me.

“Can we please talk about this?” she asked, following me back to our bedroom. I should have known she wouldn’t give up on me that easily.

“What else is there to say?” I walked into the closet and pulled a suitcase down from the top shelf. “I don’t wanna marry you anymore, end of story.” I knew I was being an asshole, but that was part of my plan: I had to make her so mad, she wouldn’t want to marry me anymore, either.

“Well, I don’t accept that!” She moved out of the way as I walked past her with the luggage. “What are you doing?”

I laid my bag out on the bed. “I told you,” I said, as I started unzipping it. “I’m leaving.”

“Well, where are you going?”

I shrugged, sidestepping her again as I went back into the closet. “I dunno. Haven’t decided yet,” I said, pulling clothes out at random and piling them up on the floor. “Don’t worry, though, you can keep the condo. I don’t need it.”

“I don’t care about the condo! I care about *you*,” said Lauren, as she stood in the doorway watching me destroy her carefully-organized closet. “I love you, Nick, and I know you still love me, too. Don’t even try to tell me you don’t, because I won’t believe you.”

“I *do* love you, Lauren,” I admitted, walking out with an armload of clothes, which I stuffed into the suitcase. “That’s why I’m doing this. You deserve better.”

“Better than what? *You?* Because you’re *sick?*” she asked. “What about our wedding vows? ‘In sickness and in health’ - sound familiar?”

“We haven’t taken those vows yet,” I pointed out, squashing the pile of clothes so they’d fit. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Well, I don’t need to wait another six weeks to say those words. I’ll say them to you right now.” She grabbed me by the arm and spun me around so that we were face to face. With her hands on my shoulders, she looked into my eyes and said, “Nick, I promise to love you, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. I do.”

I let out my breath in a shuddering sigh. Then I took both of her hands off my shoulders and squeezed them in mine. For a second, it felt like we were actually standing at the altar, about to become husband and wife. But only for a second, because I knew that was as close as we would ever get.

“Thank you. But I *don’t*,” I said and dropped her hands. Lauren gaped at me in disbelief, but I quickly dropped my gaze. I couldn’t stand to look at her and see the hurt in her eyes. *It’s for the best*, I told myself, turning away from her.

“What if the situation were reversed?” she asked, as I went into the bathroom to pack up my meds. I could hear her voice shaking and tell she was close to crying. “If I was HIV-positive and you weren’t, would you leave me then? Or expect me to leave you?”

I shook my head as I came back out of the bathroom. “It doesn’t matter because that’s not how it is. *I’m* the one who’s infected,” I said, cramming the prescription bottles into an inside pocket of my suitcase, “and unless they find a cure for it in my lifetime, I’m never gonna get better. I’m only gonna get worse, and then you’d be stuck dealing with it. You’d be the one watching me slowly die. I’m not gonna do that to you, Lauren. I’m not gonna marry you only to make you a widow someday.”

Lauren laughed scornfully through her tears. “Do you know how stupid that sounds? In every marriage, someone ends up widowed. We’re *all* gonna die someday, and one of us has to be the first to go. It could just as easily be me. Hell, Nick, I could drop dead the day after our wedding, and then *you’d* be a widower. But that doesn’t stop me from wanting to marry you. To me, love is worth taking a little risk.”

“Well, not to me,” I said, slamming the suitcase shut. “I won’t risk it, Lauren. The wedding’s off. I’m leaving.”

Then I walked out, dragging my baggage along with me.

I went back to Howie’s house because, of all people, I knew he would be the most understanding. That was why I had called him in the first place.

“You can stay here as long as you like,” he said, helping me unload the car. “I owe you for letting me live with you after my surgery.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Speaking of which, you shouldn’t be lifting that.” I shot him a quick smile as I grabbed the handle of my suitcase out of his hand. “You can get the door.”

“Got it.” He grinned back, seeming genuinely happy to have me there. He probably saw it as a sign that we were friends again. And by that point, I guess we were.

We went inside, and I dropped my stuff off in his spare bedroom, where I’d slept the night before. The little neat freak had already remade the bed for me. I arranged my medications across the bathroom counter, realizing I’d already missed both my morning doses and the ones from the night before.

I popped open my pill organizer, which Lauren had helped me fill every week since I started treatment. It had become a part of our Sunday night routine to set all the prescription bottles out on the kitchen table and sort my medication for the upcoming week into the fourteen compartments. I was going to miss my fiancée tomorrow, when it came time to refill all those compartments by myself. Truthfully, I missed her already.

I shook the Saturday morning meds out into my hand and swallowed the whole mouthful with a swig of water from the tumbler Howie had left out for me. Over the past two months, I’d gotten pretty good at taking a ton of pills at a time. My gag reflex was all but gone.

I took another drink of water to get rid of the bad taste in my mouth, then went to find Howie. He was sitting outside on the patio, playing with his phone.

“You back from your internet vacation?” I asked.

“Yeah...” He sighed. “The media found out Leigh filed for divorce, so I gotta do damage control and make sure the fans aren’t dragging her name through the mud too much. Without knowing the whole story, it’ll look like my wife just up and left me after my liver transplant, which doesn’t exactly paint her in the best light. But she doesn’t deserve to be harassed.”

“Oh man... I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that had leaked out.”

“It just happened yesterday. You had other things on your mind.” He glanced up at me, offering a grim smile. “Anyway, Leigh’s pretty private and doesn’t follow fans on social media, so maybe she won’t even see the nasty comments. It’ll be a lot worse for Lauren when it gets out that you broke off your engagement.”

I sighed, a sickening feeling settling into the pit of my stomach. “Oh, I’m sure it will. I should tell her to change her privacy settings now.”

I actually took out my phone to text her, but Howie said, “You know, maybe you should wait a few days before you say anything. Give yourself and Lauren some time to come to terms with this before you guys give people a reason to start speculating. Trust me.” He held up his phone.

“Yeah... you’re probably right.” I put my phone back in my pocket and sat down.

“You want anything to drink?” asked Howie.

“You got anything with alcohol?” I answered without thinking. Then, almost immediately, I realized where I was and who I was talking to, and my face got red. “Sorry, dude. Dumb question.”

He let out a little chuckle. “It’s okay. But yeah... my family got rid of all the liquor that was left when they were here, so you’re in a dry house now, my friend. I can’t drink anymore... big no-no after a liver transplant.”

“Yeah, I know... I’m not supposed to either,” I replied sheepishly, remembering that I had just taken my medication. Even though it was starting to become a routine, there were times when I still forgot how much my life had changed in the last three months.

“I have soda,” Howie offered. “Or I could make coffee.”

“A soda sounds good,” I said. “I’ll take whatever you’ve got.” I watched him get up, wincing slightly as he rose out of his chair, and realized what an asshole I was being.

Here he was, still recovering from major surgery, and I was letting him wait on me. “Hey man, you don’t have to get it for me; I can find my way to your fridge.”

“No, I’ve got it,” Howie said, smiling. “It’s good for me to get up and walk around.”

“Well, if you insist... thanks.” When he went inside, I sat down on one of his deck chairs, propping my feet up on a nearby planter. While I waited for him to come back out, I pulled out my phone again and searched his name on one of the celebrity gossip sites, wondering what the internet was saying about him and Leigh.

The first headline that popped up had nothing to do with his impending divorce, but the giant picture that accompanied it made my jaw drop and my heart sink.

“Oh shit,” I said out loud, as I stared at the photo. “Shit, shit, *shit!*”

Chapter 41

Howie

I was in the kitchen when Nick came in, cursing loudly.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, whipping around way too fast for a guy with a still-healing incision. Wincing, I held my side. “Are you okay?”

“Have you seen this?!” He thrust his phone into my face.

“Seen what?” I asked, blinking, as my eyes struggled to focus on the screen. As if it wasn’t small enough already, the hand that was holding it kept shaking.

“They saw us yesterday.” His voice was shaking, too. “Howie, they saw us there!”

“What?” I grabbed the phone from him. “*Who* saw us *where?*”

“Someone saw us at the fucking AIDS clinic!” Nick shouted. “Look, there’s even a picture.”

My heart leapt into my throat as I looked down at his phone. Sure enough, there was a photo of the two of us sitting in my car outside the clinic. My head was turned toward

him, my hand on his shoulder, but the zoom that had allowed for this slightly blurry, close-up shot had also cropped out the buildings around us. There was nothing in the background that would identify our location; it looked like any other alleyway. “So?” I said. “We’re just sitting in a car. We could be anywhere.”

“Scroll up and look at the headline!”

I sighed and swiped my finger along his screen. He was on a gossip site. The headline said, ***BACKDOOR BUDDIES? Backstreet Boys Nick Carter and Howie Dorough Seen Canoodling in Alley Outside AIDS Clinic!***

“Canoodling?” I read incredulously. “I’m literally just touching your shoulder.”

“Who cares?” cried Nick. “They can put two and two together. Read what they wrote!”

I scanned the accompanying article.

Nick Carter and Howie Dorough, of the Backstreet Boys, were photographed Friday outside the UCLA Care Center, a clinic specializing in the treatment of HIV and AIDS. Dorough, 40, appeared to be comforting Carter, 34, who was visually upset in the photo, leading to speculation about the HIV status of one or both boyband singers.

Further fueling the fire, public record shows that Dorough’s estranged wife, Leigh Boniello, filed for divorce on February 14 after six years of marriage.

Dorough was hospitalized in January for what his publicist initially described as an undisclosed liver disease. Days later, he underwent a liver transplant due to acute liver failure. Liver problems are listed as a potential side effect of certain HIV medications, although it has not been confirmed that Howie is also suffering from HIV. Calls to the Backstreet Boys’ publicist have not been returned.

My heart sank. My thoughts echoed Nick’s: “Shit.”

“Yeah! Now what?” Nick asked, wide-eyed with panic.

I quickly re-read the article before answering. “You don’t have to worry about anything,” I said finally. “Most of it’s focused on me. They’ve got nothing on you.”

Nick yanked his phone out of my hand. “Nick Carter and Howie Dorrough Seen Canoodling’... Carter was ‘visually upset in the photo’... ‘speculation about the HIV status of one or *both* boyband singers’?” His voice rose as he read phrases from the article aloud.

My mind was racing, but I already knew what I had to do. “I’ll go public with it,” I said suddenly. “I’ll come clean about everything - everything except for y-... except for the cruise, of course.” I had started to say “except for you and me,” but I didn’t want to make him mad. In his mind, there was no “you and me,” never had been and never would be... except for that one night at sea that had ruined both our lives. I swallowed hard. “If I admit I have HIV, they’ll focus their attention on me and leave you alone.”

Nick stared at me. His eyes were still wide, but the look of panic had been replaced by an expression of awe. “You would do that for me?”

“I’d do anything for you, Nick,” I said quietly. It wasn’t just that I owed him. I loved him... and if that meant falling upon my own sword to save him the humiliation of having to admit *his* HIV status to the world, then so be it. I would take the fall for him.

He shook his head. “I appreciate it, dude, but seriously, you don’t have to. We can deny everything or, better yet, not address it all. If we get asked about it, we just say ‘no comment,’ end of story.”

I sighed. “You know that won’t work. If we try to avoid the media, they’ll just be after us even more. I guess it was only a matter of time before one of us was caught at the clinic.”

“You wouldn’t have even been there if I hadn’t called you,” Nick said, sounding guilty.

“No, but like I said... it was only a matter of time. I’m sure something would have leaked out someday; it always does.”

“Yeah... I guess.” He still seemed unsure, but I knew this was the right thing to do.

“Look, I’ve been living a lie for a long time... longer than you know,” I admitted. “Being honest about who I am and what I’ve done is gonna be hard, but I think it’ll feel good to finally get some of this weight off my shoulders.”

Nick nodded. “I’ve been there, and you’re right: after you get through the painful part of revealing everything, it does feel good.”

I eyed him hopefully, wondering if he'd had a change of heart. "You sure you don't want to do this together?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "Howie, I'll support you every step of the way... but I'm just not ready to go there with you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I said, and I meant it. I knew he was still coming to terms with everything that had happened himself. Pushing him to open up about it with other people, let alone the public, would only interfere with the progress we'd made in healing our relationship. "I respect your right to privacy. Just know that, no matter what happens, we're in this together, alright? You and I have got to have each other's backs, from now on."

"Alright, man, you got it," said Nick, nodding. He offered me his hand, and I took it, pulling him into a one-armed hug.

It felt so good to feel like I'd finally been forgiven, I wasn't even worried about what the media would say when they found out the truth. But before I announced anything, I knew I had to talk to the other person who would be most affected by it, the one who had yet to forgive me for it: my wife.

Leigh and I had actually talked more in the two weeks since she'd filed for divorce than we had in the two months prior to that. Granted, we were usually discussing issues related to the divorce itself - child custody arrangements, alimony, division of property, and so on - but it was still nice to be back on speaking terms with her. Before all this had happened, she'd been my best friend.

Although I knew we'd never again be as close as we once were, I still wanted us to maintain a friendly relationship, if only for the sake of our children. In a matter of months, I'd lost my wife, my health, and my career; those kids were all I had left, the only thing in my life that still mattered. For James and Holden, I would do anything.

That was why, when I called Leigh to tell her I was planning to go public, I asked her, "How much should I say about you and Holden? I know people will wonder about the reason for our divorce. Do you want me to tell the whole truth or just admit I was unfaithful to you and leave it at that?"

Leigh sighed. "I don't know how I feel about you airing our dirty laundry for the whole world to see..."

“I know. That’s why I’m asking you first. I have to say *something*, but it doesn’t have to be *everything*, you know? I wouldn’t bring you and Holden into it without your blessing.”

“I appreciate that.” She was quiet for a while after that. I waited, listening to the sounds of our breathing over the silence, while she thought about what I was asking. Finally, she said, “Secrets and lies are what got us into this mess in the first place, so I guess you should just be honest when it comes to us. If that means telling the truth about infecting me, then so be it. I’m not going to lie or try to hide my status.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I’m sure about me. But I don’t think we should say anything about Holden,” she added. “He’s only a baby. It’s bad enough he’s been saddled with this disease for the rest of his life; I don’t want him to have to deal with the stigma of everyone knowing he has it, too. I think we should wait until he’s old enough to have a say. If he wants to tell people someday, fine, but for now, we keep that part private.”

“I completely agree,” I assured her, though my reasons were partly selfish. Of course, I wanted to protect Holden, but I was also thinking it was going to be bad enough admitting I had given my wife HIV without letting the world know I had indirectly infected my infant son as well, not to mention Nick. “Let’s just keep this about you and me and leave everyone else out of it.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

I heard the hesitation in her voice. “Do you think I’m making a mistake?”

“No,” she said, after a pause. “I think you’re being brave.”

My heart lifted, and for a second, I felt like she might forgive me, too.

But then she went on to say, “I just wish you’d been this brave before we got married. If you had told the truth about yourself then, none of this would have happened.”

And with that, we were right back to square one. She was still hurt and angry. I was still wracked with guilt and starting to wonder if a divorce settlement would be enough to heal our wounds and help us down the path to acceptance and, hopefully one day, forgiveness.

Chapter 42

Nick

I thought I could lay low in L.A. until the whole thing with Howie and me blew over, but that was not the case.

A few days after the photo of us appeared online, I went to Walgreens to pick up a refill of my medications. I was just standing in line at the pharmacy counter, waiting my turn, when this random woman came up to me.

“Hey, you’re Nick Carter, aren’t you?” she asked.

It wasn’t uncommon for me to be recognized out in public, especially in L.A., where people are always on the lookout for celebrities. I tried to avoid the touristy parts of town, but still, there are stargazers everywhere you go.

“Maybe,” I said, smirking at her.

Most days, I didn’t mind being approached by fans who were polite about it; as long as I wasn’t in a hurry, I’d sign an autograph or take a quick selfie with them. But this girl was no fan, and she definitely wasn’t polite.

“Dude... is this true?” She shoved something into my face.

Blinking in surprise, I realized it was a tabloid magazine - with my picture on the cover. It was a paparazzi photo of me walking down some sidewalk with a look on my face that could pass for worried, when really I was probably just annoyed at the paparazzi taking pictures of me and squinting because the sun was in my eyes, and splashed across it was the headline, **NICK CARTER HEALTH CRISIS!** and under that, *Backstreet Boy diagnosed as HIV-positive, given grim prognosis.*

“Do you really have AIDS?”

“What? No!” I tried to laugh it off, like it was just another ridiculous rumor in a gossip rag, but even though it wasn’t entirely accurate, both the tabloid and the girl had come too close for comfort to the truth. “Hang on, I’ve gotta take this,” I said suddenly, acting like I’d felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. I turned away from the girl and stepped out of line as I pulled out my phone and pretended to answer it. “Hello?”

“Hey, wait!” she called as I walked away, but I ignored her, high-tailing it out of the store and straight to my car. I drove away in a hurry, deciding my meds would have to wait for another day. I still had a few days’ worth of pills left, so it didn’t seem like a big deal.

I kept checking my rearview mirror on the way back to Howie’s house, paranoid about being followed by paparazzi. It was like it was 1999 all over again, except this time, I didn’t want any of the attention. As I drove, I realized I wouldn’t worry about such a thing if I were in Franklin or the Florida Keys, and I guess that was when I made my decision.

I couldn’t stay in L.A.

“I’m leaving!” I announced when I walked into Howie’s house, empty-handed.

“You and Lauren make up?” he called from the living room, where he was watching TV.

I went in and flopped down on his couch. “No. Much worse. My face is on the cover of freaking *Star* magazine, which claims I only have months to live or some shit like that. Some girl showed me a copy at Walgreens, when she came up and asked if I had AIDS.”

“What?!” Howie gasped, turning to give me his full attention. “How can they get away with printing stuff like that without any proof? Unless you think someone talked...”

“Who would tell them that? There’s only a few people that even know, and they’re all people I trust: my doctor, you, Brian, Kevin, AJ, the wives, and Lauren,” I said, ticking their names off on my fingers. “That’s only ten people, and none of them would talk, let alone to a tabloid.”

“Are you sure Lauren didn’t-?” he started to ask, but I shook my head adamantly.

“She wouldn’t do that. Come on, dude, you saw how she stood by me. She was there for both of us. She wouldn’t betray us like that.”

“Just saying. ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,’” said Howie, raising his eyebrows. But then he shook his head, too. “You’re right, though. She wouldn’t do that. It’s just the damn media doing what they always do: taking a rumor and running with it. Once I admit that I’m the one with HIV, they’ll leave you alone and go after me instead.”

I sighed. “Well, I’m not gonna stick around this town and wait for them to find out I’m infected, too.”

“Where are you gonna go?” he asked.

I picked at a piece of fuzz on the couch. “Probably Tennessee. When are you gonna make your announcement?”

“I’ve got an exclusive interview set up with *People* magazine next week,” said Howie, and I nodded my approval.

“They were easy to work with when they interviewed me for that article and photo spread a few years ago.” Talking to *People* about my struggle with substance abuse and my diagnosis of cardiomyopathy had been hard, but not as hard as admitting I’d fooled around with one of my bandmates on the Backstreet Boys cruise and gotten infected with HIV. I just wasn’t ready to go there yet.

Howie smiled at me. “That’s where I got the idea. I remember reading that article. They did a good job with it.”

“Well, good luck, man,” I said. “You’re braver than me.”

He shook his head. “It’s not about bravery. It’s about atonement.”

Howie drove me to the airport the next day.

After deciding to go to Tennessee, I bought a ticket for the first flight to Nashville I could find. I had a house in a quiet, gated community in the suburb of Franklin, and for the last few years, it had been like my sanctuary when I needed to get away from life in L.A. I knew that was exactly what I needed then: an escape. From the publicity, from the paparazzi, from the fans, from the clinic, from Lauren, from Howie... honestly, I needed an escape from it all.

“Sorry for leaving you to deal with all of this by yourself,” I apologized to Howie, as he pulled up to the curb to drop me off. I felt bad about ditching him, until I remembered that he had brought this all on himself.

“It’s all right. I understand,” he said. “You do what you need to do.”

“Thanks.” I reached for my carry-on, and he popped his trunk so I could get the rest of my luggage.

“Have a safe flight,” he said, leaning across the front seat to give me a hug before I got out of his car. “And take care of yourself, okay?”

“You too, man. Talk to you later,” I said. But soon after I got to Tennessee, I shut off my phone so I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone.

Chapter 43

Howie

The month of March flew by in a flurry of media requests. I granted just one interview on the subject of my HIV status and released a single statement, thanking my Backstreet brothers and our fans for their support and asking for privacy. I let my publicist handle the media storm that followed, while I hunkered down in my house and waited for it to blow over.

By April, the story was starting to die down, as bigger celebrities stole back the spotlight with their usual screw-ups and drama. Katy Perry and John Mayer had called it quits - again. Lindsay Lohan had agreed to go to rehab - again. Justin Bieber was behaving badly - again - and I couldn’t have been happier to be let off the hook.

April also marked the three-month point in my post-transplant recovery. My incision had fully healed, and I was free to resume my normal activities. The trouble was, nothing in my life was normal. “Normal activities” for me used to include playing with my boys and performing with the Boys, but now that I’d destroyed my personal relationships and put my professional aspirations on hold, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I spent most of my time sitting around my house like a hermit, lonely and bored, which wasn’t normal at all.

Then, one day in early April, Lauren called. I was surprised to see her name pop up on my phone, since I hadn’t spoken to her since leaving her home in February. “Hello?” I answered uncertainly, wondering what she would be calling me about. Of course, it was the only thing we had in common: Nick.

“Is Nick still staying with you?” she asked, after we got past the usual pleasantries.

I frowned, surprised to hear she had no idea where her former fiancé was. “No, he left, like, a month ago.

“Do you know where he went?”

I wasn't sure if I should tell her or not. If Nick had wanted her to know where he was, wouldn't he have told her himself?

“Please, Howie,” Lauren begged, sensing my hesitation. “If you know where he is, you need to tell me now. He won't answer any of my calls or texts, and I'm worried about him.”

She sounded serious, and I wondered why she was so worried. “He's in Tennessee,” I said, “but I haven't talked to him in a while.” Now that I thought about it, that was weird. All of the other guys had reached out to me after my *People* article appeared online, but not Nick. I realized I hadn't heard from him since the day he left L.A., when he'd texted to let me know his plane had landed safely in Nashville. “He said he needed to get away for a while, so he's probably just enjoying some alone time,” I added, as much to reassure myself as Lauren.

“Well, he was supposed to come back for a checkup at the clinic today, but he didn't show up,” said Lauren. “They called me when they couldn't get a hold of him. I tried calling and texting, but like I said, he won't answer me either. As far as I can tell, no one's heard from him in weeks.” Her voice was starting to shake, and I could tell she was close to tears. “Howie, I think something's wrong with him. What if he-?”

“Hey,” I said quickly, before she could start with the “what ifs.” “Don't worry. He probably forgot all about flying back for his appointment. I'm sure he's fine. I'll try giving him a call right now, just in case. I'll call you back in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” she sniffled.

I hung up and immediately called Nick's number. His phone went straight to voicemail, making me think it was either turned off or dead. At that point, I was starting to worry, too, but I tried not to panic. I sent him a text, saying, “*Hey bro, just checking up on you. Hit me back as soon as you get this and let me know you're ok.*”

I made myself wait a few minutes to see if he'd text back, but when there was no response, I called Lauren back. “His phone's going straight to voicemail,” I told her. “I texted him, but haven't heard back.”

“That's what happened every time I tried, too,” she said and then sighed. “That's it. I'm calling the Franklin police.”

“Whoa, wait - don’t you think that’s a little extreme at this point?” I asked, imagining how embarrassed Nick would be if he opened his door to a bunch of cops who’d come over to check on him, not to mention the unwanted attention it would attract. That was exactly the kind of thing he was trying to avoid. “We don’t know if anything is wrong. He probably just has his phone shut off. Let’s give him a few hours, and if he hasn’t tried to contact one of us by tonight, then tomorrow I’ll fly to Tennessee and check on him myself.”

“And you don’t think *that’s* a little extreme?” asked Lauren incredulously.

It was true that I hadn’t given the idea any thought before I’d said it, but what else would I be doing? “I’ve got nothing else going on,” I said. “I want to make sure Nick’s all right as much as you do.”

“All right, fine,” she replied. “But if you go out there, I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t have to-” I started to say, but she stubbornly insisted.

“Yes, I do. I’m the only one who has a key to the house. You need me.”

There was nothing else I could say to that, except, “Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

But later that night, when we still hadn’t heard from Nick, Lauren and I found ourselves boarding a red-eye flight to Nashville. We barely slept on the plane, and by the time we landed, the sun was already rising in Tennessee.

We rented a car, and Lauren drove us to Nick’s house in Franklin. We were both quiet on the forty-minute ride. I kept trying to call Nick, even though it was not yet seven a.m., but his phone continued to go straight to voicemail. “He’s probably still asleep,” I said. I could tell Lauren wasn’t convinced. Neither was I.

When we pulled into Nick’s driveway, Lauren threw the car into park. I hopped out before she had even shut off the ignition. I thought the sounds of two slamming car doors might attract Nick’s attention, but there was no sign of him as we climbed the steps to the front porch. Lauren knocked loudly and rang the bell, but waited less than a minute before she went ahead and unlocked the door. “Nick?” she called, as we walked inside.

There was no answer. The whole house was silent and dark, not a single light left on overnight. I was starting to wonder if Nick was even there at all. Maybe he had flown on down to the Florida Keys, another one of his favorite places to hide out. That didn't explain why he still wasn't answering his phone, but it made me feel better about the musty way the house smelled, like the windows hadn't been opened in months. The air was stale and stagnant, but it didn't have the stench of decay one would expect when entering a house whose occupant had been dead for days, maybe weeks. And wasn't that what we were both afraid of? Neither of us would come right out and say it, but I knew the worry was there in the back of both our minds as we walked through the house, calling his name.

Lauren went upstairs, while I stayed downstairs, circling through the kitchen. There were dirty dishes in the sink and empty liquor bottles in the trash. The bottles in particular gave me a bad feeling.

Then I heard Lauren scream.

“Howie! Up here!”

I ran up the staircase, taking the steps two at a time. I hadn't moved that fast in months. Winded and clutching my side, I rounded the corner and saw the door to Nick's bedroom standing open. I held my breath as I walked inside, afraid of what I would find there.

Lauren was hovering over the bed, where Nick's body lay. Her long curtain of hair was hiding his face, but I could tell he wasn't moving. I exhaled and took another shaky breath before I asked, “Is he dead?”

“No, but he's burning up!” As I came closer, I realized Lauren's hand was on Nick's forehead, which was covered with sweat. “Something's wrong with him,” she said, running her hand down the side of his face. “Nick, sweetie, wake up.”

Watching the tender way she touched him and talked to him, I was overcome by a wave of envy, which I realized was ridiculous. With Nick so sick, it wasn't the time to get jealous of his fiancé. *Ex-fiancé*, I reminded myself, though to look at Lauren, one would never know it. She obviously still loved him.

Nick's eyelids fluttered, and he let out a faint groan, still only semi-conscious. “Should we call an ambulance?” I asked Lauren. She nodded, and I took my phone out of my pocket. My hand was shaking as I started to dial. 9... 1...

“No,” Nick suddenly moaned. His eyes finally opened all of the way. “No ambulance.”

I hesitated, my finger poised over the 1. Then I turned off the screen and came up alongside Lauren, leaning over the bed so he could see me. “Hey Nick, it’s Howie. Can you hear me, bro?” I asked.

He blinked a few times, struggling to focus on my face. Finally, he said, “Yeah... what are you doing here?”

“You wouldn’t call anyone back, so we came to check on you,” I said. “What’s wrong?” A startling thought came to me as I remembered the empty alcohol bottles. “Are you *on* something?”

“No... I’m *sick*,” he said, though he was slurring his words. “Just leave me alone and let me die.”

“Don’t say that!” Lauren snapped. “You are *not* dying. I don’t know what’s wrong, but we’re not leaving until we find out. You’re either gonna get up so we can take you to the doctor, or we’re calling an ambulance. What’s it gonna be?”

I admired her take-charge attitude. It was effective, too - Nick must have known she wasn’t messing around. “All right, all right,” he mumbled, struggling to sit up. Lauren slid her arm under his and helped him, her hand on his back. She held onto him as he swayed unsteadily on the edge of the bed. “God,” he groaned. “My head’s killing me.”

I still had the sneaking suspicion that he wasn’t just sick, but hungover. He stank, like he’d been sleeping in the same, unwashed clothes for weeks - and maybe he had. His t-shirt was soaked with sweat and had a stain down the front that may or may not have been vomit. “Well, your *smell’s* killing me,” I said, trying to keep the mood light. “You stink, dude. When was the last time you showered?”

“Dunno...”

“In that case... how about putting on some clean clothes before we go, huh?”

Nick just groaned again, but Lauren looked at me and nodded. I rummaged around in Nick’s dresser drawers until I found a pair of gray sweatpants and a clean t-shirt. I handed them to Lauren, who helped Nick pull his shirt up over his head. He was so weak, he just sat there and let her undress him like he was a child. The last time I’d seen him like that was the night of the cruise, when I was the one taking his clothes off. He had only been only drunk then, but something was definitely wrong with him this time.

Lauren and I helped him stand and step into his sweatpants. He was shaky on his feet, and I could feel the heat radiating from his feverish skin as I slung his arm around my shoulders to support some of his weight. Lauren took the other arm, and we walked him slowly down the stairs. He moved like an arthritic old man, wincing with every step.

“Nick, how long have you been like this?” Lauren asked, as she sat him down at the kitchen table and shoved some shoes onto his feet.

“I dunno,” Nick mumbled again, rubbing his temples. “A few days, maybe?”

Lauren gave his knee a gentle squeeze. “We’ve gotta find out what’s going on and get you feeling better. Come on... we’re going to the ER.”

Nick tried to protest, but in the end, he was too weak to resist. We wrangled his arms around our shoulders again, helped him out to the car, and headed for the hospital.

Chapter 44

Nick

I’d thought I would be better off away from L.A., away from the paparazzi, away from Lauren and Howie, but after I left, my life just got worse.

For the first few days, everything was fine. I shut off my phone and stayed off social media so I could avoid people and enjoy the peace and quiet of my house in Franklin. I immersed myself in my favorite hobbies: video games, movies, music. I still ran on the treadmill and tried to eat right and took my meds religiously... until I ran out. That was when everything started to fall apart.

It was my fault for not planning ahead, for leaving town before refilling my prescriptions. It’s not like I couldn’t have transferred them to a pharmacy in Franklin, but I got a panicky feeling every time I thought about walking into someplace to pick them up, remembering what had happened at Walgreens the last time I’d tried. I didn’t want to be seen doing anything that would fuel the speculation about my HIV status, so I put it off. And the longer I procrastinated, the better I felt... for awhile, anyway. The nausea and stomach pain I usually felt after taking my pills went away, even without

Compazine. My appetite improved, sleep came more easily, and my energy level increased, motivating me to work out more.

Eventually, I thought, *Screw the pills*. Maybe I didn't need to take medication. Dr. Usako had said I was doing well; my viral load was down, and my immune system was back to normal. I could stay healthy through diet and exercise, which was much easier to maintain when I wasn't suffering from the medication's side effects. Yay for holistic medicine.

I even went grocery shopping and bought a bunch of the immune-boosting superfoods Lauren had been feeding me before we broke up. But in the checkout line, I saw something that made my stomach start hurting again: Howie's face on the cover of *People* magazine, along with the headline, ***HOWIE DOROUGH: "I'M HIV-POSITIVE." The Backstreet Boy opens up about his diagnosis, his divorce, and how he's dealing with it all.***

With a sigh, I snuck a copy into my cart and went through the self-checkout so no one would see me buying it. On my way home, I stopped by a liquor store and stocked up on booze, knowing it would be easier to read Howie's interview if I wasn't sober. I hadn't had a drink since starting treatment, but now that I'd stopped taking my medication, I didn't think it would hurt.

I suppose that was the start of my downward spiral.

I started feeling sick a few days later. I thought I had the flu; the symptoms were the same: fatigue, high fever, headache, body aches, and so forth. But even though I stayed in bed and slept as much as possible, I didn't get any better. Days passed, and by the time Lauren and Howie showed up, I was in bad shape.

At the hospital, a nurse took my medical history and asked what medications I was on, so I was forced to admit that I'd stopped taking my HIV meds. When Lauren heard me say that, she literally gasped. "*Nick!*"

"What?" I said flatly.

"Why would you do that??" She was staring at me incredulously, like she couldn't believe what an idiot I was. "Dr. Usako said once you start treatment, you can't stop. No wonder you're sick!"

“It’s just the flu,” I mumbled, closing my eyes as I massaged my temples. The fluorescent lights in the exam room were too bright, and my head hurt. Lauren’s shrill voice shouting at me was only making me feel worse.

“Based on your symptoms, it does sound like you have an infection of some sort,” the nurse interjected, “but with a weakened immune system, we can’t be too careful. I’m sure the doctor will want to do some blood work and get to the bottom of this.”

Sure enough, after examining me, the doctor had her draw my blood and ordered a bunch of tests. We had to wait a few hours for the results. I pretended to sleep while Lauren and Howie sat off to one side of the room, whispering about me. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but I could tell they were worried. I felt bad about them coming all that way to deal with my bullshit, but mostly I just felt... *bad*. Every part of my body ached. I’d had the flu before, but this was ten times worse. As it turned out, that was because it wasn’t the flu at all.

“Well, Mr. Carter, the good news is that your test results came back negative,” said the doctor, when he finally returned to deliver his diagnosis. “Nothing out of the ordinary showed up on your scans, and there were no signs of a bacterial or fungal infection in your blood cultures. The bad news is that your blood *cell* counts are abnormal. Your platelets and white blood cells are low, and your CD4 count has dropped significantly. I spoke to your HIV specialist, and she said it was 511 when she last saw you in January. Today, it came out at 224. To put that into perspective, a CD4 count lower than 200 is one of the criteria that can be used to diagnose AIDS.”

Again, Lauren gasped, as my stomach did a somersault. I had just barely dodged what, in my mind, sounded like a death sentence: AIDS.

“In your case, Mr. Carter,” the doctor continued, before any of us could speak, “I believe you are suffering from something called retroviral rebound syndrome, which can occur soon after stopping antiretroviral therapy. Basically, once you stopped taking your HIV medication, the virus started replicating very rapidly, just like it did right after you were first infected. Your viral load is up from around 10,000 to almost 1,000,000 copies per milliliter, which explains why you’re experiencing the symptoms of a severe viral infection.”

“Oh my god!” Lauren gasped yet again, looking shocked at the high number. “How could it have climbed that high so quickly? Nick said it’s only been a couple of weeks since he stopped taking his meds, and even if that was a lowball estimate, it can’t have been much more than a month. When we were together, I made *sure* he took them.”

She shot me a glare, as if to say, *See how much you need me?* I looked away, feeling guilty.

“You’d be surprised,” said the doctor. “I consulted a few similar case studies that found it only takes a week or two for HIV to take advantage of the fact that it has free reign and start wreaking havoc on the immune system. Fortunately for you, Mr. Carter, the condition is reversible,” he added, “as long as you start your antiretroviral therapy again right away.” He gave me a stern look over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses.

I swallowed hard. “So... so you’re saying I don’t have AIDS.”

“Not at this time,” said the doctor. “Your HIV infection is still in the early stages. However, without treatment, it will most definitely progress to that point. That was the problem in the ‘80s, before advances in antiretroviral therapy. Most people had already developed AIDS by the time they were diagnosed, and it killed them quickly, often in a matter of months. Nowadays, people with HIV that is properly treated and does not progress to AIDS are predicted to live a normal lifespan. It’s *very* important that you adhere to your treatment plan from now on.”

Everyone was watching me, waiting for me to promise I would start taking my pills again like a good boy. I felt embarrassed and stupid, but the doctor’s little AIDS lecture had done its job of scaring me into submission. In a small voice, I said, “I will.”

The doctor nodded. “Good. Dr. Usako faxed over your prescriptions and said you should continue taking the same drugs and dosages for now. She’d like to see you for a follow-up appointment as soon as you’re back in Los Angeles to make sure you’re still responding to the treatment. Sometimes HIV develops drug resistance when treatment is stopped and started again, so she may need to change your medication regimen at some point.”

I groaned to myself, as I imagined what a pain in the ass it would be to have to adjust to whole new set of meds and their side effects. I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“In the meantime,” the doctor added, “I’d like to admit you for observation. Your symptoms should start to go away within a few days of reinitiating the antiretroviral therapy, but until then, we can manage them here.”

I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. “Can’t I manage them at home? I mean, do I *have* to stay in the hospital?”

“Of course, I can’t force you to stay against your will, but Dr. Usako and I both agree it would be for the best,” said the doctor.

“Don’t even go there, Nick,” said Lauren, glaring at me again. “You’re staying.”

“I know it sucks,” Howie spoke up for the first time, looking at me with sympathy instead of judgment. “Trust me, I’ve been there, bro. But you have to do what the doctor says. He knows best.”

I was too tired to argue, so I just nodded and turned my head to the side so they wouldn’t see the tears starting in my eyes. Even though we weren’t together, I still loved Lauren, and I felt guilty for screwing up and letting her down. I also felt bad about bringing Howie all the way out here, when he was still recovering from his surgery. But I hadn’t just hurt them. More than anyone, I’d hurt myself.

I couldn’t take my health for granted again. Lauren and Howie were right: I had to follow the doctor’s orders.

Chapter 45

Howie

Once the admission paperwork was complete, Lauren and I accompanied Nick upstairs to his private room. I waited in the hallway while she went in to help him change into a hospital gown and get settled. While I was waiting, I sent a group text to the guys to fill them in on what was going on. Their responses were typical: Kevin asked all kinds of questions, Brian offered prayers on behalf of the Littrell family, and AJ called Nick a bunch of names, including “dumbass” and “shithead,” then said to tell Nick he loved him.

After a while, Lauren came back out and sat down beside me in the hall. “He’s gonna try to get some sleep,” she said, and then she let out a huge sigh. “God, I can’t believe how *stupid* he is. Why would he stop taking his meds?? He was doing so *well!*”

It was the first time we’d had a chance to talk out of earshot of Nick since we had found him in the house. We’d whispered some in the ER, while Nick was faking sleep, but since we’d both spent enough time around him to know when he was really asleep, we hadn’t said anything we wouldn’t have wanted him to overhear.

“He screwed up,” I said, shrugging. “What else is there to say? People do stupid things sometimes.” I could tell I was going to be more sympathetic toward Nick than she was. I felt like I understood what he was going through, maybe because I’d been there before. I had messed up much worse than Nick, misused my meds and alcohol to the point of almost killing myself. At least we had gotten to him before he’d gone that far. “Let’s just be glad he’s gonna be okay and hope he’s learned his lesson.”

Lauren shook her head. “After everything that’s happened in the last few weeks, I don’t know if I trust his decision-making abilities anymore. He’s acting irrationally, Howie. First he breaks off our engagement... then he leaves town, doesn’t talk to anyone, stops taking his meds, starts drinking again, and skips his doctor’s appointment. It’s like he’s trying to sabotage his own life by getting rid of every good thing he had going for him.”

“I don’t think that’s what he’s doing,” I said. “He just didn’t want to hurt you. That’s why he left.”

“Well, he *did* hurt me,” she snapped. “And now he’s hurting himself.”

“He didn’t mean to. Did you see the look on his face when the doctor said ‘AIDS’? That scared the shit out of him. He won’t go off his meds again.”

“No, he sure as hell won’t. I won’t let him,” said Lauren, squaring her jaw. “If he won’t come back to L.A. with me, then I’ll stay here with him.”

She looked determined, but I had never heard her sound so desperate. It seemed like Lauren, the fiercely independent woman Nick had won over, was now holding onto him for dear life, afraid to let go. I wasn’t sure this was as much about making sure Nick took his meds as it was Lauren wanting to be needed by him and needing to have a place and a purpose in his life.

It made sense to me, of course. She had sacrificed so much of herself to be with Nick, and even though she’d stuck by him, he had hung her out to dry and left her with nothing except the condo in L.A. She had no real career, no money of her own, no life outside of the one she’d built with Nick. So of course she was clinging to him, hoping he would come back to her. But I knew Nick better than that.

“You know why Nick fell for you?” I asked, looking over at Lauren.

She frowned, clearly wondering where I was going with that. “Why?”

“Because,” I said, “you were the first girl who didn’t fall all over him. You thought he was an arrogant prick the first time you met him, remember?”

Lauren laughed. “Yeah... for a few minutes, anyway. He seemed so standoffish at first. But then we started talking, and we hit it off right away.”

“Yeah, but even then, you weren’t a fan. You liked him, but you didn’t go all gaga over him like other girls. You were never the clingy type... which is a good thing. Guys don’t like clingy girls.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to tell me I’m acting clingy now?”

I held up my hands in defense. “All I’m saying is the tighter you try to hold on to him, the harder he’s going to push you away.”

“This isn’t even about Nick and me as a couple,” she insisted, shaking her head. “This is about his health and wellbeing. All I want is for him to be happy and healthy, and if he’s happier without me... well, then so be it. But I’m not just going to sit back and watch him self-destruct. I still care about him, and I’m going to do everything I can to make sure he takes care of *himself*.”

“Hey... we’re on the same side here,” I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. “We both want what’s best for Nick. But honestly, what I think he needs most right now is some space. He left L.A. because he wanted to be left alone.”

“Yeah, and look what happened to him!”

“I know, but like I said, I don’t think he’ll make that mistake again. Either way, we can’t *make* him take his meds any more than we could keep him here in the hospital if he really wanted to leave. Nick’s a grown man, and he’s gotta figure this out for himself. Neither of us can live his life for him.”

Lauren sniffled. I looked over at her again and was startled to see tears trickling down her cheeks.

“It was supposed to be *our* life,” she whispered, wiping her eyes. “Together.”

I swallowed hard, squirming with guilt over my role in ruining their relationship.

“Do you know what today is?” she continued. “It’s the day before what *would* have been our wedding day. We were supposed to have the rehearsal dinner tonight. It was going

to be Moroccan-themed.” She sniffed again and took another swipe at her right eye. “I have a white kaftan hanging in my closet, along with a custom wedding gown I’ll never wear. I had to cancel all the vendors and venues we’d booked and send back everything I could. I had to tell all my family and friends to forget about the ‘save the date’ cards they got in the mail. Do you know how hard that was for me? How humiliating?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, knowing it was my fault. Nick was the one who had left her, but I was the reason he’d felt he had to. “I’m so sorry, Lauren.”

She shook her head regretfully. “So am I. But you know what makes it even worse? The whole time, I was hoping he would still come around, that we could just reschedule. I mean, look at me - I’m still wearing my engagement ring.” She held out her left hand so I could see the seven-carat rock sparkling on her finger. “He walked out on me, and yet, here I sit, outside his hospital room. I guess I am being clingy, huh?” She let out a harsh sound - half laugh, half sob.

“You’re not,” I assured her, rubbing her shoulder. “You’re still in love with him. I get it. But you know something? He still loves you, too. He told me so.”

“Then why won’t he marry me?” she cried, throwing up her hands in frustration. “Why does he have to be such a fucking martyr? Does he really think we’ll both be better off alone and miserable than we would if we were together? This is what I’m talking about, Howie - he’s not thinking rationally.”

“Here’s what I think: You know that saying, ‘If you love something, set it free?’ That’s the belief Nick’s operating under right now - that *because* he loves you, he has to let you go. He thinks you deserve better, that you should have a life that doesn’t revolve around his HIV.”

“My life *doesn’t* revolve around his HIV,” she argued.

“And yet, here you sit, saying you’re going to move halfway across the country to take care of him if he won’t come back to L.A. with you. Yes it does, Lauren. Like it or not, your being here is just proving his point - to *him*, at least. You and I both know it’s not true, but this is Nick we’re talking about - that same, self-absorbed asshole you fell in love with on your first date.”

Lauren snorted as she continued to cry-laugh.

“In his mind, it’s all about him,” I continued. “You need to show him otherwise. It’s *your* turn to walk away. Go home. Have a life without him. Make him regret that he’s

not a part of it anymore. Make him *miss* you. Then maybe the second part of that saying will come true. 'If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it was meant to be.'"

She sniffed and nodded. "Maybe you're right," she said, rummaging through her purse for a tissue to blow her nose.

"Trust me. Nick's always been needy when it comes to love. He's kind of like a temperamental cat: if you just leave him alone and ignore him long enough, he'll come crawling back to you eventually. But not if you keep coming after him."

Lauren laughed. "Yes, I heard you have experience dealing with temperamental cats."

That seemingly random comment caught me off-guard. "Huh?"

She smiled. "When you were in surgery, Kevin was telling us about this cat of his that you hated."

"Oh! Yeah... Quincy." I chuckled. "Yeah, that cat was so annoying... never left me alone."

"So you're saying I should do the opposite and leave Nick alone."

"Exactly."

She sighed. "I just feel bad. You know, Nick's been abandoned by just about every person in his life. I don't want to be the next name on that list."

"You're not abandoning him. *He* left *you*," I reminded her. "Besides, he won't be completely alone. He's got the guys and me. You know none of us would abandon him."

Lauren nodded. "I know. I still worry about him being out here by himself, though. I'd feel better if he were back in L.A., where at least I know he has friends around to check on him."

"I don't think he's gonna wanna go back to L.A. right away. Hell, *I* don't wanna go back to L.A."

She looked over at me. "Really? Where would you go instead? Florida?"

I nodded. “Florida’s home for me. All my family is there... well, except for Leigh and the kids. But I think she’d bring them back there to see their grandmother before she’d bring them out to L.A. Maybe it’s time I found myself a doctor in the Orlando area and moved back.”

It was something I’d been thinking about ever since my mother and siblings had flown home. I needed the support of my family, but there was no way I could have traveled that far so soon after my transplant. Now that I was mostly recovered, though, I had more freedom to go where I wanted. My mind was already at work, weighing my different options, when the idea suddenly came to me.

“Nick could come with me,” I said. “Then I could keep an eye on him... make sure he’s taking his meds.” I winked at her.

She raised her eyebrows skeptically. “You think he would go for that?”

I shrugged. “I dunno... maybe. I mean, he has roots in Florida, too. My condo in Cape Canaveral has an ocean view; he would love that. And we’ve been on a lot better terms lately. I think he’s finally starting to forgive me and accept the fact that, like it or not, we’re in this together.” Selfishly, I hoped I was right. I loved the idea of leaving the drama in L.A. behind and having Nick all to myself somewhere else.

Lauren nodded. “Well, whatever you think. I guess I shouldn’t worry about it either way, huh?”

I flashed her a reassuring smile. “He’ll figure it out, Lauren. He always does. It just usually takes him a little longer than the rest of us because he has to screw up a few times first.”

“Hm, well, let’s see - he’s already broken off our engagement and made himself sick,” she said sarcastically, ticking Nick’s most recent screw-ups off on her finger, “so by that logic, he should be close to figuring things out already. Third time’s the charm?”

I laughed. “We can only hope. With Nick, though, you never know.”

Chapter 46

Nick

Lauren left for L.A. the next day, on what would have been our wedding day. Instead of watching her walk down the aisle, I watched her walk out of my hospital room.

“Take care of yourself, Nick,” she told me on her way out. That was all she said. No “I love you.” Nothing else. I have to admit, that stung a little, but I knew I deserved it. At least she seemed to be moving on with her life. That was what I’d wanted, wasn’t it? For her to be happy and healthy without me? I tried to be happy for her, but truthfully, I felt miserable.

Meanwhile, Howie stayed with me in Franklin. For three days, he hung out at the hospital, while my fever hovered around 103. On the fourth day, the fever finally broke, and they sent me home, with strict instructions to keep taking my HIV medication and to follow up with my doctor as soon as I got back to L.A.

I was finally starting to feel better by then, and I definitely didn’t want to end up in the hospital again, so I promised to take my meds as directed. The problem was, I wasn’t sure I wanted to go back to L.A. Lauren was there... and so were the paparazzi who had scared me away in the first place. I didn’t want to face them again. I didn’t want to deal with the drama. I wanted to stay far away from it all.

“You know, I was thinking the same thing,” said Howie on the way home from the hospital, when he asked what my plan was and I told him what was on my mind. He was driving while I sat in the passenger seat, a pharmacy bag with a fresh supply of prescription drugs tucked between my feet. For the first few days after I’d decided to stop taking them, I’d felt so free. Now I just felt overwhelmed.

“You mean, you don’t wanna go back either?” I asked, looking over at him.

He shook his head. “Not particularly. I’ve been stuck there for the past four months because that’s where my medical team is, but it’s not like Florida doesn’t have doctors.”

I shrugged and nodded. “So you’re going back to Florida?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” he said, scratching his head. “My family’s there, and... well, there’s not really any other reason for me to stay in L.A.; it’s not like we’re working right now.”

“True.” I wondered if we would ever work together again. I supposed that was up to Howie and me to decide; the rest of the fellas would follow our lead. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that yet. I’d written some songs before I got sick, but it was all solo stuff; I hadn’t given much thought to the group.

“You could come with me, if you want,” Howie added casually. “You’d like Cape Canaveral. It’s a lot smaller and quieter than L.A., that’s for sure - and there’s no paparazzi there.”

“There’s no paparazzi here, either,” I pointed out, watching idyllic, green pastures roll by outside my window as we neared my neighborhood on the outskirts of town. Florida would always feel like home to me, but I had fallen in love with Tennessee, too. Life moved at a slower pace there, and the people were friendlier. It was a peaceful place. The only thing it was missing was an ocean, but the beauty of the mountains more than made up for the lack of beaches.

“No, but... I’m not sure it’s such a good idea for you to stay here alone, Nick,” said Howie, giving me a quick sideways glance before returning his eyes to the road. “I mean, what would have happened to you if Lauren and I hadn’t gotten here when we did?”

I felt my face flush. “It won’t happen again. I made a stupid mistake, learned my lesson; I’ll stay on my meds from now on,” I muttered, hoping he wasn’t about to lecture me like the doctor at the hospital had.

“Okay, but what if you start having severe side effects again or... I dunno, some other kind of complication-” I saw his knuckles whiten as his fingers tightened around the steering wheel. “-and there’s no one around to take care of you?”

“I can take care of myself,” I said flatly. “Take a left up there.”

Howie made the turn into my community, then looked over at me again. “I know you can. It’s just... you took care of me after my surgery, when I wasn’t supposed to be living alone. I’d like to return the favor.”

I rolled my eyes. “That was all Lauren. You don’t owe me anything, Howie.”

“I owe you everything,” he countered quietly.

I sighed impatiently. “No, you don’t, Howie, you-”

“If it wasn’t for you, I’d be dead,” he interjected. “And if wasn’t for me, you’d still be living with Lauren, perfectly healthy and happily married by now. So... either way you look at it... I owe you.”

I couldn't really argue with that, so I didn't say anything. Neither of us spoke again until we were pulling into my driveway. Then, as the car slowed to a stop, Howie said, "At least think about it, will you? There's plenty of space in my condo now that Leigh and the kids have moved out, and the complex is right by the beach - my balcony overlooks the water; you'd love it - and the Kennedy Space Center is so close, we could watch the rocket launches..."

As Howie babbled on about how great Cape Canaveral was, I realized how lonely he sounded. Maybe he wasn't so much worried about me living alone as not wanting to be alone himself. For the first time since he'd told me his HIV status, I didn't think about the fact that it was his fault he was alone. I actually felt sorry for him, and something in me softened. "Yeah, okay, I'll think about it," I said, as I scooped up my bag of prescriptions and reached for the door handle.

That seemed to satisfy Howie for the time being. He smiled at me as we walked into the house. I wrinkled my nose; it smelled bad inside. I hadn't realized how funky it had gotten while I was holed up in there. I guess I'd gone nose-blind, like in those Febreze commercials. Compared to the sterile cleanliness of the hospital, my house seemed filthy.

"Sorry for the mess," I said, as I continued into the kitchen, where the sink was full of dirty dishes, the garbage overflowing with empty liquor bottles and take-out containers. I set my medicine on the counter, then turned to see Howie standing in the middle of the kitchen, staring around at the clutter. He caught my eye and raised his eyebrows.

"You sure you can take care of yourself?"

"Oh, shut up. I'll clean this shit up," I said with a sigh, shoving the trash down into the bag so I could pull the drawstrings to close it. I heaved the bulging garbage bag out of its can, surprised by how heavy it was. Even though my fever had broken, I still felt weak, like I was recovering from the flu.

Howie watched me struggle with the bag for a few seconds, a slight smile on his face. Then he walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet. "I'll help," he said. When I came back in from taking out the trash, he was rinsing dishes. "Sit down for a few," he said, without looking at me. "I've got this."

"You don't have to-" I started, but he cut me off.

"Nick. I've got this. Sit."

So I perched on a stool at the breakfast bar and picked at my hospital bracelet while I watched him load the dishwasher and wipe down the countertops with soapy water. Smirking, I couldn't help but think, *Maybe I should let him take care of me.* Suddenly, moving in with Howie didn't sound like such a bad idea.

I would definitely think about it.

A few more days passed before Howie brought up the possibility of my coming to Cape Canaveral with him again. By that point, I was feeling better and starting to get my strength back, although the medication I took twice a day served as a depressing reminder that I might never feel like my old self, pre-HIV.

"So, Nick," Howie said, watching me shake my morning pills out of several prescription bottles that lined the counter while he made coffee. "Have you given any more thought to Florida? I only ask because I need to book my flight out of here in the next few days, and... well..."

"...You were wondering if you should reserve one seat or two?" I finished for him, organizing the pills into a perfectly straight line across the countertop to avoid making eye contact.

"Well... yeah."

I picked up one of my prescription bottles and pretended to study the dosing instructions on the side to stall for time. I'd been home for several days and still hadn't gotten around to filling my pill organizer, like Lauren had always helped me do. Faced with the prospect of figuring it all out for myself, I missed her more than ever.

"Yeah, I've thought about it," I said slowly, setting the bottle back down. The truth was, while I'd considered his offer to come to Cape Canaveral, I hadn't yet made up my mind. On one hand, I felt bad for the guy, having to go home to the empty condo where his wife and kids no longer lived. No wonder he wanted my company. But it would be weird for me to go and live with him, and besides, Franklin had always felt like sort of a sanctuary to me. I wasn't sure I wanted to leave Tennessee. So, to avoid answering, I shuffled over to the fridge and took out a carton of orange juice. "OJ?" I asked, holding it out to him.

Howie shook his head. "Can't. Too much potassium."

“Oh.” I carried the carton back to the counter, opened an overhead cupboard, and took down a glass. As I poured myself some juice, I said, “You’re going back to Florida, and you can’t even have orange juice? That sucks, dude.”

Howie snorted. “Yeah, well... it’s a small price to pay for a second chance at life, I guess.”

That statement sort of surprised me, coming from him, after how hard I’d had to work to convince him to consent to having a liver transplant in the first place. “So does that mean you’re glad you got the transplant?” I asked, sticking the juice carton back in the fridge. When I turned back toward him, Howie was frowning. “Sorry, was that insensitive?” I said, assuming the face was directed at me, even though his eyes were staring into space.

“No, you’re fine,” he replied slowly. “I was just thinking... I guess I *am* glad. I wasn’t really sure at first, you know.” He ran his fingers absently across the counter top. “The whole time I was in the hospital, I kept wondering whether I was grateful to be alive or still wished I was dead. I know that sounds selfish, seeing as how someone else had to die for me to live... but that’s how I felt.”

“I know,” I said quietly. “I mean, I know you didn’t want the transplant at first. It took some serious effort to talk you into it...” I smiled at him briefly, but felt my smile fade when I remembered how he had looked in the hospital, all hooked up to tubes and machines. “...and afterwards, I wasn’t sure I should have done that,” I admitted. “You were in such bad shape, I thought... I thought maybe it would’ve been better if you had just died on New Year’s.” As the confession slipped from my lips, I instantly regretted it. “I’m sorry, dude, that was a shitty thing to say.”

But Howie shook his head. “No, it’s true,” he said, shrugging. “I thought I’d be better off dead, too.”

I suddenly realized his eyes were bright with tears, which made me feel even more awkward. I had only seen Howie tear up a handful of times in my whole life; he wasn’t like Kevin, who cries at everything, including TV commercials.

“I don’t think I ever really thanked you,” Howie added, “for talking me into the transplant, or for saving my life in the first place. Like I said the other day, if it weren’t for you, I would have died... but I’m glad I didn’t. I *am* grateful to be alive. So... thank you.”

“Back at ya,” I said, busying myself with my medication again so I wouldn’t have to hug him. It was too early in the morning to be having such a heavy conversation; I hadn’t

even brushed my teeth yet. But hey, at least I'd distracted him from talking about Florida. "Thanks for coming all the way out here to check up on me... and making sure I take my meds," I added, pushing the line of pills into a little pile, which I scooped into the palm of my hand. I grinned at him, then popped the whole handful into my mouth at once and washed them down with a swig of juice. Swallowing with difficulty, I set the glass down with a grimace and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Not even orange juice could disguise the bitter taste of the pills on my tongue, but it was better than plain water.

"Hey, like I said in L.A., we've gotta have each other's backs. We're in this together," Howie said, pouring two cups of coffee and passing one to me.

"Thanks." As I took the steaming mug out of his hand, I realized Howie was right. He and I were the only ones who could truly understand what the other was going through. Like it or not, we were connected by the very thing that had torn both of our lives apart. Neither of us had been very successful at dealing with it separately; his suicide attempt and my recent stint in the hospital had more than proven that. As I took a sip of scalding coffee, burning the tip of my tongue, I wondered if I was being stupid for wanting to face it alone. Maybe Howie and I would both be better off if we stuck together, each of us acting as a support system for each other. Maybe then, we could start rebuilding our lives.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of coffee, and let it out slowly. Leaning on the countertop, I ran my stinging tongue across the back of my bottom teeth as I thought about what I was going to say next. Finally, I turned to face Howie again. "So, about that flight to Florida... go ahead and book two seats."

Howie smiled. "I was hoping you'd say that."

So that's how, on the day I should have been flying home from my honeymoon with Lauren, I found myself headed to Florida with Howie instead.

Chapter 47

Howie

It felt great to be back in Florida. "Smell that sea air?" I asked Nick, as we climbed out of the cab that had shuttled us from the airport to my condominium complex.

He took a deep breath and smiled, stretching his arms over his head. “Mmm... yeah. Welcome home.”

“Same to you,” I said, even though it had been a long time since Nick had called Florida home. Having grown up near Tampa, he’d never even lived on the Atlantic side of the state and now spent most of his time in the Keys. Still, I had so many memories from the early years of the group, when all five of us were based in Orlando, that it felt like a homecoming to me.

Sometimes I missed those days and wished we weren’t spread so far apart. Unlike Nick, AJ, and Kevin, I had never quite adapted to living on the West Coast. Leigh and I had kept the house in California for convenience when I was working there, but even before the divorce, we’d considered selling it. L.A. just didn’t feel like home to either of us, and after having children, it made the most sense for us to move back to the East Coast, where both our families were located. I loved living in Cape Canaveral, close to the beach and not far from Orlando.

But when I walked into my condo for the first time in four months, I didn’t feel the warm sense of “home” I’d been expecting. For one thing, it was way too quiet inside. I was used to being welcomed home by the sound of running feet and happy shouts of “Daddy!” but all I heard this time was the low hum of the air conditioner. It didn’t smell like home, either. The air was slightly stagnant from the windows being shut for so long, yet the condo was spotlessly clean, almost sterilely so. It looked like someone - probably my mother, who had a spare key - had come in and cleaned the place.

“Nice pad, dude,” said Nick, looking around. He’d never been to the condo before. I nodded, but in a way, it was like I was seeing it for the first time, too. I wasn’t used to it looking so neat and tidy, with no toys lying around or sippy cups sitting on every surface. It made me sad. Except for a few framed photos Leigh had left on the walls, there was no sign that my two little boys had ever lived there.

But not everything was gone. “Where should I put my stuff?” Nick asked, and when I took him back to James’s bedroom, I saw that my son’s twin bed was still there, his quilt with cars and trucks all over it pulled up tight, his toys tucked away neatly in his toy box, his books lined up straight across the shelves of his tiny bookcase. A lump rose in my throat as I recognized *Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site*, a book I’d read to him before bedtime at least two hundred times.

Clearing my throat, I said, “Sorry, I know it’s not exactly five-star accommodations. We had to get rid of our guest room once Holden came along, and since I don’t think you’ll fit in his crib...”

Nick chuckled. “Not sure I’ll fit in this little bed either,” he replied, flopping onto it, and sure enough, his feet hung a few inches off the end.

“Sorry,” I apologized again, “but unless you wanna share my bed-”

“Uh, no thanks,” Nick said quickly, his face reddening. “This’ll be fine.”

I’d meant it as a joke, but the look on his face told me I shouldn’t have said it. We may have made some progress in mending our friendship over the past few months, but obviously, he was still sensitive about certain things. I knew he didn’t want to be reminded of what had happened between us on the cruise, even though the medications he took twice daily must have made it hard for him to forget.

“Good, ‘cause I was only kidding. I’m not gonna have you hogging all my covers and kicking me in my sleep,” I said lightly, trying to ease the sudden tension. “But in all seriousness, I am gonna get another adult-sized bed at some point. Now that the kids aren’t living here full-time, they don’t need their own rooms. We can move Holden in here with James and make his nursery the guest room again.”

It hurt to have to say that, to admit that I’d only be seeing my boys in the summer and on certain holidays, but that was the custody arrangement Leigh and I had worked out. They would stay with her in New Jersey, where Holden had his doctor and James would be starting school, and spend two months in the summer with me. It wasn’t fair, but I knew I was in no position to fight her for equal custody. Of course, I could provide for my children better than she could financially, but between my health problems and the sometimes crazy schedule that came with my career, I worried the courts would see me as an unfit parent if it came to that. Instead, wanting to keep things amicable, I agreed to let the kids live with Leigh out of state and pay child and spousal support. After everything that had happened because of my bad decisions, it was the least I could do.

To my delight, Leigh and both boys flew down to Florida about a week after Nick and I did, just in time for James’s fifth birthday. She brought with her the paperwork we needed to sign in order to finalize our divorce, but the moment I saw my children, I didn’t care about her ulterior motives.

“DAD!!!” There was the warm greeting I’d been waiting more than five months for, as James let go of Leigh’s hand and raced across the crowded airport terminal and into my open arms.

“James!” I scooped him up, surprised at how much heavier he felt than how I remembered him. “Wow, kiddo... you’re getting so big!” It occurred to me that while James had surely grown some, I had also gotten weaker and probably wasn’t supposed to be lifting so much weight. I could feel the strain around my incision scar, but I didn’t care. I hadn’t seen my son since Thanksgiving, and it felt so good to hold him again.

When Leigh approached us, pushing Holden in his stroller, I put James down and knelt in front of my youngest. Even without picking him up, I could tell he, too, had gotten bigger - no longer the baby I’d left behind, but a toddler with a shock of wavy, blond hair. “Hi, Holden,” I whispered, a lump clogging my throat as I leaned in and kissed the top of his head. When I pulled away, I saw that his bottom lip was quivering, his big, blue eyes looking up at me uncertainly, and a horrible thought occurred to me: had he forgotten who I was?

“Say hi to Daddy, Holden,” Leigh prompted him, but Holden just blinked and continued to stare at me.

With a sigh, I rose slowly to my feet, figuring it was best not to rush the reunion. “How’d he do on the flight?” I asked, looking at Leigh.

“He actually slept most of the way,” she said. “I’m sure he’ll warm up to you once he’s more awake.” She offered me a small smile. “How are *you* doing?”

“Oh, I’m hanging in there.”

“You look good.” She came around from behind the stroller to give me a hug. As I inhaled the familiar scent of her perfume, it occurred to me that I had missed her almost as much as the boys. Even though she was soon to be my ex-wife, I still loved her and always would. For awhile, I had wondered if there was any way to save our marriage, but if my suicide attempt hadn’t been enough to bring her back to me, I knew nothing would. The best I could hope for was her friendship. I would have welcomed her forgiveness as well, but that may have been asking too much.

“Thanks,” I said, as she released me. “You look good, too. How have you been?”

She nodded. “I’m doing alright.”

Leigh didn’t look the least bit sick, and thankfully, neither did Holden. He seemed much healthier than he had the last time I’d seen him in person, shortly after he had gotten out of the hospital. Leigh had told me the medication he was on had been helping his immune system recover, but it was still a huge relief for me to see so for myself.

After picking up their luggage, we walked to the car and went back to the condo, where Leigh had agreed to stay with the boys while they were in Florida. It was going to be a little awkward, especially with Nick staying there too, but I didn't care. I was just happy to have my family back, if only for a few days.

"UNCLE NICK!!!" I heard James cry as he raced into the condo. Laughing, I followed him into the living room to find Nick in front of the TV, looking at something on his computer. He slid it aside just in time, as James jumped onto his lap and threw his arms around Nick's neck.

"Hey, kiddo!" Nick sounded delighted. "Long time, no see!"

I watched them with a lump in my throat, realizing it *had* been a long time since either of my kids had seen Nick or the other guys. James loved his four "uncles," who had been a big part of his life ever since he was a baby, as Leigh brought him along on almost every tour. It made me sad to realize he probably wouldn't see them as much anymore, now that he was no longer living with me and we weren't touring. Holden wouldn't have the opportunity to get to know the guys as well as James had.

Leigh came in, carrying Holden on her hip. "Hi, Nick," she said curtly. I wondered if she was remembering the last time they were in the same room, when Nick had hit me in the face at a funeral home and told everyone how I'd infected him with HIV.

"Hey, Leigh. Um, how are you doing?"

She managed a tight smile. "I'm okay," she said, boosting Holden up higher as she shifted her weight.

Nick smiled back. "He's gotten big. I can't believe how blond his hair is."

Leigh laughed, seeming to relax a little. "I know - where did that come from, right? We used to joke around and say that-" She suddenly stopped, looking embarrassed, but I knew what she'd been about to say. I could tell by the awkward look on Nick's face that he understood, too. He must have remembered me calling him right after Holden was born and making the same joke: that Holden had to be Nick's baby and not mine. At the time, the idea of Leigh cheating on me with Nick had seemed so ridiculous, it had made both of us laugh, but none of us found it funny anymore, not now that *I* was the one who had slept with him.

Ashamed, I turned and walked away, as I heard Nick clear his throat and say, in an overly bright, happy voice, "Hi, Holden!"

I left the four of them to catch up and walked back to the bedrooms, under the pretense of wanting to make sure everything was ready for Leigh, James, and Holden, who felt more like house guests than family. Nick had helped me move Holden's crib into James's room, and I'd bought a bigger bed to convert the baby's bedroom into a guest room. Nick would stay there, and I was going to let Leigh have our bedroom to herself while I slept on the living room sofa. I made sure the beds were made in the master and the boys' room before wandering back to the front of the condo.

Nick was now holding Holden, bouncing him up and down on his knee while he showed James something on his laptop. Leigh was sitting on the arm of the sofa, looking over James's shoulder. It should have been a beautiful scene, but seeing them together like that - the four people whose lives my mistakes had affected most - was uncomfortable for me.

Stop it, I scolded myself. Stop thinking about it; stop blaming yourself. I thought about what the therapist I'd seen for awhile after my transplant would have said. She'd told me I had to accept what had happened and let go of the guilt I felt in order to move on with my life. But it wasn't so easy, knowing my actions had permanent consequences for the people I loved. Because of me, none of our lives would ever be the same.

"How are we going to tell James?" I asked Leigh late that night, after the boys had been put to bed. We were alone in our bedroom, with the door shut so we could talk privately, away from little ears. In the morning, we would be meeting with a notary public to sign the divorce papers, and at some point, we would have to sit our oldest son down and find a way to explain to him why he wouldn't be living with both of his parents anymore.

Holden was too young to understand, but I knew James would have questions. Up until then, it had been easy enough for Leigh to make excuses for my absence in his life over the last five months: Daddy was on tour, Daddy was sick, and so on. But now that she'd brought James here, now that he had seen I was back home and feeling better, he was inevitably going to wonder why I wasn't coming with them when they went back to New Jersey.

"I've been looking up advice on this online," started Leigh, "and from what I've read, it's best to keep it concrete and simple. We'll want to start with the basics: where he and Holden are going to live, who's going to take care of them, and when they'll get to see you. But more than anything, we need to emphasize that even though you and I aren't living together anymore, we both still love our children, and that will never change."

I nodded, looking sadly at my soon-to-be ex. Both of us were out of our element on this one; neither of us had experienced divorce. My parents had been married for fifty years when my father passed, and Leigh's mom and dad were still together. We had always sworn we would follow in our parents' footsteps with a marriage strong enough to survive anything, but the mistake that had come between us was too big to move past, at least for Leigh.

I would have been willing to make it work, had she wanted to, but I knew it was my infidelity that had hurt her more than the HIV. Leigh deserved better than me, a man who would love her with his whole heart and never doubt his feelings for her. I wanted that for her, no matter how much it hurt to let her go. I wanted her to be happy. I could understand where Nick was coming from, in that respect. Wasn't that why he had left Lauren? Maybe, in a way, Leigh was doing the same for me. Maybe she thought she was setting me free.

"When?" I asked hoarsely and cleared my throat. "When should we talk to him?"

Leigh hesitated. "Let's not tell him until after his birthday... please? I just want him to have one last happy birthday with his whole family here before..." She trailed off, looking down at her lap.

Again, I nodded in agreement. James was turning five in two days, and Leigh wanted to take him to Disney World to celebrate. I wasn't about to let our divorce ruin my son's special day. The conversation could wait.

Chapter 48

Nick

Awkward. In a word, that was what it was like living with Howie.

It wasn't so bad the first week, when it was just the two of us. Well, sleeping in a four-year-old's tiny twin bed covered in cutesy cars and trucks was pretty bad, but, true to his word, Howie went mattress shopping and bought a nice new queen-size set to go in the "guest room," which had been Holden's bedroom. That was better, although the walls were still adorned with artwork of smiling animals and big wooden letters that spelled out H-O-L-D-E-N. "We'll redecorate... put on a fresh coat of paint," Howie promised. "I

just wanna leave everything else as is until Leigh comes and let her take what she wants. She did all the decor, you know.”

I thought he was being awfully nice to Leigh, after she had kept his kids away from him the whole time he was recovering in California. I understood why, of course, but I also knew how much it had hurt Howie, how much he missed her and his little boys.

When they finally came to Florida for a visit at the beginning of May, things got even more awkward. All of a sudden, everyone Howie had infected was living under the same roof like one big, dysfunctional family: the scorned wife who wanted a divorce, the bi-curious husband who had cheated on her with two different dudes, one of the dudes he'd messed around with, and two clueless little kids who were caught in the middle of it all. We could have starred in our very own soap opera. A telenovela, perhaps. It sounded entertaining in my head, but in real life, it was just... well, like I said: awkward.

The first night they were there, we all went to bed early. I could hear Howie and Leigh whispering through the wall as I lay in the room next door, looking up at the letters of Holden's name and thinking about Lauren. If it wasn't for Howie, she and I would have been married by then, maybe even talking about having a baby of our own. But thanks to him, that would never happen.

I thought back to the embarrassing conversation we'd had in the doctor's office on the day I'd ended our engagement and how Lauren had asked all those questions about safe ways to have kids. I tried to imagine what she would look like pregnant, her toned stomach swollen with a baby inside. It was weird to think about, but sort of a turn-on at the same time. As I lay there, picturing the beautiful curves of her body, I let my hand drift under the covers, where I could feel myself getting hard. *See, Dr. Usako, no erectile dysfunction here*, I thought savagely as my fist moved up and down, tugging and squeezing.

I was in the middle of masturbating when I heard the click of the doorknob turning, and my heart almost stopped. I let go and sat up quickly, pulling the covers up to my chest, as light from the hallway spilled into the room, illuminating a small silhouette.

“Uncle Nick?” James's voice called in.

For a split second, I thought about faking sleep, but since he'd already seen me sitting up in bed, I replied with a shaky, “Yeah, buddy?”

He stood on his tiptoes to turn on the overhead light before he came into the room, causing me to squint and hitch the covers up even higher, fully aware of the fact that I was butt-naked underneath. I usually slept in the nude, but it had never occurred to me

that I would need to lock the door to keep little kids from wandering in. I guess I just thought once Leigh and Howie had put them to bed, they would stay there.

“Did you, um... have a bad dream or something?” I asked awkwardly, wondering what on earth he was doing in *my* room and not theirs.

James shook his head. “Holden won’t go to sleep. He needs his elephant.”

“Oh,” I said, uncomfortably aware of the elephant boner hiding beneath my sheets. “Well, where’s that?”

James looked around, frowning, then spotted the toy chest sitting at the foot of the bed. I’d left my clothes lying on it, but he shoved these onto the floor without a second thought and lifted the lid. He rummaged around for a few seconds and finally announced, “Here it is!”

I looked at the toy he was holding up in triumph, a soft, blue and gray, stuffed elephant. James flipped a switch on its back, and it started playing a lullaby. “It helps Holden go nigh-night,” he said wisely, bringing it around to the side of my bed to show me.

“Oh, sweet. Well, you better go bring it to him so you guys can get to sleep. Goodnight!” I said quickly.

To my great relief, James nodded and wandered to the doorway. “G’night, Uncle Nick!” he called as he left, forgetting to turn off the light or close the door behind him. I held my breath for a few seconds, listening to his footsteps fade away, then let out a huge sigh and scrambled out of bed to grab my shorts off the floor. Quickly, I pulled them on and poked my head out the open door, wanting to make sure the coast was clear before I went into the hallway with a big bulge in my pants.

I stumbled into the bathroom, locking the door behind me, and finished my business. I washed my hands with scalding water when I was done, not wanting to leave a trace of anything behind because, aside from being gross, I had suddenly imagined my semen swimming with virus particles. The thought made me feel sick to my stomach. This, I realized, was exactly what my problem had been in the bedroom with Lauren. I felt contaminated, and no amount of soap and water would make me feel any less unclean.

I needed fresh air. I walked barefoot to the back of Howie’s condo and opened the sliding door to the balcony overlooking the water. I wasn’t expecting anyone else to be out there, so I jumped when I saw someone shift in the semi-darkness. As my eyes adjusted to the light of the half-moon overhead, I realized it was Leigh. She was sitting off to one side of the balcony, her long legs propped up on the railing.

“Oh, hey, Nick,” she said softly, looking up at me.

I didn’t know what she was doing, sitting out there in the dark by herself, but I felt awkward again, like I was interrupting something. “Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t see you out here.”

“That’s okay. Come on out. Sit,” she said, patting the seat beside her.

I hesitated for a second, then shrugged and walked out onto the balcony, pulling the door shut behind me. I was suddenly aware of the fact that I wasn’t wearing a shirt or, well, anything other than my shorts, but Leigh didn’t seem to mind. In fact, she hardly even looked at me as I sank down into the chair next to her. She was staring straight ahead.

I followed her gaze to the water, which was sparkling in the moonlight. The sound of the waves washing over the beach was soothing, and I felt myself start to relax. I’d spent many nights like this in L.A., looking out at the ocean, and for the first time since I’d arrived in Florida, I felt like I was home.

A few peaceful minutes passed before either of us spoke again. It was Leigh who broke the silence. “So, what’s up? Can’t sleep?”

“Uh... no, not really.” I debated telling her about James barging in to look for Holden’s elephant, but decided not to. It wasn’t a big deal. “What about you?”

“Me neither.” She sighed. “Howie and I just got done talking about how we’re going to tell James and Holden about the divorce. Well, just James, really; Holden’s too young to understand what’s happening...”

“I’m sorry. But hey,” I said, “speaking as someone whose parents should have divorced, like, a decade before they actually did... it’s probably for the best.”

She nodded. “Oh, I know it’s for the best.” Her voice was matter-of-fact. “But not because of the HIV,” she added quickly, looking over at me. “I don’t hate Howie for that; he didn’t know he had it. I don’t hate him at all, actually.” She turned her head back toward the beach, running a hand through her long hair. “He’s the love of my life... but his actions have shown he doesn’t feel the same way about me.”

“He does love you, Leigh,” I said quietly. “If you could have seen how depressed he was after he got out of the hospital... or heard the message he left on my fucking voicemail

the night he did it... you'd know he still loves you. He's missed you and the kids so much."

"I know," said Leigh, letting out another heavy sigh. "I feel bad about keeping the boys from him, but I had to do what was best for them. Howie and I will always be friends, for their sake, but if he truly loved me the way a husband is supposed to love his wife, he wouldn't have gone looking for love outside of our marriage... and certainly not with other men." I felt myself flush, realizing she must have seen me as one of those other men. "That's what has hurt me the most," she continued sadly. "It makes me feel like our whole marriage was a lie."

I didn't know what to say to that, except for "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She shook her head. "It's not your fault. I'm sorry for dumping all this on you. I shouldn't have said all that; it should have stayed between Howie and me."

"No, it's okay," I reassured her, reaching out to touch her shoulder in the darkness. "I know it's not the same, but... he hurt me too, you know. It helps to talk about it."

"True," she replied, looking over at me sadly. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this mess."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Yeah... me too."

She was quiet for a few seconds after that. Then she said, hesitantly, "This is gonna sound really personal, so you don't have to answer if you don't want to, but as long as we're being open with each other, I have to ask: What *did* happen on the cruise?"

This surprised me so much, my heart skipped a beat. I felt a tightness in my chest as I thought back to that night on the boat - what I could remember of it, anyway. *She was right*, I thought. *This is way too personal*. I couldn't talk about that stuff with Howie's wife... ex-wife... whatever she was.

"I don't need to know all the gory details," Leigh added quickly, apparently realizing she'd crossed a line. "Howie told me, more or less, what he thought had happened. I guess I was just wondering about what you said. Did he really... *rape* you?"

I cringed, remembering our horrible confrontation at Q's visitation. In hindsight, the words I'd used that day haunted me. I had been so upset and so angry still, I'd hurled that accusation at Howie in front of everyone without stopping to consider how it would affect him, how badly it would hurt him, and how much of it was even true.

My memories of our encounter on the cruise had always been pretty vague because of how wasted I was that night. More than anything, I remembered the horror I had felt the morning after, when I'd woken up to find Howie in my bed, wearing nothing but his underwear. In that moment, I couldn't imagine that I would have ever let him sleep with me like that, let alone enjoyed it, so according to my own logic, he must have somehow coerced me. But now, like Leigh, I couldn't help but wonder whether or not that was really the case.

"I shouldn't have said that," I replied, after a few seconds of awkward silence had passed. "Howie... he didn't rape me. I don't remember everything that happened, but I know we'd both had way too much to drink that night. I... I think we just got shitfaced and started... y'know... fooling around." I felt my face getting warm again, accompanied by a tingling sensation down below that, this time, had nothing to do with Lauren.

Leigh frowned. "Do you... I mean, have you ever had... *feelings* for him?"

I froze, wondering if the look on my face had given away what I was thinking, but before I could figure out what to say, she held up her hand to stop me from speaking.

"Wait," she said. "Don't answer that. That was way too personal, and if you have, I don't really want to know anyway."

"Oh. Well, uh... okay then." I forced myself to laugh, like I found the whole thing funny.

"I'm sorry," she added, shaking her head again. "I shouldn't have even asked. I'm just trying to understand."

"It's okay," I said. "I get it. I've been there myself, believe me."

She smiled and patted my forearm. "I know. We've all been struggling with this, haven't we? Forgive me for having no filter tonight; I guess I'm just tired." With that, she abruptly stood up. "I'm gonna go to bed, try to get some sleep."

"Oh... okay." I watched her walk past my chair. "Night."

She had already slid the door open, but stopped and turned back at me. "Thanks for talking to me, Nick. Goodnight," she said, and then she went inside.

I was left alone with my thoughts. Looking out at the water, I thought about our conversation. Leigh and I had always gotten along fine, but we'd never really been close, never sat and talked like this, just the two of us. In a way, it made sense that she had opened up to me; I was the only one who could even begin to understand what she was

going through. But I wondered if a small part of her also blamed me for the role I'd played in messing up her marriage.

It would have happened anyway, I assured myself. I wasn't his first, and I sure as hell wasn't the one who infected him. There was a time when I'd worried maybe I *had* been, but the timeline didn't make sense. There was no way Holden could have gotten so sick if he'd only had the virus in his system for a few weeks. He had to have been exposed much earlier than that, which meant Howie had already given it to Leigh before infecting me. I was a victim, just like her.

A victim of rape, though? No... it hadn't really been like that.

But what had it been, then? Long after I went back to bed (locking the door this time), I lay awake, wondering about that. I closed my eyes and tried to recall as much as I could of that night on the cruise.

I remembered Howie in his Indian costume; I'd spent half the deck party laughing at that feathered headdress he was wearing. I remembered how uncomfortable I was in my construction worker clothes - clomping around on the stage in those heavy work boots and stiff, denim jeans, the bulky hard hat falling off my head. I remembered him helping me take that stuff off so I could go to sleep; my whole cabin had been spinning as I lay on my bed. Before I knew it, he was lying on top of me, and his warm lips were moving all over my body, and suddenly, I remembered the rush of pleasure I'd felt as he touched me.

No! I thought, sitting up in a panic. My heart was pounding, and my skin was covered with perspiration, but even worse than that, I could feel myself getting hard again. *No, no, no... stop that!* I told myself furiously. *You're just sexually frustrated. You haven't gotten laid in, like, five months, and it's starting to affect you. Think about Lauren... think about Lauren... think about Lauren...*

I lay back down and tried to picture her body again, tracing every line of it with my mind's eye. But my memory kept getting invaded by visions of Howie, lying in bed beside me. *Get out of my head!* I thought desperately, actually pounding my forehead with my fist, but it did no good. Something had triggered feelings and memories I couldn't seem to suppress, no matter how hard I tried.

As I lay awake for hours, struggling with my own tortured thoughts, I realized living at Howie's house was about to get a whole lot more awkward.

Chapter 49

Howie

James turned five the day after Leigh and I finalized our divorce. To celebrate (his birthday, not our divorce), we took him to the Magic Kingdom.

There had been some debate between Leigh and me about who was going to Disney World. She didn't think Holden or I should go. "Think of all the germs!" she said. "He's been doing so much better, but I don't want to expose him to something that could set back his progress. And you're not supposed to be around big crowds either, are you?"

"As of today, it's been four months since my transplant. I'll be fine," I assured her, even though it was true that my immunosuppressant drugs made germs a much bigger threat to me than to the average person. But that wasn't going to stop me from spending the day with my sons. "We'll just bring plenty of wet wipes and hand sanitizer along to disinfect Holden every time he touches something."

She rolled her eyes at me, unamused.

I thought she was overreacting. "We can't keep him in a bubble, Leigh," I added. "I know he's little now, but as he gets older, he's gonna have to learn to live with this, same as the rest of us."

In the end, she agreed with me, and all four of us headed to Disney like one big, happy family. To look at our smiling faces, you would never know we were broken. Leigh and I were determined to keep up that front for at least one more day, until the time was right to talk to James about the divorce.

"How come Uncle Nick's not here?" James asked, as we were walking across the parking lot. He was holding my hand, while Leigh pushed Holden in his stroller.

"Oh... I dunno; he had other things to do today, I guess," I said with a shrug, smiling down at James. I had invited Nick to come along, of course, but he'd declined. I didn't know what was going on with him; he'd been distant the last two days - more so than usual, anyway. I figured he just felt weird with Leigh and the kids there, like he was intruding on our family time. It didn't matter to me either way - today was all about James.

"Look, James, can you see Cinderella's castle?" asked Leigh, pointing, when we made it to Main Street U.S.A.

“Yeah. Where’s Buzz and Woody?” was all James wanted to know, which made us both laugh.

“Hm... I bet Buzz’ll be somewhere in Tomorrowland,” I said, showing James the map we’d picked up at the park entrance. “That’s where all the space stuff is. Look, he even has his own ride! Should we go there first?”

He nodded eagerly, and off to Tomorrowland we went to locate Buzz Lightyear. We found his friend Woody in Frontierland, where, after riding all the “baby” rides with Holden in Fantasyland, James was eager to try out some “big kid” attractions.

“I’m five now, so I can ride that one, right?” he said, pointing to Big Thunder Mountain Railroad.

“Well, buddy, let’s see if you’re tall enough,” I said, taking him over to the height restriction sign. We’d skipped Space Mountain because James was still a few inches too short, but he was right above the line for Big Thunder.

Leigh and I looked at each other. “I’d better take him,” she said. “I’m not sure you should be riding a roller coaster so soon after your surgery.”

I shrugged. “This one’s not that bad - no worse than driving, I wouldn’t think.”

“Better safe than sorry, though, right?”

In the end, Leigh got her way, and I hung back with Holden, who was definitely too small to ride, while she took James to wait in line. Watching them go, I couldn’t help but feel a little left out. I’d always loved roller coasters, and it would have been fun to be with James as he rode his first one. But someone had to stay with Holden, and of course it made more sense that it should be me.

I pushed him around in his stroller for a while, browsing some of the souvenir shops to escape the heat, then found a shady bench to sit on near the exit of Big Thunder. I parked the stroller, unbuckled Holden, and held him on my lap as we watched the mine trains race around the mountain.

“Look, Holden, see the trains?” I said, bouncing him on my knee. “Soon we’ll see Mommy and James riding on one of those.”

The minutes crept by as we waited for them to get through the long line. To pass the time, I snapped a selfie of Holden and me with my phone and uploaded it to Instagram

with the caption, *“Celebrating James’s 5th birthday at Disney World. Holden and I are waiting for the birthday boy and Mommy to finish riding Big Thunder Mountain.”*

I should have known to be less specific. Soon afterward, we were approached by a couple of women who looked to be in their late twenties. “Hi... Howie?” one of them said, while the other gave me a nervous grin.

Recognizing the look of two starstruck fans, I smiled back at them. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Wow, it is you!” the second girl spoke breathlessly, her eyes lighting up. “We just saw your tweet saying you were here! Oh my gosh, I can’t believe we found you!” She exchanged an incredulous look with her friend. “I can’t believe we’re meeting a Backstreet Boy! At *Disney World!*”

I laughed. “Well, I’m no Prince Charming, but...”

“Psh, you’re way better than him,” said the first girl, waving her hand dismissively. “We’ve been fans of you since we were, like, ten.”

“Oh, wow... thanks!”

“So, um, how are you doing?” asked the second, her smile fading into a solemn expression. “I heard about... well, I read the article where you...” She trailed off awkwardly.

I nodded, understanding what she wanted to ask. “I’m doing fine,” I said, forcing myself to smile at her. “Thanks for asking.”

“Oh yeah, we’ve been praying for you ever since we found out,” said the first girl seriously.

“Well, thanks. I appreciate the support.”

“Oh my gosh, is this your little boy?” the second girl suddenly interjected. She seemed eager to change the subject. “He’s so adorable!”

“Yeah, this is my son Holden,” I replied, putting a protective arm around him. “Can you say hi, Holden?” Instead of waving, Holden gave them the same look he’d given me at the airport and then buried his face in my shoulder. “Sorry, I guess he’s gonna be shy.”

They both giggled. “That’s okay. Hey, would you take a selfie with us?” one of them asked.

“Yeah, sure.” I scooted to the middle of the bench so they could sit on either side of me and took the picture with one of their phones.

“Thanks so much!” they said breathlessly. “It was so nice to meet you!”

“Nice meeting you, too.” I felt a sense of relief as I watched them walk away with their heads together, looking at their selfie. It was the first fan encounter I’d had since going public about my health problems, and it could have been a lot worse. I made a mental note to tell Nick, knowing how afraid he was of anyone finding out his HIV status. Once the initial media storm had died down, it really wasn’t that bad.

Not long after the two women left, James and Leigh came back. “Well, how was it?” I asked.

“He loved it!” said Leigh, looking fondly at our oldest son.

“It was so fun!” James’s face was aglow. “Didja see us, Dad?”

“Sure did, buddy!” I fibbed. “You guys were going super fast! You sure you weren’t scared?”

“No way! I wanna go again!” James shouted, jumping up and down.

Leigh laughed. “Maybe later. Let’s find a different ride, maybe one we can all go on together.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” I agreed.

But when we reached the next ride, Splash Mountain, Leigh looked at me apologetically and said, “I think Holden’s too little for this one, too.”

“Oh... well, that’s okay, maybe James and I will go on this one together then,” I said, smiling down at James. “How’s that sound? You wanna get wet?”

James grinned. “Yeah!”

Leigh cleared her throat loudly. “Actually, Howie, from what I’ve heard, it’s not a good idea for immunosuppressed people to go on water rides.”

“What?” I scoffed. “You’re kidding, right?”

She shook her head. “There could be germs or fungus in the water.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “I’ll take my chances.”

“No, I really think you should wait here with Holden while I take James,” she insisted. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was trying to punish me, somehow, for what I had done to end up in this situation.

“Well, Holden, I guess it’s just you and me again,” I said with a sigh, watching her walk away with James. “So much for spending the day as a family.”

But I didn’t mind being with my baby boy. While James and Leigh were in line, I took Holden to the Country Bear Jamboree. I can’t say I enjoyed it as much as Splash Mountain, but the singing bears kept Holden’s attention.

When we rejoined James and Leigh, who had emerged dripping wet and refreshed from the ride, we moved on to Adventureland, where the attractions were more family-friendly. Leigh was careful to wipe down Holden’s hands after every ride and wouldn’t let him touch anything while we were in line. I thought she was being overly cautious, but I kept my opinions to myself, not wanting to start another argument. All in all, it was harder than I’d thought it would be, acting like a happy little family when we were secretly falling apart.

We ended the day with dinner and presents at my mom’s house. She had made all of James’s favorite foods, and we sang “Happy Birthday” while he blew out the five candles on his cake, a big smile on his face. I watched him with a pit in my stomach, hating the thought of spoiling his happiness by breaking the news of our divorce.

But the next morning, Leigh and I did sit him down and explain everything as simply as we could. We had rehearsed the conversation, and it went about as well as we could have expected. James didn’t ask many questions, but I had a feeling it was because he was too young to fully understand the impact it would have on his life.

Sure enough, on the day he and Holden left with Leigh, as I hugged him goodbye at the airport, James started to cry. “But why aren’t you coming with us, Daddy?” he wanted to know.

“Daddy wants to, but I can’t, buddy,” I had to tell him. My heart broke as I watched tears fill his big, brown eyes. “Mommy and I aren’t going to be living together anymore, remember? Like we talked about?” James just sniffled loudly. “But hey, before you know it, it’ll be time for you and Holden to come down here to visit Daddy again, and won’t that be fun?” I asked desperately.

James shook his head. "I don't *wanna* go!" he wailed.

"I'm sorry, James," I whispered, wiping the tears from his cheeks. "I wish it weren't like this. I love you so, so much."

Leigh looked at her phone. "Howie, I hate to cut this short, but we need to get going," she said impatiently. "The security line is really long."

"Yeah... I wouldn't want you to miss your flight," I said, with a heavy sigh. I pulled James into one last hug, kissed Holden's forehead, and then looked at Leigh. "Let me know when you make it home safe, will you?"

She nodded. "Of course. Take care of yourself." She grabbed my hand and gave it a little squeeze, then let go.

With a lump in my throat, I watched them walk out of my life. James was still crying; he kept looking back at me with miserable, pleading eyes. I waved once, then forced myself to turn and walk away so he wouldn't see my eyes watering, too.

Chapter 50

Nick

When I was a kid, I got picked on a lot. Today it would be considered bullying, but back then, the attitude was just, "Oh well, boys will be boys."

The trouble was, I didn't fit in with the other boys my age, and they taunted me incessantly for the things that made me different: the way I looked, the way I sang and danced, and the fact that I would rather perform on a stage than play sports. Basically, the same things that some would say made me special also made me a target. Maybe the other kids were just jealous. I'll never know.

What I do know is that they made my life at school a living hell. They threatened to beat me up at the bus stop, whispered insults under their breath when the teacher wasn't nearby, and called me names on the playground. At first, it was just stuff like "sissy boy" and "pansy" - which is bad enough when you're only eight or nine - but as I got older and began to pursue more opportunities in the entertainment business, the name-calling progressed to include more hurtful words like "faggot," "homo," and "queer."

I guess that's why I've always been sensitive about people insinuating that I'm gay - which happens a lot when you're in a boy band, singing cheesy songs and doing synchronized dance moves with four other guys wearing color-coordinated outfits, by the way. It's not that I think there's anything wrong with being gay. Not now, anyway. But back then, those boys made me feel like being anything less than straight as an arrow was something to be ashamed of, and I'd never forgotten that feeling.

So when people like Howie and Leigh asked if I'd ever had gay feelings or fantasies, they brought out that bullied little boy in me, who would get defensive and deny it before I even allowed myself time to consider the real answer to their questions. But the truth was, my late-night conversation with Leigh had broken down some kind of barrier, some mental block I'd built up around the thoughts I wanted to keep contained, and all of a sudden, I couldn't get Howie out of my head.

He haunted me in my dreams, and worse yet, he was there in my waking hours, too. After Leigh and his kids left, he wanted to hang out with me all the time. There was no getting away from him, not even at the doctor's office.

Somewhere along the way, Howie had gotten a referral from his general practitioner for an HIV specialist in the area and made us both appointments. "I booked them back to back," he told me, "so we can go together. That way, if anyone sees us there, they'll think you're just along for moral support."

It sounded like a good idea, until we were actually walking into the clinic. *They're gonna think we're a couple*, I worried, as I looked around the crowded waiting room. I avoided eye contact, staring determinedly down at my phone as we sat and waited for our turn, but I imagined people watching us and wondering.

Once we were finally called back, the appointment itself wasn't bad at all. The specialist, Dr. Bulsara, introduced himself and asked us each a bunch of questions about our medical history, then took blood to run some baseline tests. I felt a sense of relief when we got the results: my viral load had dropped considerably since my hospital stay in Tennessee, and my CD4 count was back up where it belonged. This meant my medication was working, and I knew better than to stop taking it again.

Howie seemed to be doing well, too, so I decided it was time for me to go back to Tennessee. We didn't need each other anymore, and frankly, I needed to get away. I could take care of myself. I'd find another doctor in the Franklin area, stay on my meds this time, and I would be fine. I just had to find a way to tell Howie without hurting his feelings. Ever since Leigh and the boys had left, he'd seemed pretty fragile, emotionally, and I knew he wouldn't want me to go either.

My opportunity came one night as we were watching TV. Howie had on the evening news, and I was replying to fan tweets on my phone, effectively tuning it out until I heard one of the newscasters say, *“In other news, a court date has been set for a hearing on what could be a landmark case in determining whether Florida’s statewide ban on same-sex marriage could be considered unconstitutional. On July second, six same-sex couples will-”*

I cleared my throat loudly. “So I’ve been thinking...”

“Bet that hurt your brain,” said Howie without missing a beat or taking his eyes off the TV.

“Ha, never heard that one before,” I replied sarcastically. “Seriously, though, will you listen to me for a sec?”

“Can it wait till the commercials? I’m kinda watching this.”

I ignored him. “I’ve been thinking about going back to Tennessee.”

At that, Howie turned his head toward me. For a brief second, I saw a flicker of sadness in his eyes; then he blinked, and it was gone. “Oh, really?” he asked, with almost forced casualness. “How come?”

“Dude, I’ve been here for, like, three weeks already; aren’t you sick of me yet?” I said.

“Well, yeah, but when has that ever stopped you?” Howie replied, playing along. “I always thought your main goal in life was to annoy me as much as possible.”

I laughed. “You got that right.”

“So why stop now?”

I shrugged. “I dunno; I just figured it was time. Now that I’m feeling better and back on my meds and stuff, I should be okay on my own.”

“But... you just started seeing a new doctor here.”

“They have doctors in Tennessee too, ya know.”

Howie stared at me for a few seconds, frowning. I could practically see the wheels in his head turning, wondering what it would take to keep me there. But finally, all he said

was, “Well, whatever you wanna do. But you know you’re welcome to stay as long as you like.”

I nodded. “I know, bro - thanks. Don’t think I don’t appreciate you having me down here and helping me get back on track and all of that. Now I’ve just gotta get the rest of my life sorted out.”

“Sure,” he said. “I understand.” But despite his best efforts to hide it, I could hear the hurt in his voice.

He turned his head back toward the TV, where they were now talking about an upcoming launch of a GPS satellite. *“The Air Force will launch its sixth Global Positioning System IIF satellite aboard a Delta IV rocket from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station tomorrow. The launch, originally scheduled to take place this evening, was scratched due to unfavorable weather conditions and has been rescheduled for tomorrow, May 16. The launch time is 8:03 p.m.”*

“When are you leaving?” Howie asked suddenly.

“Oh... I dunno yet. Still gotta buy my plane ticket,” I said.

He gave me a sideways glance. “Well then, wanna watch the rocket launch with me tomorrow night?”

It was an absolutely beautiful evening. Clear skies. Seventy degrees. Perfect weather for a launch. We rolled down the windows in Howie’s car, which was parked off to the side of the road at Port Canaveral, where he said we’d have the best view.

The sun set outside my window as we waited. Satellite radio played softly out of the car speakers and, recognizing the song, I started to sing along. *“Today is gonna be the day that they’re gonna throw it back to you. By now you should’ve somehow realized what you gotta do. I don’t believe that anybody feels the way I do about you now...”*

I stole a glance at Howie in the fading twilight. He was looking the other way, watching an older couple set up lawn chairs outside their car.

“And all the roads we have to walk are winding... and all the lights that lead us there are blinding. There are many things that I would like to say to you, but I don’t know how...”

“Cause maybe...” As I sang along with the chorus, I heard Howie’s voice suddenly join mine in harmony. *“You’re gonna be the one that saves me...”* I looked over at him again in surprise and found him smiling back at me. *“And after all... you’re my wonderwall...”*

It had been a long time since we’d sung together like that. The last time had been on stage in Sacramento more than six months ago. I was still waiting on my test results then, unaware that my whole world would be turned upside down two days later when I found out I was infected, too.

As a lump rose in my throat, I looked out my window to avoid making eye contact with Howie again. I didn’t think I’d ever felt such a complicated mess of emotions. One moment I was sentimental, resentful the next. I couldn’t wait to get back to Franklin, far away from him, where I could sort out my feelings.

Abruptly, I turned and reached toward the radio controls, silencing both Oasis and Howie as I switched the station from the ‘90s on 9 to the ‘80s on 8. “Hey, I thought you liked that song,” said Howie in surprise.

“Eh, it’s overplayed,” I replied. I was hoping to find some hair metal on the eighties station; instead, I got the start of “Hungry Eyes” by Eric Carmen.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you... I’ve got this feeling that won’t subside. I look at you, and I fantasize... you’re mine tonight...”

I quickly changed the station again. On the ‘70s on 7, Fleetwood Mac was singing, *“You can go your own way... You can call it another lonely day...”* How was it that the radio seemed to be reading my mind, matching my conflicting thoughts? I thought that only happened in movies. Annoyed, I punched the power button with way more force than necessary, shutting the whole sound system off.

Howie gave me a strange look. “That was a good song,” he said.

I scoffed. “Which one, the one from *Dirty Dancing*?” (For the record, yes, I’ve seen *Dirty Dancing*. I grew up with three sisters; it was unavoidable.) “You would think so...”

He wrinkled his nose. “What’s that supposed to mean? I meant Fleetwood Mac. Why are you in a bad mood all of a sudden?”

“I’m not; I’m just sick of hearing the same old shitty music,” I lied.

Howie shrugged. “Whatever floats your boat, man. It’s about time for the launch to start, anyway.”

I looked at the dashboard clock. It was eight on the dot. Across the water, I could see the rocket launch pad. It looked so small from our vantage point.

The older couple sitting outside their car a few yards away from us had turned on a small transistor radio that they had tuned to whatever station was covering the launch. I could hear strains of communication coming through the open windows. I wished I’d thought of that instead of shutting off Howie’s radio.

I was just about to turn it back on and try to find the same station when I heard the final countdown begin. “*Ten... nine... eight... seven...*”

“Watch,” said Howie in a low voice, and I looked to the launch pad, where a small fire was now burning at the base of the rocket. My breath caught in my throat as the countdown continued (“*Six... five... four...*”) and the faint, orange glow of the flames grew steadily bigger and brighter.

“*Three... two... one...*” I watched in fascination as the ball of flames suddenly swelled to the size of the setting sun, blocking the rocket from view for a few seconds as it brightened the dark horizon. Then the big, orange ball of light began to rise, and I could see the rocket being propelled straight up into the sky by the force of its ignition, leaving a trail of white smoke behind it. It was such a beautiful sight, it left a lump in my throat.

“Wow... that was so fuckin’ cool,” I whispered, breathless. “Thanks for bringing me out here to see it.”

“You’re welcome.” Even without looking at him, I could tell Howie was smiling. “I knew you’d like watching one of these, Mr. ‘I’m Taking Off.’”

I chuckled. “Yeah... you know me too well.”

“Sometimes I wonder about that,” muttered Howie under his breath.

I’m not sure if he meant me to hear him or not, but I couldn’t help but ask, impulsively, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I finally took my eyes off the rocket, now a mere speck high up in the sky, to look at Howie. He was no longer smiling, but now watching me with a slight frown on his face. “I’m just wondering what’s up with you these days,” he said. “You’ve been distant...”

moody... What's going on? Does it have to do with me, or is something else bothering you?"

I was taken aback by that. I thought I'd done a pretty good job at hiding my feelings, but then, Howie had always been able to read me like a book. I didn't even know what to say at first.

"Nothing... nothing's going on. Aren't I allowed to have different moods?"

Howie's eyes narrowed in the increasing darkness. "Nice try, Nick, but I can tell when you're bullshitting me. Now spit it out - what's wrong?"

I stayed silent, turning my head to look out the window. The people who had parked their cars around us were pulling away. Without their headlights, it was pretty dark outside.

Howie started his car and put up the windows. I heard him shift in the leather seat to look at me again. "Is this about the cruise? Or what happened as a result of it?" he persisted, letting the engine idle in park. "Cause if it is, I understand... but I have to say, I thought we were past that..."

"What was I like that night?" I asked suddenly. "I mean, I know I was wasted, but... did I really seem like I was enjoying it, like you said before?"

My question seemed to have caught Howie by surprise. He took a few seconds to answer. Finally, he sighed and said, "So we really are going to rehash all that. Well, I didn't *rape* you, if that's what you're wondering. Okay, so I might have kissed you without asking permission - that was kind of an accident - but I wouldn't have kept going if you hadn't *told* me to. You said it felt *good*."

I was aware of my heartbeat accelerating as I thought back to what I could remember of that night - his warm, soft lips moving down my body... my hands all over his...

"Believe me when I say I would *never* have done that to you if you'd said no," Howie swore. "And I know you were drunk, Nick, but it's not like you were unconscious. You were aware enough to know what we were doing, and you *did* seem to enjoy it. I remember you specifically telling me to stay... so I did." He paused. "Don't you remember *any* of that?"

There was a pleading tone in his voice. I think he thought I was going to accuse him of rape again, but that wasn't at all where I was going with this. "I... I think I may have

blocked out some of the details at first... but lately I've been remembering more of them," I admitted.

"And?" Howie asked, raising his eyebrows.

I felt my face getting hot. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to look at him as I whispered the revelation I'd been struggling to come to terms with for a solid week. "I think maybe I did enjoy it."

I heard his sharp intake of breath and opened my eyes into slits. Howie was staring at me incredulously, but as I watched, a smile started to spread slowly across his face. "Seriously? Or are you just messing with me?"

"I wish I was messing with you. I mean, I'm sure it was just all the alcohol fucking with *my* brain," I added quickly, "but-

"No. Wait a second." Howie held up his hand suddenly to stop me. "You can't say something like that and then start backpedaling. It *wasn't* just the alcohol, was it? Admit it, Nick: you felt something that night. Something real."

I shook my head rapidly, like a wet dog trying to get water out of its ears. "I don't know what I felt. I was so drunk, I probably would have made out with a fucking panda if you'd offered me one."

"Well, then-" Howie started to say something, then suddenly stopped, cocking his head to the side. "A panda?? Really?"

I rolled my eyes. "Well, no, not *really*; you're missing my point. I was so wasted, I would have done just about anything with anyone and enjoyed it."

"So, like sex with a panda," Howie supplied, grinning.

"Ugh!" I put my head in my hands. "I didn't say *sex* with a panda, I just said I'd-

"You did say a 'fucking panda.' Either way, I'm pretty sure it qualifies as bestiality." He laughed, obviously enjoying being the one to give me a hard time for once, instead of the other way around. "But that's beside the point. I don't believe alcohol suddenly made you bisexual - or whatever you wanna call it - any more than it would turn you into someone who enjoys panda sex, if you weren't already into bestiality."

"Howie, let it go; it stopped being funny fifteen seconds ago," I said, my face still hidden behind my hands.

“No, I won’t let it go. Not until you admit you felt something more than alcohol poisoning and a strange attraction to pandas.”

“Ugh, now you’re just beating a dead horse...”

“...Like, apparently, you would’ve beat off a drunk panda?”

Hearing that made my head fly up out of my hands. “Howie!” I exclaimed. “When did you get so fucking perverted?”

“Since I started hanging out with you so much,” he replied with a grin.

I raised my eyebrows. “Well... I have to say, I’m impressed, man.”

Howie laughed. “Thanks, but don’t think you can sweet talk your way out of this, Nicky. We’re not leaving until you tell me the truth. What did you feel that night?”

“I... I didn’t feel anything,” I stammered, but at the same time I wondered: what was I so afraid of? Howie wasn’t like the kids at my school, the ones who had tormented me as a child. If there was one person in my life who had always loved and accepted me just as I am, it was him.

“Fine,” said Howie, leaning back in his seat and folding his arms over his chest. “Then prove it.”

“Huh? How?”

“Kiss me,” he said. “I dare you. Kiss me, right here, right now, without any alcohol in your system... and tell me you feel nothing.”

“I’m not gonna kiss you, no way!” I protested.

“What, you’ll kiss a panda, but you won’t kiss me?” He pretended to look offended, but really, I could tell he was enjoying this. Well, that was all fine and good for Howie; he’d had plenty of time to come to terms with his own sexuality, but I was still struggling with mine. What did it mean? Could I really be bisexual, as Howie had suggested?

There was only one way to find out. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I suddenly leaned across the center console, grabbed his face with both of my hands, and kissed him full on the mouth.

When our lips connected, there wasn't an explosion of fiery heat like we had just seen lift a rocket into space. And yet, as much as I hated to admit it, even to myself... I *did* feel a spark of something.

Chapter 51

Howie

I had never known Nick to turn down a dare, and despite his initial protests, he did not disappoint. He could have just given me a peck, but instead, his mouth came crashing down onto mine. The force of his kiss caught me by surprise, and for the first few seconds, I forgot to close my eyes. Nick's were squeezed tightly shut, of course, so he didn't see me studying the fine lines of his face, the arch of his brow, as our chins and noses brushed against each other. He was even more beautiful up close.

When he broke the kiss and we pulled apart, both of us were breathing hard. My heart felt like it was beating a million times per minute. Nick's blue eyes were wide; the expression in them was a blend of panic and surprise. "You felt something, didn't you?" I whispered.

Slowly, hesitantly, he nodded.

I felt a thrill of triumph rush through me. "I knew it! I knew it couldn't have just been me. That night on the cruise, there was this... this chemistry between us. I know that sounds cliché, but I've never felt anything like it before, not even with Leigh."

"Cause you're gay," said Nick. I nodded. "But I'm not... at least, I don't think I am... I'm in love with Lauren!" he sputtered. "How can I love her and have feelings for you at the same time?"

I understood his confusion. After all, I had struggled with the same question for many years myself.

"You're human, Nick. Of course you can have feelings for more than one person. I'm sure you looked at other women while you were with Lauren, didn't you?"

"Well... yeah," he admitted, his face flushing.

"It's no different with me," I said, shrugging.

“It is different! You’re a *dude!*” he cried. His cheeks were bright red now, and his eyes flashed with anger, though whether it was directed at me or at himself, I wasn’t sure.

“So what? You’re not a homophobe, are you?”

Nick recoiled. “Well, no, *I’m* not, but... other people are.”

“So? Why do you care so much about what other people think? For as long we’ve been in the public eye, I thought you’d have developed thicker skin by now.”

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. It’s not the same for you. Ever since the group got big, you’ve sort of been in the background, while I was the one getting most of the attention. No offense or anything,” he said quickly.

“None taken,” I replied, shrugging. “It’s no secret you’ve always been the most popular Backstreet Boy.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know why. I never asked to be. But for whatever reason, I’ve always had people breathing down the back of my neck, watching my every move, just waiting for me to screw up so they can sit around and judge me.”

“No offense, Nick, but you brought some of that on yourself.”

Nick sat up straighter, his body stiffening. “What does that mean?” he demanded.

“Don’t get all defensive on me. I’m just saying, when you go around getting arrested and doing reality shows and dating girls like Paris Hilton, you tend to attract more attention than the rest of us.”

Nick looked like he wanted to argue at first, but then he shrugged and slumped back into his seat. “Fair point.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about,” I said. “I’m sure me going public with my mess of a personal life has taken a lot of the attention off you.”

He shrugged again. “Not really. There’s still rumors going around that I have HIV, too.”

It rattled me to hear that he was still getting harassed about that, after everything I’d done to protect him, but I tried not to let it show. “No one can prove it, though,” I pointed out.

“But if I’m seen going in and out of AIDS clinics...”

“All the more reason for you to stay here with me,” I interrupted him. “If we keep scheduling our appointments for the same day and go in together, people will think you’re just there supporting me.”

“Or they’ll think we’re gay for each other and that you gave me HIV,” he said flatly.

The truth hurt. Sighing, I said, “Would that really be the worst thing in the world to happen? Worse than getting a DUI or going out with Paris Hilton?”

Nick cracked a smile. “Believe it or not, Howie, she actually *didn’t* give me an STD, so... yeah, I’d say that would be worse.”

I swallowed hard, stung by the implication that I was somehow skankier than Paris Hilton. “We can’t hide it forever,” I said softly.

“You mean *I* can’t.”

“No, I mean ‘we.’ I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again now: we’re in this together, Nick.” I reached across the center console to rest my hand lightly on his knee. I thought he might push it away, but instead, he put his own hand on top of mine and left it there.

“I know.”

I turned my hand over, and he let me lace my fingers through his. His hand was sweaty. I gave it a reassuring squeeze, and for a few minutes, neither of us spoke. Darkness had fallen around us; I could no longer see across the cape to the rocket launch site. We were the only ones still parked on the side of the road.

“Well,” I said, with a sigh, “should we head home?”

“Yeah.” Nick took his hand out of mine so that I could shift the car into gear.

The ride back to my condo was quiet. I kept licking my lips as I drove, remembering, with a little rush of excitement each time, the feeling of Nick’s lips pressed against them. I had to hide my smile the whole way home. I hadn’t experienced happiness like that in at least six months.

For the first time since we’d hooked up on the cruise, I felt like Nick and I were fully on the same side.

I slept alone that night, as I had every night since Holden's diagnosis. It didn't bother me as much anymore, but as I lay in bed, looking at the wall that separated my bedroom from Nick's, I couldn't help but wonder if he was also lying awake, thinking about me.

I fought the temptation to knock on his door, knowing I needed to give him time to sort out his feelings. If I tried to take things to the next level too quickly, it would just freak him out. I had to let Nick make the first move.

Even though I was tired, it took a long time for me to fall asleep. I tossed and turned for several hours, my mind racing, before I was finally able to shut down my brain. In the morning, I woke up with a headache, feeling like I'd barely slept at all.

I staggered out to the kitchen to get a glass of water so I could take my medicine. I was sore and achy, though I couldn't imagine why. In an effort to get back into shape, I had started exercising again by taking walks around my condominium complex and along the beach, but I'd been careful not to overdo it with any strenuous workouts. I took a Tylenol along with my usual HIV meds and immunosuppressant drugs, and that seemed to help.

I was making coffee when Nick got up. "Morning," I said casually, as he came into the kitchen. He grunted something unintelligible in reply as he got himself a glass out of the cupboard and filled it with water. I watched him take his own medication; then he joined me at the breakfast bar while we waited for the coffee to finish brewing.

I wanted desperately to bring up the night before, but I held back, waiting to see if he would. Nick, though, seemed determined to act like nothing had happened. He talked to me normally about everyday stuff - news stories, sports, the weather - but said nothing at all about the kiss we'd shared in the car.

I wondered if he was still thinking of leaving, but didn't ask. I knew he would let me know when he decided.

We each drank a cup of coffee, then went about our day as usual. I took a short walk on the beach, while Nick went to the gym to work out. He wasn't back by the time I had showered, so I made myself some breakfast and ate alone. I didn't have much of an appetite; my stomach was bothering me. I wondered if it was just nerves about Nick, or if I was coming down with something. I took my temperature just in case, but it was normal.

In the afternoon, I lay down for a nap, but it didn't help. Even though I slept for three hours - much longer than I'd meant to - I woke up feeling exhausted. To make matters worse, Nick still wasn't back, which worried me. What if something had happened to him? I texted him, but got no reply. When I tried calling, his phone just went to voicemail. A part of me wondered if he had decided to go back to Tennessee after all and left without telling me so I wouldn't try to stop him. *No*, I told myself, *Nick wouldn't do that*. But the truth was, there was no telling what Nick would or wouldn't do these days.

I was contemplating who else I could call to check on him somehow - the police? the hospital? the airport? - when I heard the front door click. "Hey, I'm back," Nick announced casually as he came in, dropping a takeout bag on the kitchen counter. "I brought dinner."

"Where the hell have you been?" I asked, my pulse pounding in my temples as I got up from the couch. I looked at the logo on the takeout bag. "Jon Smith Subs? Where'd you find one of those?"

Nick shrugged. "I dunno. I was just driving around and saw the sign, and it sounded good, so I stopped. Do you want steak or chicken? I wasn't sure, so I got one of each," he said, taking two sandwiches out of the bag. "I'll eat whichever one you don't want."

"You could've called to ask," I said, annoyed by his attempt to dodge my questions. "Or at least to let me know you were alive. I was getting worried about you."

"Sorry," he replied, not sounding particularly apologetic. "I just needed to clear my head."

"Well, I hope it's clear," I said shortly. My own head was pounding. "I'll take the steak," I added and snatched the sandwich I thought he would prefer, just to piss him off. The sub and fries were stone cold, and I wondered again where he'd been, but didn't ask a second time. It wasn't important; he had come back, and that was all that mattered.

While Nick nuked his meal in the microwave and ate every bite, I just picked at mine, still not hungry. Now that Nick was back and I wasn't feeling any better, I decided I was definitely coming down with something.

By that night, I felt even worse. My head and stomach still hurt, and I had the beginnings of a sore throat and a runny nose, too. When I blew my nose for the fourth time during the first sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, Nick looked over at me. "Are you getting sick?" he asked, an expression of mild concern on his face. We both knew even a slight infection could be serious for someone with a weakened immune system.

I shrugged. "It's probably just a cold. I checked my temperature this morning, and it was normal."

"Well, you should probably check it again. It could've gone up since this morning, and you know if it gets to 100.5, you need to—"

"—call the transplant center, I know," I said, smiling at him, surprised and rather touched that he had remembered this specific number. Of course, he and Lauren had learned what to watch for when I'd lived with them after my transplant, in case I developed any complications. A fever of 100.5 or higher was a warning sign of the two most common ones: infection and rejection. "I'll check it on the next commercial break."

After the host, Andy Samberg, had delivered his opening monologue, I dug out the thermometer and took my temperature again. "99.9." I read the number on the digital display with a sinking feeling in my stomach. I still had half a degree to go before there was any real cause for concern, but even so, I couldn't help feeling slightly worried. I didn't want Nick worrying, though, so I tried to turn it into a joke. "Dude, you better not have given me any of your nasty cooties last night."

"Hey, you're the one who asked me to kiss you," Nick replied, finally acknowledging what we'd done for the first time all day with a would-be casual shrug. I could tell he was concerned and trying to act like he wasn't. To his credit, he played along, adding, "It's probably Nick Plague."

"Nick Plague?" I repeated, laughing.

He looked over at me and grinned. "It's a fan thing. Apparently, a lot of them get sick after meeting me at soundcheck, so they've started calling it 'Nick Plague.'" He looked oddly pleased to have a disease named after him.

"Hm, maybe you should see that as a sign and start washing your hands more often," I said. "I don't want your plague germs."

"Just trying to settle the score, dawg. You gave me HIV, so I gave you Nick Plague, and now we're even."

There was a time when it would have hurt to hear that kind of comment from him, but that time had passed. We had finally reached the point where we could joke about what had happened - not that it would ever be funny, but both of us had benefitted from setting aside the hard feelings and finding some black humor in the situation. For once,

I didn't even think Nick was trying to take a dig at me; instead, I felt like it was his weird little way of letting me know I was forgiven.

"Well, it's only a slight fever. I should be okay," I said, putting the thermometer away.

"You sure you don't want to call the doctor, just in case?" Nick asked, trying again to sound casual.

I looked at the clock on the cable box. "It's quarter till midnight. Even on the West Coast, it's way after hours." I shook my head. "I'm sure I'll be better in the morning, but if not, I'll call then."

I went to bed convinced that I only had a cold and would be fine, but when I woke the next morning, I did not feel any better. I had to drag myself out of bed to check my temperature, only to find that my fever had hit 100.5. Worse yet, when I went into the bathroom, I was greeted by a horrific sight: my whole body was covered in a raised, red rash. Staring at my blotchy reflection in the mirror, I felt sick with fear, for I knew a fever and rash were sure signs that something was very wrong.

Chapter 52

Nick

My alarm woke me at eight in the morning, as it had every day since I'd gone back on my medication. I groaned and shut it off, not ready to get out of bed yet.

I was tired. I hadn't slept well since I'd come to Cape Canaveral with Howie. The new bed he'd bought was comfortable, but I couldn't seem to shut down my brain whenever I was in it. It had been especially bad the last two nights, ever since the rocket launch. Afterward, I'd lain awake for hours, wondering what it meant that I had felt something for Howie when we kissed. I hadn't wanted to; I was hoping the kiss would reinforce the belief I'd been clinging to ever since the cruise, that what had happened between us was just the result of too much alcohol and not any real attraction. But my plan had backfired spectacularly - with sparks.

I had done my best to avoid Howie all the previous day, so we wouldn't have to talk about it. I'd gone to the gym by myself in the morning, worked out for an hour or so, and spent the rest of the day driving aimlessly down the A1A. For awhile, I had actually considered going all the way to Key West, but decided it would have been a dick move to

leave Howie without any warning, like Leigh had. If I were going to leave, I would at least have the decency to tell him first... but now I wasn't sure I even wanted to anymore. The kiss had made things so much more complicated - as if they weren't complicated enough already.

With a sigh, I rolled over onto my back and lay there for a few minutes, looking around Holden's old room. Leigh had taken the letters off the wall before she left, but the paint was slightly less faded where they had hung, so I could still see his name. It was like the Blackfoot Indian tattoos I'd tried to have removed from my chest: barely visible, but still there. For some reason, that bothered me. I guess it was because it was like this constant reminder of everything that had gone wrong in Howie's life - and, by extension, mine, too. Had none of it happened, his baby would still be sleeping in this room, and I would be home in bed with my wife.

A lump rose in my throat as I held up my left hand, looking bitterly at my bare ring finger. I should have been wearing a wedding band around it by now. I wondered if Lauren was still wearing her engagement ring, like she had been in Tennessee. I hoped not. As much as it hurt, I hoped the fact that she hadn't called or texted since then was a sign that she was moving on without me.

It's for the best, I told myself, turning my hand around. On the inside of my wrist, I could see the tattoo of a skull with the words "Old habits die hard" hiding Paris Hilton's name. I could have removed the original tattoo, instead of covering it up, but aside from the fact that laser removal hurts like hell (as I'd learned from my Blackfoot Indian ink), I kept it as a reminder that everything happens for a reason and mistakes help us learn. I'd sure made enough of them in my life to know.

I thought back to what Howie had said about Paris in the car after I'd kissed him. Was fooling around with him a worse mistake than dating her? On one hand, it was... because if I hadn't, I wouldn't have gotten infected with HIV. But on the other hand, at least Howie loved me, whereas Paris had just used me. Deep down, I knew he had my best interests at heart and had never meant to hurt me. I had been struggling with my feelings about the whole situation for so long, I hadn't stopped to think that maybe there was a reason this had happened to us. Maybe, somehow, it was meant to bring us together.

Swallowing hard, I sat up and, pushing back the blankets, swung my legs over the side of the bed. It was time to get up... and time to talk to Howie. I couldn't keep avoiding him forever. Sooner or later, we would have to have another conversation about what had happened. *Might as well get it over with today*, I thought, pulling on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt.

“Hey, Howie, you up?” I called on my way to the kitchen. It didn’t surprise me to find him sitting at the breakfast bar, since he usually got up before me. “Oh good, you are. I thought maybe we could-” I stopped mid-sentence, realizing he was on the phone. He had his back to me, but I could see his hand holding it up to his ear. “Oops... sorry,” I mouthed, as I tiptoed around him to get a glass of water.

Howie didn’t even look up. He had his forehead propped against the palm of his hand and appeared to be deep in concentration, listening hard to whoever was on the other end of the line. Judging by the frown on his face, they were saying something serious.

I pushed my glass to the water dispenser in the fridge with just enough pressure to get a trickle of water, filling it as slowly as possible so I could eavesdrop on Howie without looking like I was listening.

“Yeah, if you could do that, that’d be great,” he was saying. “Yeah, this number’s good... Okay... Thanks so much. ‘Bye.” I heard him sigh as he set down the phone. “Morning, Nick.”

“Hey, what’s up, man?” I turned around, my glass still half empty. When I caught sight of his face without his arm in front of it, the glass slipped from my fingers and fell to the floor. “Holy shit!” I cried. “What the hell happened to you?”

His cheeks were covered with a bright, red rash. It looked like a bad sunburn, but I knew it couldn’t be; Howie’s naturally tan skin rarely burned, and besides, he hadn’t looked like that the night before.

“Watch the glass,” he warned quickly, holding up a hand to stop me as I started to hurry over to him.

“Oh, shit,” I said, looking down at the shattered remnants of the glass. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay; just don’t cut yourself.”

I stepped carefully around the shards of glass, uncomfortably aware of the fact that I was barefoot and my blood was contaminated. But at least I didn’t have to worry about infecting Howie. “Seriously, dude, what is that on your face?” I asked, as I sat down next to him to get a closer look, scooting my stool a safe distance away in case it was something contagious.

“I don’t know, but it’s all over,” he said, his voice shaking slightly as he showed me his splotchy arms and legs. “My temp’s up to 100.5, so I called the emergency number at

the transplant center. Dr. Parker's not there this early in the morning, but the nurse on call said she'd page him. She said he should call me back within fifteen minutes." He checked the time on his phone and sighed again.

"Well, did the nurse say what it could be?" I asked, wondering if we should be worried. I knew Howie hadn't felt well the night before and that a high fever was one of the warning signs we were supposed to watch for right after his transplant, but I didn't remember hearing anything about rashes.

He shook his head. "She didn't say much, just listened to my symptoms and said she'd page Dr. Parker right away. But, I mean, it must've sounded serious to her if she would wake him up at home..."

I swallowed hard. "Yeah... but you know, it kinda just looks like hives. Maybe you're having an allergic reaction to something. Did you eat anything weird yesterday? Or wash your sheets with a different detergent?"

Howie shook his head again. "Thank you for your fine diagnostic work, Dr. Carter, but no, and that wouldn't explain the fever or the fact that I feel like I got hit by a truck."

"Oh... true. You didn't tell me the part about the truck, though."

He chuckled. "Touché."

I busied myself with cleaning up the broken glass on the floor while Howie waited for his doctor to call. "Did you take your meds yet?" I asked him, as I filled a new glass with water to take mine.

"No, not yet. I thought I'd better wait and ask the doctor, in case it's a reaction to one of the drugs or something."

"Oh." I hadn't considered that, but it fit with what I'd been thinking earlier about an allergic reaction. "I bet that's all it is! That happened to me with my meds - well, not the fever and rash, just a lot of puking and diarrhea - and the doctor just prescribed this other pill I take to help with that stuff," I said, holding up the little Compazine tablet I was about to swallow, "and it's been a lot better since then."

"Yeah... maybe," Howie muttered. He was staring at his phone, and I could tell he'd hardly heard a word of my babbling.

I didn't know what else to say, except what I had wanted to talk to him about in the first place, but since it obviously wasn't the best time for that, I decided to shut up. I took my

pills, poured myself a bowl of cereal, and sat back down at the breakfast bar. “Want some?” I offered, pushing the box of Cookie Crisp toward him.

Giving me a sidelong glance, Howie shook his head. “I can’t believe you like the same cereal as my five-year-old.”

“Dude, who doesn’t like Cookie Crisp?” I replied incredulously. Finding an unopened box of it in Howie’s cupboard had been the best thing that had happened to me in Cape Canaveral. Who cared if it belonged to his kids and had probably been bought last November? It had been a long time since Lauren had let me eat sugary cereal like this, but I’d decided I was done sticking to her list of immune-boosting superfoods. I’d tried to eat healthy in Franklin, and a lot of good that had done, seeing as how I’d still ended up in the hospital. Life was too short to deprive myself of delicious treats like Cookie Crisp. I knew that better than anyone now - or anyone who wasn’t Howie.

“I don’t,” he said shortly and went back to staring at his phone.

For the next few minutes, we both sat there in silence, waiting. Well, it wasn’t totally silent; even though we weren’t talking anymore, I was uncomfortably aware of how loudly I was eating my cereal. Every clink of the spoon, every slurp of milk, and every crunch of Cookie Crisp seemed strangely amplified in the quiet kitchen. Howie kept side-eyeing me, obviously irritated. That was nothing new, though; as Howie had said, there was a time when my number one goal in life had been to annoy him as much as possible. I was just fulfilling my duty - and hopefully finding a way to distract him at the same time.

When his phone finally went off, we both jumped. “Hello?” Howie answered. “Hi, Dr. Parker...”

I took my empty bowl over to the sink and stood there, shamelessly eavesdropping again on Howie’s end of the conversation. I listened to him explain his symptoms and describe the rash that erupted on his skin overnight. Then he was silent for a few seconds, while the doctor was talking. “Okay... okay...” Howie kept saying in response, and then, finally, “I will. Thank you, Dr. Parker.”

“What’d he say?” I asked, as soon as Howie hung up.

Howie heaved another sigh. “He wants me to go to the hospital to have some tests done.”

“What, in L.A.??”

He gave me a look, the kind of look that meant I'd said something stupid. I used to get that a lot from him. "No, dumbass, the hospital here. Well, in Orlando, actually."

"Why Orlando? That's, like, an hour away."

Howie shrugged. "None of the hospitals here have a hepatology department. Liver specialists," he added, at my blank look.

"Oh. So... does that mean he thinks this has something to do with your transplant?" I asked hesitantly, almost afraid to hear his answer.

"He said my symptoms could be signs of rejection or just an infection, but since I'm immunosuppressed, that could be serious, too. He's gonna call ahead to Florida Hospital and tell them we're coming. Do you mind driving me?"

"Not if you don't mind letting me borrow your car," I replied. "My rental's about outta gas." I suddenly regretted driving all those miles for no reason the day before.

He shrugged. "Sure, whatever. I'm gonna get dressed. Brush your teeth before we go, would ya? You've got fake chocolate chips stuck between your teeth."

I ran my tongue over my teeth self-consciously, as he turned to leave the kitchen.

We left as soon as we were both ready. The ride to Orlando was long and tense. We listened to the radio without really talking, like we had the night of the rocket launch, but this time, there was no singing along. I couldn't even concentrate on the music. I just kept thinking about the last time Howie had ended up in the hospital and how close he'd come to dying. Far from finding ways to avoid him or tell him how I felt, all I wanted right then was for Howie to be okay.

Chapter 53

Howie

Like Nick, I felt a foreboding sense of déjà vu as we pulled up in front of Florida Hospital, but for different reasons. This was where Holden had been diagnosed six months ago. I remembered the fear I'd felt as I arrived at the hospital to find my son in ICU, on a ventilator, sedated, and sicker than either Leigh or I could have ever imagined. Life could change in an instant there.

I saw the falsely cheerful facade of the children's hospital in the background as Nick followed the signs to the emergency department. There, he handed my keys off to the valet to park the car so he could come inside with me.

Dr. Parker must have fulfilled his promise to call ahead because, once we'd checked in, we didn't have to wait long before a nurse named Colleen led us back to a private room. She took my vitals, made a few notes on my chart, and then handed me a hospital gown. "Go ahead and get changed and hop into bed. I'll be back to check on you in a bit," she said briskly before she left.

Nick looked at me awkwardly. "Do you want me to wait in the hall while you change?"

I shrugged. "I don't care if you stay. Nothing you haven't seen before."

But that wasn't exactly true. When I took off my t-shirt, his jaw dropped. "Holy shit!"

"Yeah, I know... it's everywhere," I said miserably, assuming he was talking about the rash.

"No... your *scar*." Nick suddenly looked embarrassed, like he'd blurted out something he shouldn't have. "I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "But... *shit*, dude, they really sliced you up." He couldn't hide the look of horror on his face, nor could he seem to stop himself from staring.

"Well, yeah, your liver's the biggest organ in your body," I said, feeling my face flush as I self-consciously followed his line of sight down to the Y-shaped scar that stretched from the center of my chest to the top of my belly button and out to both sides of my torso. It was fully healed now and had faded a lot over the last few months, but I supposed it was still pretty shocking to someone who hadn't seen it without the bandages before. I wasn't a big fan of it either, but I told Nick, "It looks worse than it is."

He let out his breath in a low whoosh. "I'd say you've definitely got Brian beat," he said with a nervous laugh. "He's gonna have some competition now for which Backstreet Boy the girls wanna see without a shirt the most. Chicks dig scars."

I made a face. It was hard for me to imagine feeling comfortable enough to go shirtless on the next cruise. Then again, after what had happened on the last one, I somehow doubted Nick would even agree to another cruise. We still had a couple more on our contract, but I was sure we could cancel that on the basis of my health concerns, if it came down to it. It was just one of the many career moves we would have to consider, sooner or later. Until we had that conversation, everything with the group seemed to be

on hold. And until I found out what was causing my symptoms, everything in my life seemed to be on hold, too.

Nick sat with me as I waited to be seen by a doctor. Finally, a woman in a white coat came in and introduced herself as Dr. Webber. She spoke in a British accent and had a pretty, dimpled smile that put me at ease. “I hear you’re feeling a bit poorly, Mr. Dorough,” she said. “Can you tell me more about the symptoms you’ve been experiencing?”

“Call me Howie,” I replied, “and yeah, sure.”

As I started describing the symptoms that had developed over the last couple of days, Nick suddenly cleared his throat and stood up. “Um, I should probably step out, huh?”

“You don’t have to,” I said quickly. I could tell he was uncomfortable, but, selfishly, I wanted him to stay. It had helped, having him there to wait with me, and now that the doctor was there, I felt like I needed him even more. “My friend Nick can stay in the room, right?” I asked Dr. Webber.

“Of course, if you’re comfortable with that.”

I looked at Nick, silently begging him to sit back down. I was worried about what the doctor would say; if something was seriously wrong, I didn’t want to be alone when I found out.

Nick shrugged. “I guess if it’s cool with everyone, then okay,” he said, taking his seat again. I shot him a grateful smile, then got back to telling Dr. Webber about the way I’d been feeling.

When I was done talking, she said, “Well, Howie, given your history, your symptoms could be indicative of several different issues - some quite serious, others not so much. We won’t know exactly what we’re dealing with until we do some further investigation, so I’d like to start with a physical exam and then order a few tests. Does that sound alright?”

I nodded, knowing I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. I was so used to being poked and prodded by that point, it wasn’t a big deal. I let her look at my rash, listen to my chest, and feel my belly.

“There doesn’t seem to be any swelling or tenderness around your liver,” she said, as she pressed her fingers into a few places on my right side, just under my ribcage. “That’s a good sign. I still want to test your liver function, just to be sure you’re not experiencing

an episode of rejection, and do some additional bloodwork as well. I'll send Colleen in to collect some samples, and I'll be back to check on you once we have the lab results."

After the doctor left, the nurse came back to draw my blood. Nick, I noticed, stared determinedly at the floor as she inserted the syringe into my arm. After she had gone, I smirked at him and said, "How can you have so many tattoos and still be afraid of needles?"

Nick shuddered. "I swear, it's even worse watching someone else get stuck."

"Aww, it wasn't that bad," I said, touching the Band-aid that was holding a cotton ball against the tiny hole in the crook of my arm. But beneath my bravado, I was touched by his sympathy. "I know what you mean, though; I hate watching James and Holden get shots. It is worse when it's someone you love, and all you can do is hold them and wipe their tears away when it's all done. You feel so helpless..."

I glanced over at him hopefully, wondering if my use of the word "love" would get a reaction out of him, but Nick had gone back to looking at the floor. I wished I could read his mind and understand what was going on in there. Nick had always worn his heart on his sleeve, but these days, his feelings were hard to decipher. Then again, the fact that he had stayed with me, even though I knew it made him uncomfortable, spoke volumes. Maybe he wasn't offering to hold my hand, but at least he didn't hate me anymore - that much I was sure of.

"You want me to call anyone?" Nick offered, after we'd been waiting around for awhile. "Or step out so you can call your family?"

I shook my head. "Nah... no sense in worrying anyone when it could be nothing. Let's wait until the test results come back." *And see how bad it is first*, I added in my head. I wasn't usually so pessimistic, but seeing as how nothing had gone my way in the last six months, I was getting used to bad news. Waiting for it, though... that was the worst.

"Okay," said Nick, both hands tapping out a random beat on the tops of his thighs as he looked around the room. I could tell he was getting restless. There was no TV or anything in the room to keep us occupied, and we'd run out of conversation. It wasn't the right time or place to try to talk to him about our relationship. The kiss in the car felt like it had taken place a lifetime ago, though it had only been two days. Watching Nick nervously lick his lips, I couldn't help but wonder if it had even happened at all, or if it was only a fantasy.

“Hey, I heard there’s gonna be another rocket launch this Thursday,” I said randomly, wanting to see how he would react. When his face turned red, I knew for sure I hadn’t been dreaming. “Maybe,” I added, trying to feel him out some more, “if I’m outta here by then and you’re still in town, we could go watch it together.”

Nick met my eyes for just a second, long enough for me to see a flash of something in his before they seemed to settle on my forehead. “Yeah, sure... sounds good,” he said, and I felt a flicker of hope.

Then Dr. Webber came back. This time, she was accompanied by another woman in a white coat, whom she introduced as Dr. Charnell. “Dr. Charnell is a hepatologist. I’ve asked her to consult on your case because, while your lab results haven’t confirmed an episode of rejection, we can’t rule it out until we run some more tests. I’ll let Dr. Charnell explain.”

The second doctor stepped forward, clearing her throat. “Yes, unfortunately, Mr. Dorough, there are some findings in your blood work that are cause for concern,” she said, and my mouth went dry. “First of all, your liver enzymes are slightly elevated, which, as I’m sure you know, could be an early sign of rejection or failure of your liver graft. Like Dr. Webber said, we’ll need to do more tests, including a CT scan of your abdomen and a liver biopsy.”

I nodded, thinking that didn’t sound so bad. I’d been through both of those tests before and after my transplant.

“You’re also anemic,” added Dr. Charnell. “Your red blood cell count is low, which explains why you’ve been feeling tired. It’s not uncommon after a liver transplant and could just be a side effect of the immunosuppressant drugs you’re taking. That said, the anemia coupled with a fever and rash have us both concerned that it could something more serious. These are all symptoms of a rare complication called graft-versus-host disease, which occurs when cells from the donor liver attack the transplant recipient’s tissues and trigger an immune response.”

I swallowed with difficulty, wishing I had some water. “That doesn’t sound good. How, um... how serious are we talking here?”

Dr. Charnell and Dr. Webber exchanged glances. Even before the answer came, I could tell, more or less, what it was going to be by the looks on their faces.

“Unfortunately, graft-versus-host disease does have a high fatality rate in liver transplant recipients,” said Dr. Charnell. “However-”

“How high?” I asked hoarsely.

Dr. Charnell shifted her weight uncomfortably. “I don’t put much stock into statistics; every case is different, and we don’t even know-”

“*How high?*” I repeated, louder this time.

Dr. Charnell paused to take a deep breath. “Over seventy-five percent.”

I suddenly felt woozy. Next to me, I heard Nick’s sharp intake of breath. I’d almost forgotten he was even in the room. I chanced a glance his way; he was staring at the doctor with a horrified look on his face, his blue eyes wide.

“But Howie, we don’t even know if that’s what this is,” said Dr. Webber quickly, “so let’s focus on the next steps and not get too far ahead of ourselves. Here’s what’s going to happen next: We’re going to admit you to the hospital for a blood transfusion, which will replenish your red blood cells and hopefully help you feel a bit better. You’ll undergo some diagnostic tests, like the CT scan and liver biopsy I mentioned earlier, and Dr. Charnell will get to the bottom of what’s causing your symptoms.” She offered me an encouraging smile and added, “You really needn’t worry until we know more.”

But of course I was worried. How could I not be?

When the two doctors left me with a packet of admission paperwork to fill out before I could be moved to a new room, I looked again at Nick. He was now staring at me, and when he saw me looking, he shook his head slowly. “Damn, Howie... you gotta quit doing this to me, man.”

I laughed shakily. “Just trying to keep things interesting.”

Nick cracked a smile. “Yeah, well, that’s one way to put it.” Then suddenly he sat forward, leaning toward my bed. “Listen, though - those doctors are right. Don’t start freaking out about something you don’t even know if you have. Trust me, I’ve been there, and it ain’t fun. And if it turns out that you do have that graft-verse-whatever thingy, well... if you can survive everything else you’ve been through in the last six months, you can survive that, too. I mean, I’m beginning to think you’re immortal or something... The Indestructible Howie D!”

I smiled at his attempt to ease my mind. “Thanks, Nicky. I really appreciate you being here with me.”

He nodded. “No problem.” Then he reached out and grabbed my hand. Reassuringly, he squeezed it and said, “I’m not going anywhere.”

As I gave his hand a grateful squeeze back, I couldn’t help but feel more hopeful. About everything.

Chapter 54

Nick

I tried to put on a brave face in front of Howie, but on the inside, I was the one freaking out. I wasn’t used to dealing with this kind of stuff on my own. On the night of Howie’s overdose, I’d at least had Lauren there to listen to the doctors and hold my hand as we waited. This time, I had no one. So as soon as Howie went for his CT scan, I did what I always used to when I was stuck in a scary situation and didn’t know what to do: I called Kevin.

“Hey, Nick, what’s up?” he answered his phone. The moment I heard his mellow voice, I felt marginally better. But there was no point in beating around the bush; I knew Kevin hated making small talk as much as I did.

“Howie’s sick,” I blurted. “He’s back in the hospital, and the doctor said there’s a seventy-five percent chance he could die.” Okay, so that wasn’t *exactly* what the doctor had said, but that was how I’d heard it.

“What??” Kevin no longer sounded mellow. “What the hell happened?”

“We don’t know for sure yet, but he might have this graft-verse... well, I can’t remember what it’s called exactly, but it sounded kinda like a fight in Mortal Kombat, and it’s got something to do with his liver transplant, and-”

“Nick.” Kevin’s voice cut sharply through my rambling. “You’re not making much sense. Slow down and start from the beginning.”

I took a deep breath and told him what had happened, from the moment I’d gotten out of bed that morning until Howie was whisked away for his scan. “...and I’m freaking the fuck out here, Kev; I mean, what if something happens to him and I’m the only one here? I don’t know what the hell I’m doing!”

“What can I do?” Kevin wanted to know.

“Well, can you come down here?” I couldn’t believe I was having to suggest something that seemed so obvious to me. Why wouldn’t Kevin come, when Howie could be dying?

“To Orlando?” He actually sounded surprised. “Do you really think it’s that serious?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?? Over seventy-five percent of people die from this!”

“Yeah, but, you don’t even know if that’s what Howie has, right?” Of course, Kevin being Kevin, he had to ask all kinds of questions before he could make a decision. “Have you called his family?”

“No, he wanted to wait. He... he didn’t wanna worry anyone, but I’ll tell him to call them when he gets back from the CT scan.”

“So he’s conscious?”

“Yeah...”

“Okay, that’s good. Is he in a regular room or ICU?”

“Regular...”

“And is he on oxygen or anything like that?”

“Well, no... but it’s not his lungs we’re worried about; it’s his liver!”

Kevin sighed. “Nick, do you think you might be overreacting just a little?” he asked slowly, like I was still some hyperactive little kid who needed to be calmed down.

“No! Kevin, they said he could *die*!” Well, okay, maybe I could have stood to calm down some. My pulse was pounding in my temples, and I felt close to tears. Why didn’t he understand how serious this could be? “Don’t you wish you’d gotten to say goodbye to Q? If he’d been in the hospital and we could have gone to see him before he died, wouldn’t you have come here then?”

Kevin was quiet for a few seconds. Then he said, “Of course. You’re right, Nick. I’m sorry; I just needed to wrap my head around this before I could rationalize leaving my family to fly all the way to Florida.”

“Howie’s your family, too,” I said fiercely, throwing what he’d once said to me back in his face.

“I know. Listen, I’m looking at flights right now; I’ll text you back when I book something. Have you talked to Brian or AJ yet?”

“No... I called you first.”

“Well, see if you can get a hold of Brian, and let me handle AJ. I can only imagine what this conversation would be like between the two of you; you know how he gets himself all worked up over this stuff...”

“Okay.” I didn’t even mind that Kevin didn’t trust me to tell AJ; in fact, I was grateful to be relieved of that responsibility. “Thanks, Kev.”

When I got off the phone, I felt better. Kevin had always been a calming influence on me. It was why he was usually the first one I called when I was in a panic about something. Legal trouble? Call Kevin. Family drama? Call Kevin. Health crisis? Call Kevin. He was like the Ghostbusters.

He could have his own hotline, I thought, smiling to myself. 1-800-CALL-KEV.

I knew Brian would get a kick out of that too. Scrolling through my contacts, I found his name and called his number next.

Even though Brian was the last one to be called, he was the first to arrive in Florida, seeing as how he’d only had to fly down from Atlanta. *One hour in the air - can’t beat that*, he said in the text he sent to tell me he’d landed.

“Who are you texting?” Howie asked, as I tapped out a reply to Brian.

“None of your beeswax.” I hadn’t told him I had talked to the guys, figuring it would be more fun to surprise him when they showed up.

“Wow, real mature. I haven’t heard that one since the nineties,” said Howie, rolling his eyes at me.

I grinned at him, added another sentence asking Brian to stop somewhere on the way and pick up sandwiches because I was starving, and sent the text. I couldn’t believe I’d been at the hospital with Howie all day. It was almost dinner time. A nurse had brought

Howie a menu to order food from whenever he was ready, but he said he wasn't hungry. I couldn't really blame him; he'd been through a lot for one day.

Not long after the CT scan, he had undergone a liver biopsy, which he swore wasn't bad, even though, from the way he'd described the procedure, it had involved inserting a needle into his belly to snip off a little piece of liver - so, you know, no big deal there. Now he was back in his hospital room, hooked up to an IV for his blood transfusion. I was trying not to watch the dark red blood flow through the tube into his arm because it grossed me out, but every few seconds, I found myself glancing at it. It turned my stomach every time - although, that could have also had something to do with the fact that I hadn't eaten anything but a bowl of Cookie Crisp all day.

I'd told Howie I had gotten something to eat in the hospital cafeteria while he was having his tests done, but the truth was, all I'd done was sit in his room and try not to have an anxiety attack. I knew I needed to take better care of myself, but I was more worried about Howie. I couldn't wait until the other guys got there to take some of the burden off me because I wasn't handling it well at all. It's hard to be brave when you feel like you're about to fall apart.

Chapter 55

Howie

Nick was starting to crack. I could see it in his eyes, which kept darting around the room like a nervous animal before eventually looking at his lap, where he was holding his phone. He had been checking it every few seconds for the last hour. Nick was fidgety by nature, but it had been a long time since I'd seen him act so squirrely.

"Nick, are you okay?" I asked, watching him with sympathy as he pressed the button on the side of his phone to check the screen again.

"Yeah. You?"

"Honestly, I feel fine," I said. It was true; I was tired, but I didn't feel any worse than I had that morning. Actually, I felt quite a bit better. Along with the blood transfusion, I was getting steroids through my IV to reduce the rash, and that had helped with the itching. I'd also been allowed to take Tylenol to lower my fever and take the edge off the pain from the liver biopsy. All things considered, I was feeling pretty good at that point.

“I know it looks bad,” I added, noticing Nick’s eyes linger for a second on my face. I didn’t know if he was looking at the rash on my cheeks or checking to see if I was lying. “But I’ve been through worse.”

“I know,” he said shortly. “I was there, remember?”

Of course, I knew he had come to see me in the hospital right before my transplant, but I had been so out of it, I didn’t remember much. I could tell by the look on Nick’s face that he hadn’t forgotten. “I’m sorry,” I said softly, “for putting you through all that.”

He shook his head. “I told you, you don’t need to apologize anymore. I just never wanna see you go through something like that again.” His eyes found a spot on the floor to study for a few seconds before he looked at his phone again.

“Hey,” I said, “why don’t you get out of here for awhile? I think they’re done running tests for the night, and I probably won’t get any more results until at least tomorrow morning, so there’s really no reason for you to stay. Go back to the condo and get some rest.”

Nick locked eyes with me, and for a second, he looked like he was considering it. Then he shook his head again. “Nah, man, I’m good. I’m not gonna leave you here alone.”

But a startling thought had just occurred to me. “You’re not good, Nick; you don’t have your meds with you! You need to go home right now and take them.”

He checked his phone. “I don’t have to take them for another couple of hours. I’ll hang out till-” He stopped abruptly, his face flushing. “-till I feel like leaving,” he finished lamely, but I could tell that wasn’t what he had started to say.

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously at him. “Why do you keep looking at your phone? What are you waiting for? Or should I ask *who* you’re waiting for?”

Nick wouldn’t give me a straight answer, but it didn’t matter. I found out a few minutes later, when Brian walked through the doorway.

“Hey!” he greeted me with a wave and a big grin, setting a bag of sandwiches down on my bedside table. “Can I hug ya, or is this stuff contagious?” he asked, looking at the lacy red rash on my arms.

I shrugged. “If it’s an immune response like they think, then no, but no one really knows-”

“I’ll take the risk,” Brian said and bent down to give me a hug.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, as he released me. Before Brian could answer, I looked over his shoulder at Nick, who seemed completely unsurprised to see Brian. “When did you call him?”

Nick smiled shiftily. “While you were having your CT scan.”

“He kinda made it sound like you were dying,” said Brian, frowning, “but it doesn’t look that bad. You sure you haven’t just been playing in poison ivy?”

The last part made me laugh. “I don’t think so - but I don’t think I’m dying, either.” I glared over at Nick, who was still looking guilty. “You sure didn’t have to come all the way down here.”

“I don’t mind,” Brian said, shrugging. “It’s not that far, and I haven’t seen you guys in awhile. So how’s it goin’?” He flung himself into an open chair and crossed his legs conversationally.

Nick and I looked at each other again. Neither of us seemed to know what to say. I was annoyed at him for not taking his own advice about not freaking out before we knew anything for sure and for going behind my back to call Brian without even asking me first.

Brian didn’t seem bothered by the awkward silence. “Hey, I brought subs,” he said suddenly, jumping back out of his seat to grab the bag of sandwiches off my bedside table. “I wasn’t sure if you could have one of these or if you had to eat hospital food, but I got plenty just in case.”

“Thanks, B.” I wasn’t hungry, but I took a few bites out of a sub to be polite. Watching Nick wolf his down, I wondered if he had been honest when he’d told me he had eaten earlier. “Hey, now that you’re here, maybe you can hang out with me for a while so Nick can drive back to Cape Canaveral. He needs to take his medicine.”

Nick made a face at me, but Brian said, “Sure, you bet. Hey, Nick, I booked two rooms at the Hilton if you wanna just pack some stuff and stay with us instead of driving back and forth - and sorry, I know how you hate Hiltons, but it was the only decent hotel with rooms left on such short notice.” He grinned. “Leighanne would kill me if I brought home bedbugs.”

I chuckled. “I dunno, Bri, I think you can get worse than bedbugs from a Hilton.”

“Good one, Howie.” Brian got up to give me a high five.

“Ha, ha,” said Nick sarcastically, rolling his eyes. “Your decade-old jokes are hilarious. Like I said the other day, though,” he added, locking eyes with me, “she ain’t the one who gave me an STD.”

Brian let out a low whistle, looking awkwardly between us. I just shook my head, wondering why Nick was always so mean to me when we were with other people. I supposed he had to keep up a front; God forbid the rest of the guys find out he had feelings for me that went beyond friendship.

The rest of the guys...

Suddenly, I was struck by something Brian had said before the Paris Hilton jokes started. “Hey, wait a sec... what did you mean ‘stay with us’?” I asked, looking from Brian to Nick. “Are Leighanne and Baylee with you, or... Kevin and AJ aren’t coming, too, are they?”

Nick and Brian exchanged sheepish grins. “They get in late tonight,” Nick admitted.

I sighed. “Seriously, Nick? What happened to not freaking out before we know what’s wrong with me? I wish you’d take your own advice for once. I haven’t even told my family I’m in the hospital, and now you’ve got the whole group flying in like I’m on my deathbed! How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Loved?” supplied Brian, raising his eyebrows, before Nick could say anything.

That made me feel bad. Swallowing hard, I said, “I know. That didn’t come out right. Don’t think I don’t appreciate you guys being here. I just think everyone’s overreacting. This isn’t like last time. I’m gonna be *fine*.”

“We know,” Brian said quickly. “But Nick was worried, and we wanted to be here to help however we could... even if it’s just to keep you company till you can get out of here.”

“Well, thanks,” I said, forcing myself to smile. I knew they meant well, and I was grateful for the company. But at the same time, I was worried. What if there was something they knew or sensed that I didn’t? What if my test results showed I really *was* dying?

It was almost funny. Five months ago, I would have welcomed death. I was ready for it then. But a lot had changed since New Year’s Eve. With the new year - and my new

liver - had come a new lease on life. I wanted to live again. I wanted to be there for my children, my family, my friends, and my fans. I wanted to make music and make people happy. I wanted to see where the rollercoaster that was my relationship with Nick would take us next. But still, I worried that our carefully reconstructed lives were about to be turned upside down again.

Chapter 56

Nick

I left Brian at the hospital with Howie while I drove an hour back to his condo in Cape Canaveral. I stayed just long enough to throw some clothes, toiletries, and medication into my suitcase. I packed a similar overnight bag to take to Howie at the hospital, although Brian texted around nine to tell me visiting hours were over and that he would meet me at the hotel.

I arrived in Orlando in time to pick up Kevin and AJ at the airport. “How’s D?” AJ asked, as soon as he climbed into the car.

“He’s doing okay.” I hesitated, then added, “Honestly, he’s kinda pissed at me for calling you guys; he thinks I was overreacting.” I kept my eyes focused on the road in front of me as I pulled away from the curb, avoiding eye contact with Kevin, who had accused me of the same thing.

“Have they found out what’s wrong with him yet?” Kevin wanted to know.

“No, not yet. He had some more tests done this afternoon, but didn’t get any of the results... well, unless someone came to talk to him while Brian was there.”

But when we met up with Brian at the Hilton, he said they still hadn’t heard anything. “Howie was in good spirits when I left,” he told us, as we sat around his hotel room, catching up with each other. “He was gonna try to get some sleep.”

“Ha, good luck with that,” I said, snorting. The other guys gave me curious looks. “What? It’s hard to get *any* sleep in the hospital when they keep waking up every few hours to check your vital signs and stuff..”

“No one’s arguing with you, Nick,” said Kevin, clapping me on the shoulder. “How are you doing after your little hospital stay, anyway?”

Even though I knew that question would have come sooner or later, I cursed myself for being the one to inadvertently bring it up. “Fine,” I replied. “I’ve been feeling pretty good, actually.”

“You’re staying on your meds?” he asked, giving me a stern look.

“Yes, Dad,” I said in sing-song voice. “Got some right here in my suitcase.”

“Good,” said Kevin, seeming satisfied.

AJ nodded in agreement. “Lauren’ll be glad to hear that.”

I looked over at him in surprise. “You’re still talking to Lauren?”

He gave me a weird look back. “Well, yeah, dude - you’re the one who dumped her, not me. She and Ro are still friends, so... yeah. We’ve talked.”

I wondered what kind of stuff Lauren had been saying about me to Rochelle and AJ, but I decided I probably didn’t want to know. Instead, I asked, “How’s she doing?”

AJ shot me another look; this one seemed annoyed. “Really, dude? How do you think she’s doing? She’s devastated.”

“Still?” It hurt me to hear that Lauren was having such a hard time. It had been almost three months; I’d hoped she would have moved on by now.

“What do you mean, ‘still’? You were the love of her life, Nick. She’s not just gonna forget about you and go on like nothing happened.”

“I tried... to go on like I never knew you,” Brian sang in the background, trying to ease the tension. Everyone ignored him.

“I wish she would,” I said quietly. “I want her to be happy.”

“If you really wanna make her happy, why don’t you come back to L.A. and apologize for being such an asshole?” AJ suggested.

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Why, ‘cause you don’t wanna risk getting her sick? Or ‘cause there really is something going on with you and Howie?”

How did he know? I stared at AJ in shock for a second before I recovered. “What?!” I said, laughing. “No. Neither of us are drinking anymore, so whatever happened on the cruise was a one-time thing and will *never* happen again.”

“You guys do seem to be getting along better these days,” Kevin pointed out. “I’m glad you’ve decided to let bygones be bygones.”

I shrugged. “Yeah... I guess I had to stop hating him at some point.” After a moment’s hesitation, I added, “I hope you guys know, what I said at Q’s funeral... it didn’t come out right. I was just having a really hard time.”

“We know,” said Brian, with a sympathetic smile. “I said some things that day I’m not proud of either.”

As I met his eye, I remembered the comment he’d made about Howie “going around giving everybody AIDS.”

“I appreciated you having my back,” I said, returning Brian’s smile.

“Yeah, but... I should’ve had Howie’s, too.”

Kevin nodded. “I should’ve taken more time to listen to him. If he’d felt like he had our support, maybe he wouldn’t have tried to...” He trailed off, shaking his head, and I could tell he was trying not to cry. Typical Kevin.

“Aw, c’mon, Kev, don’t start that,” said Brian, shooting AJ and me an exasperated grin. “Howie’s gonna be fine.”

“I... I know. It’s just...” Kevin looked at me. “What you said about Q... it got me thinking, and... well, I’m just glad we’re all here together.”

“Aww, Kevy Kev... c’mere,” said AJ, standing up and opening his arms. “Brian, Nick, you guys too. Bring it on in here.”

“Group hug!” Brian sang out, as we joined Kevin and AJ. It was super cheesy, but it felt good. I was just glad to have the guys there. Together, we would help Howie get through whatever the next few days had in store.

In the morning, we all piled into Brian's rental and rode back to the hospital. Howie was eating breakfast when we walked into his room.

"Hey, guys," he greeted us, between bites of what may or may not have been oatmeal.

"Hey, how's it goin'?" said Brian. "Glad to see you've got your appetite back."

Swallowing a mouthful of the gloppy beige substance in his bowl, Howie shrugged. "Can't say this stuff is all that appetizing, but yeah, my stomach's feeling better, anyway."

"That's good. Your face still looks like Macaulay Culkin smacked it with a hot iron, though," I said, noticing that the red blotches on his cheeks looked no less bright than they had the day before. Despite my attempt to make a joke about it, that worried me. Why weren't the drugs they'd given him working?

"Gee, thanks, Nick." Howie rolled his eyes, then turned his attention to the others. "AJ... Kev... good to see you guys. I hope Nick didn't freak you out too much on the phone yesterday. I know this looks bad-" He gestured to his face. "-but really, I'm fine."

"Really?" said Kevin, dropping into the chair closest to Howie's bed. "Have you found out what's causing this?"

"Well, no... not yet. I'm still waiting to hear about my test results. But I don't feel any worse than I did yesterday. I'm sure it's no big deal... nothing you guys had to fly down here for, anyway. Sorry about that." Howie gave me a sidelong glance, which I returned with a sheepish grin.

"Hey, no need to apologize, either of you," said AJ, looking between the two of us. "This'll give me a chance to visit my mom. She'll be thrilled to hear I'm in town. Maybe I'll surprise her and just show up at her door."

Howie smiled. "You should. She'd love that, AJ."

"She'd love it even more if I'd brought Ava along," replied AJ with a smile of his own.

"Aww... how is Ava, anyway?"

"Oh, she's great. Two-and-a-half going on twenty-three, you know."

The rest of the guys laughed. I just sat back and half-listened as they caught up with each other, talking about their kids and families. I had always felt left out of these conversations, even more so ever since AJ had Ava and joined the “Backstreet Dad” club, leaving me as the last hold-out, the only unmarried, childless one in the group. It hadn’t really bothered me before I got engaged to Lauren because I’d always thought I didn’t want what they had, a wife and kids. All the drama in my family had made me think marriage and fatherhood weren’t for me.

But it was different now. Somewhere along the way, I’d changed my mind - no, *Lauren* had changed my mind. For a time, I’d envisioned a future with her as my wife and maybe, someday, the mother of my children. The more I got used to the idea of Lauren and I starting our own little family, the more I grew to love it and look forward to making it a reality. Now all I had to look forward to was growing old alone, assuming I didn’t die of some AIDS-related illness before I hit old age, and that reality sucked, big time.

You know that saying about how it’s better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all? I thought it was a bunch of bullshit. Before I met Lauren, I didn’t know what I was missing. I liked my life the way it was; I thought I was happy, even though I wasn’t. But now I *knew* there was something missing in my life, and the awareness of it made it much worse. I tried not to think about what could have been, but it was hard, hearing the guys talk about their happy families and realizing I’d never be a part of their club.

Playing with my phone, I started to tune them out and didn’t realize the topic of conversation had changed until I heard my name. I looked up and saw that Howie’s doctor had come in. “And you remember my friend, Nick,” Howie said, apparently having already introduced her to AJ, Kevin, and Brian.

Dr. Charnell smiled and nodded. “Nice to see you again. Well, Howie, I’m here to discuss your test results. Would you like your friends to step out or stay with you?”

My heart leapt into my throat as I looked at Howie, wondering if her next words would be a death sentence or a pardon for him. Right then, I could only remember the times I’d heard a doctor deliver bad news: my “come to Jesus” moment in the cardiologist’s office, when he told me to change my lifestyle or risk dying young... the day I was diagnosed HIV-positive... the aftermath of Howie’s seizure, when his doctor made it clear that, without a new liver, the toxins accumulating in his bloodstream would kill him. In that instant, I relived them all.

“I guess that depends on if it’s good news or bad,” replied Howie, with a nervous laugh. He looked a lot calmer than I felt, but of course, I couldn’t tell if his heart was racing or his palms were sweating as much as mine.

Dr. Charnell smiled again. “In that case, let me start by saying it’s good news.”

As I let out my breath in a rush of relief, I saw Howie sag and realized how tense he’d been after all. “Yes, you should *always* start with that,” he replied emphatically, and everyone chuckled. You could feel the mood in the room shift, as the cloud of doom that had been hovering over Howie’s head for the last day or so finally dissipated.

“Sorry to keep you in suspense,” said Dr. Charnell. “As you’ll remember from our conversation yesterday, there was concern that you were experiencing some complications from your liver transplant. Fortunately, the biopsy showed your liver is functioning normally - no signs of rejection or graft-versus-host disease in your labs or scans.”

“Thank God,” I heard Kevin mutter under his breath.

“That’s good,” Howie said, nodding. “So do you know what’s causing all this?” He held out his arms, which were still covered in red cheetah spots.

“Yes - you have a viral infection known as fifth disease. Some people call it ‘slapped cheek syndrome.’” I smirked at Howie; he did look like he’d been smacked in the face. “It’s actually more common in children than adults, but anyone can contract it; it’s spread the same way as the cold and flu viruses,” Dr. Charnell explained. “You could have picked it up virtually anywhere in the last couple of weeks, probably some place where you were around small children.”

Howie groaned and shut his eyes. “Like... Disney World?” he asked, grimacing.

Dr. Charnell laughed. “Highly likely.”

“Man... I guess Leigh was right after all,” Howie said, shaking his head at me. To Dr. Charnell, he explained, “We were just there celebrating my son’s birthday. My wife - ex-wife - didn’t think I should go because there’d be too many germs.”

The doctor nodded. “That is something you’ll always need to be mindful of, but it shouldn’t stop you from living your life. Infections will happen. As long as you’re diligent in calling the doctor when they do, like you were this time, they’re usually manageable. Fortunately, this is one that should run its course in the next few weeks. There are some more serious complications that people with compromised immune

systems need to watch out for, such as anemia. Your red blood cell count was low when you were admitted yesterday, which is why you needed the transfusion. You should follow up with your primary care physician in the next few days and get a repeat blood test to make sure your counts are up.”

Howie raised his eyebrows hopefully. “Does that mean I can go home?”

“It sure does,” said Dr. Charnell, smiling. “I’ll leave instructions with your discharge papers. You can take regular-strength Tylenol if you have any joint pain, but no ibuprofen or aspirin. Call your doctor for a high fever, shortness of breath, or extreme fatigue. Otherwise, as long as you’re feeling up to it, you can resume normal activities - you’re no longer contagious at this stage in the infection.”

“Does that mean he *was* contagious before?” I blurted before I could stop myself, which caused everyone to look over at me. Feeling myself blush, I added self-consciously, “Just sayin’... I’m staying at Howie’s place right now, so how do I know I didn’t get it from him?”

AJ snorted. “Uh, ‘cause your skin’s not all red and splotchy, dumbass?”

“Actually, his face is kinda red all of a sudden,” said Brian, smirking, which made me blush even more.

“Hey, it’s a fair question,” Dr. Charnell said. “The rash is usually the last symptom to appear. However, if you’ve ever had this virus before, you’re most likely immune to it. It’s like chickenpox; most people only get it once.”

“Oh.” I racked my brain, trying to remember if I’d ever had a rash like that before. With four younger siblings, the odds that I’d been exposed at some point in my childhood were pretty high, but I couldn’t be sure.

“We’ll keep an eye on it, Nick,” said Kevin, giving me a knowing look. I think he could tell I didn’t want to open a can of worms by telling this doctor I was immunosuppressed, too. She didn’t need to know my business. Besides, I felt fine. Nodding, I shot Kevin a grateful smile in return.

“Well, if you don’t have any other questions, I’ll have a nurse bring in your discharge papers,” said Dr. Charnell. And just like that, Howie was good to go.

I felt stupid for panicking and getting the other guys to fly down over something so minor, but that was nothing compared to the relief I felt that Howie was going to be

okay. “Looks like you dodged another bullet, dawg,” I told him on the drive back to Cape Canaveral. “Like I said, you’re the Indestructible Howie D!”

He laughed. “Yeah, let’s hope this was the last time either of us sees the inside of a hospital for awhile, huh?”

“Seriously,” I agreed. “I’m freaking sick of hospitals. Maybe we should just live in plastic bubbles and eat nothing but immune-boosting superfoods from now on.”

“You sound like Leigh,” said Howie, chuckling.

“Really? I thought I sounded more like Lauren.”

“Well, we’ll just have to show them that we can take care of ourselves. Or at least take care of each other.” When he said that, I gave Howie a sidelong glance and found him watching me hopefully. “You’re staying, aren’t you? At least for another week or two, till I’m better and we know you’re not gonna get sick?”

He sounded so desperate, it was almost pathetic, but I understood where he was coming from. After all, I wasn’t the only one whose vision of the future had changed. While I was mourning the wife and children I would never have, Howie had actually had a family and lost them. I couldn’t blame the guy for being lonely.

I still wasn’t sure if my feelings for Howie went beyond the brotherly friendship we’d always had, but at the end of the day, it didn’t matter. He was my friend and my brother, regardless, and I knew I couldn’t leave him like that.

“Sure, Howie,” I said. “I’ll stay.”

Chapter 57

Howie

It was great having all the guys in town, even if it was only for a few days. “Doesn’t this feel like the good old days?” I asked, as we sat around on my balcony, enjoying the cool breeze coming off the cape. “The five of us, back in our old stomping grounds?”

“I dunno what you’re remembering, bro, but that crappy apartment we had in Orlando definitely didn’t come with an ocean view,” said Brian, propping his bare feet up on the railing as he leaned back in his chair.

“Granted, there *are* no ocean views in Orlando,” Kevin pointed out, “but yeah, we were practically living in squalor compared to this.”

“Aw, c’mon, it wasn’t that bad,” I protested. I had fond memories of my first apartment and those early days of the group, living with Kevin and Brian. We barely knew each other when they moved in, but we knew we made beautiful music together, and back then, that was the only thing that mattered.

“Howie, the hot water only lasted one-and-half showers, we had to do laundry in a musty basement, and there was no dishwasher,” said Kevin.

AJ laughed. “Hashtag first world problems.”

“Dude, please don’t ever say ‘hashtag’ out loud again,” groaned Nick. “It makes you sound like someone’s grandma.”

“No, he’d have to say ‘pound sign’ to sound like somebody’s grandma,” laughed Brian. “And we *did* have a dishwasher, Kev. His name was Howie, remember?”

“Haha, funny. At least one of us took some pride in the place,” I said. I knew they would think I was crazy, but I missed that crappy apartment. By comparison, my condo was much more spacious and luxurious, but these days, it felt too big, too empty.

“Hey, I’m with you, Howie. I loved that apartment,” said AJ. “I felt so freaking cool coming to kick it with you guys in your bachelor pad.”

“Me too,” Nick admitted, grinning. “It made me feel grown up. And it beat being stuck at home.”

I smiled at him, remembering how Kevin and I had to put up with an obnoxious thirteen-year-old hanging around. I never minded having AJ over; even though I’d known him since he was younger than Nick, he had always seemed older, more mature. But Nick was another story. Brian was the only one who ever invited Nick to spend the night. Had I known how bad Nick’s home life was back then, I might have made more of an effort to include him, but instead, Kevin and I would take advantage of our age and escape to the bars on those nights, leaving the younger boys back at the apartment playing video games.

Things were a lot different now. I actually liked being around Nick. It had helped, having him stay in my condo, although it still wasn't the same as sharing the space with my wife and kids. I missed having a family, having a role and a purpose in life. Being with the guys again reminded me of better times, when I had goals and aspirations for the future. Back then, we were always busy rehearsing or recording, but it rarely felt like work. It was *fun*. Even though Nick and Brian drove me nuts, the five of us had a ton of fun together. I didn't really miss the actual apartment, I realized. What I missed was that time in my life, when all that mattered was the music.

I suddenly cleared my throat. "Hey, since we're all here together, maybe we should take some time to talk about what our plans are for the group."

The other guys looked over at me in surprise. "Yeah, sure, if you're feeling up to it," said Kevin.

"Well, I know Nick lured you guys down here under false pretenses, but turns out I'm not dying after all, so I figure we might as well make the visit worth your while."

AJ frowned. "Don't talk like that, D. We don't have to be working for a visit with each other to be 'worth our while.'"

"No, I know, but I also know you guys have your own lives and families you'd probably rather be spending time with than hanging out here with me."

Nick snorted. "Not me."

"Well I know *you* don't, Nick, or I wouldn't have invited you down here." I shot him a quick smile so he'd know I was just joking. If his feeling were hurt, he didn't show it.

"Howie, I hope you don't think, just 'cause we live in different states, that we don't care," said Brian. "You guys give me crap about spending too much time with my family, but you know I'm here for you if you need me."

"I know, Bri." I reached over and patted his shoulder. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to make you guys feel guilty. I'm just saying, since this wasn't exactly planned, we should take advantage of our time together to talk about the future. I feel like the Backstreet Boys have been sort of stuck in limbo for the last few months because of me, and it's probably time to figure out where we go from here."

"Well..." Kevin looked around at all of us before he focused again on me. "I think that's something you and Nick need to figure out first. You're in the driver's seat, Howie; it's

up to you where we're going. Brian and AJ and I are gonna take the back seat on this one, but whatever you decide, we'll be behind you all the way. Right, fellas?"

AJ and Brian nodded without hesitation. "You have to put your health first, man," added AJ.

"And whatever we do, Nick needs to feel comfortable with it, too," said Brian, catching Nick's eye. I swallowed hard, remembering his reaction to finding out I'd infected Nick. Even though Brian had apologized, his words still stung. What hurt even worse was knowing Nick felt uncomfortable around me, as if I *was* some deviant sexual predator who'd made him sick on purpose. Things had gotten better between us since my transplant, but I could only imagine what Nick had been saying about me behind my back before then.

"Of course," I said quickly, nodding in Nick's direction. "Whatever *we* as a group decide, we all need to be okay with it."

Kevin cleared his throat and leaned forward. "Listen up, fellas. We've always been good about supporting each other's decisions, even when they take us in different directions. When I wanted out, you guys respected my feelings and let me go, and I gave you my blessing to continue on as a foursome. When I was ready to come back, you embraced me with open arms. That break was exactly what I needed to bring back my passion for performing. I enjoyed every second we spent on stage together last year, and selfishly, I don't want this to be the end of the Backstreet Boys. But if either of you wants or needs to take a break, I understand, and you have my blessing."

AJ and Brian nodded in silent agreement, leaving Nick and I to look at each other.

"Nick, I can't speak for you or your feelings," I started, "but aside from this one, *minor* setback, I've been feeling a lot better lately, and I don't see why I wouldn't be able to get back in shape to perform again. I'd have to get clearance from my doctor, of course, but it's been more than four months since my transplant, so I should be able to start working out and traveling again. I really would like to go back on tour at some point and try to make up all those shows we cancelled. Would you be up for that?"

Nick shrugged. "Yeah, I mean... if *you* are, then sure, why not? It's not like I've got anything else going on right now."

He was trying so hard to sound casual, but I could hear the emotion in his voice. I had been thinking only of my own feelings before, but right then, I realized that I wasn't the only one who was lonely and looking for a purpose in this new life. Nick needed this, too.

Of the five of us, Nick had always needed the group the most. Maybe it was because he was still a child when we started and had grown up being a Backstreet Boy that he'd seemed to struggle to find his own identity outside of the group. Not that he hadn't tried. First he'd tried to be a rock star, then an actor, and let's not forget his "ghetto fab" phase that occurred somewhere in between. Then there was his brief stint as Paris Hilton's arm candy, followed by his ill-fated foray into reality TV. In every case, Nick was playing a role, trying to adopt a persona that wasn't true to himself, and since acting really wasn't his forte, he'd failed every time. Nick was most successful when he stopped trying to be someone else and embraced being a Backstreet Boy.

In the last few years, he had seemed more at ease in his own skin, which I'd attributed to two things: a healthy lifestyle and Lauren Kitt. But now that his health had been compromised and he'd ended his engagement with Lauren, I knew Nick was struggling again to find his place. Maybe that place was onstage, right alongside me, where it had always been.

Chapter 58

Nick

I didn't realize how much I missed touring until we made the decision to hit the road again. Usually I enjoyed my time off, but the last six months had brought nothing but heartbreak and drama. Going back on tour would bring a much-needed sense of normalcy back to my life.

After Howie had talked to his transplant doctor and Kevin called our manager, we'd agreed to do a short U.S. tour in the fall. We had intended to do another North American leg of our world tour anyway, and since Howie wasn't supposed to travel overseas until one year after his transplant, it made the most sense to start in the States. If everything went well, we could take the tour to Europe the following year and make up the dates we'd had to cancel. That meant Howie had about four months to get back in shape, and I promised to stay in Florida and help him do it.

We got started a week after AJ, Kevin, and Brian left. Howie was feeling better, and his rash had faded to the point that it was barely noticeable. I must have been immune to that particular virus after all because I still hadn't experienced any of the same symptoms Howie had. *About time I caught a lucky break*, I thought with relief.

On the first day of Howie's new workout regimen, I woke him up at six in the morning. "Are you kidding me, Carter?" he complained, rolling over in bed. "It's not even light out."

"It will be soon, and it won't be hot yet. C'mon," I said, shaking his shoulder. "If we get a move on, we'll get to see the sunrise."

Grudgingly, Howie got up. Dressed in shorts and tank tops, we went outside and headed toward the water. I knew Howie liked to take walks along the beach, so my plan was to start with what he was already doing and build on that to help him regain his stamina.

I tried to remember everything Lauren had taught me about fitness as I took on the role of Howie's trainer, leading him through some light stretches to get warmed up. "Ugh," he groaned during an oblique stretch, holding his side with one hand while he raised the other arm over his head. "How do you lose so much flexibility in just four months?"

"Does it hurt?" I asked. "Don't push yourself if it hurts."

"No, it doesn't hurt, really. It just feels like I'm gonna bust a seam or something." Howie shook his head. "I know that's stupid - my incision's healed; I don't have any stitches or staples or anything left to pop - but it still feels weird. It's probably all in my head. Like, I remember how much it hurt to move the wrong way after surgery, so I still expect there to be pain when I stretch like this. Does that make any sense?"

"Sure, I guess," I said, shrugging. I had no idea what it felt like to be split wide open and sewn back together again, but it couldn't have been very comfortable. "Just let me know if it does start to hurt, okay? I don't want you to overdo it."

"I'm fine. Just stiff," he said with a sigh, as he switched to the other side.

"That's alright," I assured him. "It's just gonna take time for you to get back into the shape you were in before surgery. I know you can do it."

Howie gritted his teeth and smiled. "Thanks, Nick."

Once we were both warmed up, we took off walking down the beach. We started off slow, but gradually, I picked up the pace until my own heart was pumping fast. I looked over at Howie. Even though the temperature was only in the sixties, he was already sweating. "You doing okay, man?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied, sounding slightly winded.

“You wanna try jogging with me for a few seconds?”

“Do I *want* to?” He laughed. “No, but I will.”

“Okay, let’s go for ten seconds. Ready? Go!” I counted down the seconds out loud as I started to jog, barely faster than we’d been walking. “Ten... nine... eight...” Howie stayed with me, matching my pace. “Seven... six... five...” I could hear him starting to pant. “C’mon... three... two... one... and done!” Howie exhaled noisily as we slowed to a walk again. “Good job, man,” I said, sensing he needed some encouragement. “Let’s walk for a minute, then try jogging again.”

We kept at it for fifteen minutes, then turned around and walk-jogged the other direction, ending up back at Howie’s condo half an hour later. By that time, Howie’s face and arms were streaked with sweat. We took off our shoes and waded to cool down, letting the waves wash over our bare feet as we stood in the wet sand. The sun was rising over Cape Canaveral, the streaks of orange in the sky reflected on the surface of the water.

“You don’t see sunrises like this in Tennessee, do you?” said Howie, standing alongside me as we admired the view. It was such a gorgeous sight, it made me glad to be alive. I hoped he felt the same way.

“No,” I admitted. “Now aren’t you glad I got your butt out of bed so early?”

“As long as you let me take a nap later,” he replied. “I guess I’d better get used to it, with the boys coming in a couple weeks. James wakes up at the crack of dawn, too.”

I’d almost forgotten that, per his custody arrangement, Howie’s kids would be spending the summer with him. “Oh, now I see why you talked me into staying down here, so I can entertain your son while you sleep in.”

Howie laughed. “You got me. And according to Leigh, James is the easy one. She’s started calling Holden ‘diablo blanco’ - the white devil.”

“Aww, that little blond angel? No way.”

“Apparently, the other day, he tried to flush Leigh’s Tiffany watch down the toilet. She rescued it, but not before it hit the water, so now it no longer tells time.”

I shrugged. “Who buys a watch to tell time anymore? We got phones for that. It’ll still look good on her wrist, once she wipes the shit stains off it.”

Howie shook his head, chuckling. “You’re sick, man. C’mon, let’s head in. I need a shower.”

I wrinkled my nose and sniffed. “Yeah, you stink.”

“I know, almost as much as you,” he shot back.

“Really?” I raised my arm, pretending to sniff my pit. Then I pounced, throwing my arm around Howie and pulling him into a headlock so that his face was there instead. “You sure about that, Howie?”

Howie struggled, choking and gagging, then slipped in the wet sand. As he stumbled, his weight knocked me off balance, and before I knew it, we were both on our asses in the water.

“That’s what you get, Carter,” said Howie, laughing, as the waves rolled over us.

“Eh, we needed to wash the stink off anyway,” I replied, splashing him.

“Speak for yourself!” He splashed me back. “You told me once that my sweat smelled like taco meat, remember?”

I laughed, remembering how I always used to compare Howie to Mexican food, even though he was technically Puerto Rican. “Yeah, *rancid* taco meat.”

We goofed around for a few more minutes, then got out of the water and splashed back to the condo, shoes and socks in hand. “Try not to get water all over the floor,” Howie warned, as I tiptoed toward the guest bathroom to take a shower.

That wasn’t bad for our first workout, I thought, as I stood under the stream of hot water, lathering my body with soap. It was good to see Howie getting back to his old, active self. Other than an affinity for alcohol, he had always been one of the more health-conscious members of our group, so to see him in the hospital had been hard for me. I hoped his latest stay would be the last one for a long time. I wanted him to be healthy and feel good about himself again, and if I could help him get there, I was glad to do it.

When I got out of the shower, I changed into a clean t-shirt and shorts and went into the kitchen to take my meds. Howie was already there, about to do the same thing. “Hey, you did a great job today, dude,” I said, watching him swallow a handful of pills. “You’re gonna be back in dancing shape by fall, I guarantee it.”

Howie wiped some water off the corner of his mouth and smiled. “Thanks, Nick,” he said, setting his cup down on the counter. “I hope you know how much I appreciate you staying down here and helping me out.”

“Hey, man, you’ve been keeping me on track, too,” I replied, rattling my pill organizer.

“Here.” Howie filled a fresh glass with water and handed it to me.

“Thanks.” I plucked my morning pills out of their compartment and popped them into my mouth, chasing them down my throat with a long drink of water. This part of my new lifestyle wasn’t really so bad, I’d decided, especially after seeing how much medication Howie had to take. These days, he definitely had it worse than I did.

Howie hardly ever complained, though. Ever since he’d decided he wanted to live after all, he had just kept on trucking through everything: a liver transplant, a divorce, illness, and now the long, hard road to rehabilitation. I admired his strength.

“C’mere, man,” I said, setting my glass down and opening my arms. Howie seemed to be caught off-guard at first, but he crossed the kitchen to give me a hug. “I’m proud of you,” I added, as I wrapped my arms around him. “You’re stronger than you know.”

“Thanks, Nick,” he whispered, pressing his compact little body close to mine as he embraced me back. It had been a long time since we’d hugged like that. He felt somehow smaller and frailer than I remembered. I could smell the fresh scent of soap coming off his skin, which was still warm from his shower. His head was tucked under my chin, and as I looked down at his hair, I felt the insane urge to run my fingers through his wet curls. When he started to let me go, I realized I didn’t want him to.

“Howie.” He looked up, and, slowly, I lowered my face toward his until our lips were touching. I closed my eyes and kissed him softly, tentatively at first. I could taste a hint of his spearmint toothpaste, and the way it made my lips tingle was intoxicating. I hated how much I liked it, but I couldn’t deny my attraction anymore. Life was too short to live a lie. Neither of us knew how much time we had left. We were both feeling healthy, but as Howie’s recent hospitalization had shown, our circumstances could change in a heartbeat. I didn’t want to waste one more day trying to hide how I felt about him. So I took the kiss deeper, sucking his bottom lip between my teeth. When we finally broke apart and I opened my eyes again, Howie was staring at me in amazement.

“You sure felt something that time, didn’t you?” he asked breathlessly.

I could feel the redness creep into my cheeks as I closed my eyes and nodded. Embarrassed as I was to admit it, my feelings for him were real. Somehow, in a strange twist of fate, I'd found myself falling for my best friend.

Chapter 59

Howie

For the first time in six months, I was genuinely happy again. My body felt stronger and healthier every day, my sons were coming to spend the summer with me, and my best friend and I had never been closer. Life was finally starting to look up.

After the spontaneous kiss we'd shared in the kitchen, Nick and I had agreed to take things slow. Waiting for him to make the first move had worked out well for me, and I knew I needed to stay patient. As long as I let Nick set the pace, we would keep moving forward in our relationship, whereas I worried we'd take a step back if I pushed him. He was clearly still uncomfortable with his newfound feelings, and I had to give him time to accept them. I was willing to wait for as long as it took. To me, Nick was worth it.

In the meantime, we had plenty to preoccupy us. Leigh was flying down the second week in June with James and Holden, who would be staying with me for the next two months. A few days before they arrived, Nick randomly said, "Hey, Howie, remember when you promised to put a fresh coat of paint on the walls of the guest room? When are we gonna get that done? 'Cause I can still see the outline of your kid's name, and to be honest, it kinda bugs me."

I laughed. "Couldn't we just cover it up with some wooden letters that spell out 'NICK' instead? Would that make you feel better?"

"Depends on what font they're in," Nick replied. Then he rolled his eyes at me. "C'mon, dude, can't we just go get some paint and do it today?"

I considered the request for a second, then shrugged and said, "Sure, why not? Go put some shoes on. If you're a good boy, I'll even let you pick out the color."

Nick laughed. "Don't make promises you won't wanna keep!" he sang out as he went to find his shoes.

Sure enough, I regretted what I'd said once we were standing in the paint aisle at Home Depot, poring over paint chips. "Boring!" protested Nick, when I held up a selection of neutrals for his input. "These are all shades of beige. Let's pick a fun color!"

"Like what?" I asked warily.

Nick wandered further down the aisle, his tongue poking out between his teeth as he studied the samples. "What about this?" he asked, pointing to a vivid, lime green.

I blinked. "Are you kidding? That would be blinding in a bedroom that size! It'd be blinding in any room of any size, actually."

"I like it. It's bright," Nick said, smiling.

"Yeah, no shit. Let's keep looking."

"How about red?" Nick suggested.

"For an accent wall, maybe, but not a whole bedroom."

Nick snorted. "An 'accent wall'? Someone's been watching too much HGTV."

"No, someone used to have a *wife*," I corrected him. "Leigh liked to watch HGTV. I just got sucked in sometimes."

He laughed. "Watch it, Howie, your gay is showing," he muttered, just loud enough for me to hear.

"So what? Homophobe." My voice was louder, making Nick's face flush.

"Shut up, I am not."

"Could've fooled me." I was only half-kidding, but I knew I'd better change the subject before I really hurt his feelings. "Sorry, bud, but red is still too bold. And it looks like blood."

"Aww, but isn't red the color of AIDS Awareness?"

"I think we're more than aware, don't you?" I snapped. Nick's feelings for me may have changed, but not his love of messing with me. I was still waiting for the night when he'd want to mess around with me in another way.

“Touchy, touchy,” Nick said in a sing-song voice, strolling ahead of me down the aisle while I frowned at his back. How nice for him that he could now joke about what had happened to us, but I couldn’t forget that my actions had also hurt my wife and infant son, who’d once occupied the room we were painting. It would never be a laughing matter to me.

In the end, we settled on a pale blue-gray that Nick said reminded him of the sky. We bought a gallon of it and headed back home to start painting. This didn’t go much better than picking out the paint.

“Haven’t you ever painted a wall before?” I asked Nick, after watching him roll on drippy lines of paint in random directions.

“Uh, yeah. I think I helped my parents once when I was a kid,” he replied.

I rolled my eyes behind his back. *Well, that explains a lot*, I thought. Trying to keep my tone light, so it wouldn’t sound like I was nagging him, I said, “You know, it looks a lot better if you only go in one direction... like coloring. And, hey, make sure you rub the extra paint off your roller so it doesn’t drip so much.”

“Thanks for the handy hints, Bob Vila.”

“You’re welcome, Stevie Wonder.”

“Wait, what??” Nick laughed.

“Just saying... a blind man could do a neater job painting than you are.”

“Ohh, burn!” He was still laughing. “Damn, Howie, when did you turn into such a smartass?”

“Since I started living with you.”

He turned around and grinned, oblivious to the paint dripping down his front from the roller he was holding in midair. “Well, at least you learned from the best.”

I sighed. “Thank god we put down drop cloths.”

Nick looked down at his paint-splattered tank top and giggled again. “Oops.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “You didn’t need that wifebeater anyway.”

“Whatcha sayin’, Howie? You want me to take it off?” Nick wiggled his eyebrows. How he could go from endearingly clueless to deliberately sexy in the span of five seconds was a mystery to me, but it was one of the things I adored about him.

“If you must,” I said with a wink.

Nick smirked. He set his roller down in the paint tray and made a big show of flexing his biceps before he attempted to rip his tank top right down the middle. I watched, suppressing a smile, as he struggled with the fabric for a few seconds, then gave up and peeled the shirt off over his head, managing to smear paint into his hair. He proceeded to twirl the top around his finger. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to be seductive or trying to be funny, but I pretended to be turned on by it.

“C’mere, you,” I said, beckoning him over. When he got close enough, I rose on tiptoe and planted a kiss on his cheek. “You’re adorable. Did you know you have blue hair now?”

Nick’s nose wrinkled. “What?” He reached up and put a hand to his hair, getting paint on that too. “Man... I’m a fucking mess,” he finally admitted, laughing, as he looked at his paint-streaked palm.

“A hot mess,” I replied.

With a grin, he suddenly wrapped his arms around me and pulled me tight to his chest. His bare skin was warm and slightly damp with perspiration. He kissed me until I was dizzy, then wheeled me around and pressed me up against the wall. “Nick-” I started to protest, but he silenced me with another kiss. By the time we broke apart, I was also covered in paint.

“Now you’re a hot mess, too,” said Nick triumphantly, still grinning.

I turned to look at the wall he’d thrown me up against, the wall I had just finished painting. There was now a body-shaped smudge in the drying paint. “Nick!” I groaned. “Thanks a lot; now I have to redo this wall. If you’re not more careful, we’re gonna have to go back and get another gallon of paint.”

“Sorry, my bad. Want me to go over that wall again?” Nick asked, picking up his roller.

“No! Just... finish your wall, and try to roll in one direction, would ya?”

“One direction. Got it.” He turned away, as I tried to salvage the smudged wall. I was so deep in concentration, I didn’t realize the eighties music we’d been listening to on

Nick's phone had been replaced with something else until I heard Nick singing. "*You're insecure... don't know what for... you're turning heads when you walk through the do-o-or...*"

"Uh, Nick? Did you change the station?" I asked, turning around.

He grinned over his shoulder at me. "One Direction Radio - I thought it might help me remember. *'Everyone else in the room can see it, everyone else but you... Baby, you light up my world like nobody else. The way that you flip your hair gets me overwhelmed, but when you smile at the ground, it ain't hard to tell, you don't know... you don't know you're beautiful.'*" I watched him dance around, shaking his butt as he sang along. Even when he was trying to be funny, his vocals were perfect. As for his painting? Not so much, but at least he really had started rolling in the same direction.

Shrugging, I said, "Whatever works, man." I didn't mind the music selection. It was just nice to hear Nick having fun. For the first time in six months, he seemed genuinely happy again, too.

"Well? Whatcha think?"

Standing just inside the doorway, Nick and I admired the freshly-painted guest room. It had taken three coats to cover all the flaws, but once the paint finished drying, I was pretty sure it would look fine.

"I like it," I said. "What do *you* think? You're the one who's gonna be sleeping here."

Nick nodded as he looked around the room, then down at himself. There was paint spattered all down his bare chest, paint on his hands, paint in his hair, paint everywhere. "I think I need a shower."

I laughed. "Me too, thanks to you. Care to join me?" The words came out of my mouth before I could stop them. Inwardly, I scolded myself: *So much for taking it slow.* "Just kidding," I added quickly, trying to cover my mistake. "I mean, unless you want to..."

Nick raised his eyebrows. "You suck at lying, Howie. I know you want some of this." He ran his hands down his chest, and even though he was speckled with blue, I *did*. I wanted to run my own hands all over his body and peel every last fleck of paint off his skin.

“I... I don’t want to pressure you into anything,” I stammered. “It’s your decision.”

He smirked at me. “Relax, dude. It’s not like we haven’t seen it all before, right?”

Now it was my turn to raise my eyebrows. “So... does that mean you *do* want to?”

Nick chuckled. “Come on.” He brushed past me and headed down the hall to my bedroom. I followed, my heart pounding in anticipation. Leave it to Nick to play me hot and cold. I shouldn’t have expected anything less; he had always been moody and unpredictable like that.

We went into my master bathroom, which had a whirlpool tub and a separate, walk-in shower. “You just want an excuse to use my shower,” I joked.

Nick shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much,” he admitted, grinning at me.

“I see how it is,” I said with a wink, then opened the glass doors and reached in to turn on the rainfall shower head. As the room started to steam up, I tried to strip off my paint-soaked t-shirt, but it stuck to my sweaty back.

“Here,” Nick laughed, as I struggled to free myself from the tangle of fabric in front of my face. “Let me help.” He wrapped his arms around me and gave the t-shirt a tug. I felt a flash of pain and pleasure from it pulling the hair on my back as Nick pried it away from my skin. He guided it up and over my head, then let it fall to the floor.

“Thank you,” I whispered, looking up into his beautiful, paint-flecked face. His arms were still around me, his bare chest touching mine. I could feel the vibration of his heart thumping against his ribcage, or maybe that was my own heart pounding. It was hard to tell which of us was more nervous. We hadn’t been this close, skin-to-skin, since that night on the cruise. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I leaned in and lightly kissed his lips. “You taste like paint,” I said, as I pulled away.

He laughed. “And what exactly does paint taste like, Howie?”

“I dunno... it tastes how it smells - bad.”

Nick inhaled deeply. “I actually love the smell of wet paint. Does that make me weird?”

“No, it only adds to your weirdness. You were already weird.”

He smirked down at me. “You like weirdos, then.”

“I’m starting to,” I admitted, winking at him. I ran my hands down his bare back until I reached the waistband of his shorts. I slipped my thumbs underneath and slowly slid them down his hips. He put his hands on my shoulders as his shorts dropped below his knees, holding onto me for balance as he stepped out of them. I couldn’t resist looking down.

“Hey,” said Nick sharply. “My eyes are up here.”

I quickly looked away, feeling my face flush. Nick took advantage of my temporary distraction to depants me with the practiced hand of an expert prankster: all it took was one sharp tug, and my shorts were around my ankles.

He snickered. “Gotcha.”

It wasn’t the first time I’d been pansted by Nick, but it was the first time I’d enjoyed it.

Leaving our clothes in a pile on the floor, we stumbled into the shower. Nick closed his eyes as he stood under the spray of warm water. “God, this feels so good,” he said.

I squirted some body wash into my palm, worked it into a lather, and put my hands on his chest. He let out a sigh of pleasure as I scrubbed his skin with soap, peeling away the latex paint. I played with his nipples until they hardened under my fingertips, enjoying the fact that I could arouse him. Wondering what else I could make hard, I ran my hand down the center of his chest and over his abs, following the faint treasure trail of hair there. When my fingers were just above his pubic bone, his eyes suddenly popped open.

“Whoa! Slow down there,” he said. “Gimme some of that soap, would ya?”

Disappointed, I pulled back and handed him the bottle of body wash. “Now turn around,” he ordered me. I obeyed and soon felt his hands on my back, washing away the sticky residue from the paint that had saturated my shirt. I groaned with pleasure as his strong hands worked their way up to my shoulders, massaging my sore muscles. It had been so long since anyone had touched me like that.

Suddenly, I felt something firm pressing against the small of my back. When I turned around and saw what it was, my eyes widened. “Well, *hello* there!”

Nick winced when he looked down. “Shit... I’m sorry,” he said, turning away from me toward the wall.

I chuckled. “Why are you sorry? Like you said, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

He shook his head. “I dunno... This is still so new to me.”

“You’ve never had a boner before?” I joked.

Nick glared at me over his shoulder. “Shut up. You know what I mean. It’s... it’s just *weird*, is all.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I said quietly. “We’re two people who are attracted to each other. What’s so weird about that?”

He didn’t answer. I watched the beads of water roll down his back as he huddled against the wall, trying to hide himself from me.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, Nick,” I added. “I know how you feel. I felt weird about it at first, too. I’d always been taught that it was unnatural, but honestly, being with women never felt natural to me.”

“But I love women!” Nick protested. “That’s what I can’t wrap my head around. How can I like girls and have these feelings for you at the same time?”

“So you like both,” I said, shrugging. “What’s so bad about that? You get the best of both worlds.”

He just shook his head.

I sighed. “Look, I know you’re not religious, Nick, but I believe God made us this way, and God doesn’t make mistakes.”

He snorted. “Yeah? What if getting HIV was God’s way of smiting us for sinning?”

His words hurt, but I refused to accept them. “I don’t believe that. The Church may disagree, but I don’t see loving someone as a sin.”

“Loving someone?” he repeated, laughing derisively. “And here I thought we were just fooling around.”

I swallowed hard. “I do love you, Nick,” I said softly. “I’ve loved you for a long time.” I saw his body stiffen. “I’m sorry if that makes you uncomfortable. I know this is still new to you, but I’ve felt this way for a long time. It feels good to finally say the words out loud.”

I waited a few seconds to see if he would reply. When he didn't, I added, "You don't have to say anything back. Just... let me help you, okay?" I put a hand on his shoulder, slowly turning him toward me. "Let me help you," I repeated, extending my other hand.

He hesitated, then closed his eyes and nodded. As I wrapped my hand around his hardness and squeezed, some of the tension left his shoulders. He leaned against the shower wall, breathing raggedly, until I'd worked him to the point of release. Then his whole body went limp.

"Damn, Howie," he whispered, doubling over to catch his breath.

I laughed. "Better?"

He nodded. "Yeah." He straightened up again and reached for my shampoo. "Dr. Usako can suck it," he muttered under his breath, as he squirted some into his hand. "Erectile dysfunction, my ass."

"What?" I said in surprise.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Just something my doctor said once. I don't have it, obviously," he added, scrubbing his scalp so vigorously, I worried he was going to rip his hair right out at the roots.

I reached up and took his hands, pulling them away from his head and replacing them with mine. "Yes, I can see that," I said, massaging the shampoo into his scalp. "So why would she think you did?"

"Cause Lauren told her I couldn't keep it up in the bedroom. As if it was any of her freaking business."

I frowned, wondering why he would tell me that. Was he admitting he hadn't been sexually attracted to Lauren after all? And then I remembered what he'd told me the day he'd left her: "*I can't let that happen to Lauren. I won't.*" That's when it occurred to me. "Because you were afraid of infecting Lauren?" I asked.

Nick nodded, his eyes cast downward. I continued to run my fingers through his hair, making sure all the paint had been washed out of it. "It's okay, Nick," I said, guiding him back under the showerhead to rinse off the shampoo. "You don't need to worry about that now."

"I know," he said quietly, closing his eyes. I felt a wave of fresh guilt wash over me with the lukewarm water, as I remembered that I was really at fault for ruining their

relationship. Nick may have been the one to end the engagement, but I was the reason he'd felt he had to. The fact that I was secretly glad he was here with me instead of back in L.A. with Lauren made me feel even guiltier... but it wasn't enough to keep me from taking advantage of the situation while I could.

When we finally got out of the shower, we wrapped ourselves in warm towels and drifted away to different parts of the condo to get dressed. Nick's clothes, along with all the furniture from his room, were in James and Holden's room while the paint was drying.

"Even if we move the bed back in, I don't think you're gonna be able to sleep in here tonight," I said later that evening, when Nick and I went in to check the walls. "Smell those paint fumes."

Nick wrinkled his nose and nodded. "It's okay. I can sleep on the couch," he said. "Or in James's bed."

"Or mine," I offered. He looked at me, eyebrows raised, and I felt my face getting warm. "I just meant, you're welcome to sleep in my bed with me, if you want. We don't have to do anything other than sleep."

He smirked. "In that case... I'll consider your offer."

I knew there was no way Nick would want to sleep on the couch or in my son's twin bed when he could have half of my comfortable king, so I wasn't surprised when he came back to the master bedroom with me that night.

What did surprise me was when, out of the blue, he suddenly blurted, "So what's it like to fuck a dude?"

He was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, watching me brush my teeth. When I heard that, I almost choked on a mouthful of toothpaste. Coughing and sputtering, I ran to the sink and spat.

Nick chuckled. "Smooth."

I wiped off the corners of my mouth. "Sorry... wasn't expecting that."

"Yeah, well... what's it like?"

I wondered why he wanted to know. Was he considering doing more than sleeping in my bed, or was he merely curious? "Well..." I said slowly, watching him in the mirror as I rinsed off my toothbrush. "It doesn't feel all that different from doing it with a woman,

once you get past the initial weirdness. Why?" I caught his eye and grinned. "You want me to show you?"

Nick shuddered. "No, I don't want you to stick your dick up my ass, Howie." He turned and disappeared back into the bedroom.

I contemplated that for a moment, then shrugged. "You could be on top, if you want," I called after him, sticking my head through the doorway.

Nick was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to me. He shook his head. "No... I'd probably rip you apart."

I snorted, ducking back into the bathroom. "I know you like to think you're so well-endowed and all, but I'm sure I can handle it," I said. "You won't hurt me."

My own words triggered something in me. I turned to look at the shower, thinking back to our earlier conversation and Nick's admission that he'd been afraid to have sex with Lauren. Suddenly, his conflicted, hot-and-cold feelings started to make more sense to me. I set my toothbrush down on the counter and walked back into the bedroom. Sitting down next to him, I wrapped my arm around his shoulders.

"Did you hear what I said?" I asked, hugging him to my side. "You don't have to be afraid anymore, Nick. You won't hurt me. You can't."

I turned my head and looked into his eyes. They were wide with uncertainty, but behind that, I thought I saw something else in his expression. Was it curiosity - or desire? I still couldn't tell. I put my hand on his thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze, watching for his reaction.

Nick took a deep, shuddering breath and released it slowly. My own breath caught in my throat as he whispered, "Okay."

Chapter 60

Nick

Waking up with Howie wasn't like the last time. The last time, I was hungover and freaked out about finding myself naked in bed with my best friend. But this time, there

was no splitting headache and no unpleasant surprises. Instead, I woke feeling calm and content.

I lay there for a second, taking in my surroundings. Once I realized I was in Howie's bed, I remembered every second of the night before, and I wasn't ashamed. I felt this overwhelming sense of freedom, like someone had released me from a set of heavy chains that had been holding me down. *I got laid, that's why*, I thought, smirking to myself. It didn't even matter that it had been with a dude; finally having sex after six months of self-inflicted abstinence felt amazing. So did letting go of all of my inhibitions and fears. For the first time since finding out I had HIV, I actually felt hopeful about the future. Ironically, the same person who had saddled me with the burden of that illness was also the one who'd set me free.

I looked to my left, where Howie was still asleep. He was sprawled out on his back, his head lolled to one side and his mouth hanging open. He had his right arm up over his head, while his other arm was wrapped around a small, plush panda bear. When had that little guy joined us in bed? I wondered, stifling a giggle. I remembered Howie sleeping with a stuffed Winnie the Pooh way back in the day, but didn't realize he still had that habit. I couldn't wait for him to wake up so I could make fun of him for it.

Reaching across to his side of the bed, I took one finger and trailed it lightly along the underside of his arm, from his wrist to his tricep, trying to subtly tickle him awake. Howie twitched a little, smacking his lips, but didn't wake up. I'd almost forgotten what a deep sleeper he was. "*Howie!*" I hissed in his ear. When he finally jerked awake, I yawned, as if I'd just woken up myself. "Mm... morning," I said, making my voice sound sleepy.

He turned his head toward me. "Morning," he replied, as a smile spread slowly across his face. "You're still here."

I frowned. "Where else would I be?"

"I dunno... the couch? James's bed? Halfway to Tennessee by now?" He let out a nervous laugh. "I thought I might have scared you away last night."

I shook my head. "It wasn't that bad, actually. It felt... good," I admitted, as I sat up in bed. "I feel good." I looked over at him again. "How about you?"

Howie winced as he struggled to sit up, too. "A little sore," he said, "but it's all good."

"I'm sorry," I offered, feeling awkward for the first time since I'd woken. "I tried to go slow..."

He shook his head. “Don’t be. You were great, Nicky.”

I wiggled my eyebrows. “Paris used to tell me that, too.”

Howie made a face, just like I knew he would. “Gee, thanks for reminding me of all the other nasty places your dick’s been. I need to take a shower now.”

“Hey, wait,” I said, before he could get out of bed. “What happened to your little friend? Not your dick,” I added quickly, realizing that might have come out wrong. “Your panda friend.”

“What? Oh...” Howie looked sheepish as he pulled the stuffed panda out from under his pillow, where he had apparently hidden it while I wasn’t paying attention. “It’s James’s. I found it in his room after Leigh and the boys left last year, and it still smelled like him...” He glanced down at the toy and shrugged. “It’s stupid, I know, but I was lonely, and it helped to have something to hold onto at night. I guess it just became a habit.”

I felt for Howie, but I couldn’t miss out on such a golden opportunity to give him shit. “I see. Well, now we know who really enjoys sleeping with pandas, don’t we?”

“Shut up,” he laughed, shaking his head, as he started to get up again. “I really am gonna jump in the shower.”

“Jump” wasn’t exactly an accurate description of what Howie was going to do anytime soon. Watching him hobble into the bathroom, I could tell he was more than “a little sore.” I felt bad about that, but it was kind of funny, too. Apparently, he had underestimated just how well-endowed I was.

“You sure you don’t wanna wait until after our workout?” I called after him, just to see his reaction.

Howie stopped in the bathroom doorway and looked back at me. “Uh... I think I’m gonna need to take a rest day. Or a rest week.”

I laughed. “Hey, I did warn you...”

He smiled. “I know you did. But it’s okay. It was worth it.”

We spent the next three days thoroughly cleaning the condo before Howie's kids came. Conveniently, Howie claimed it still hurt to bend over, so guess who got stuck scrubbing floors on his hands and knees?

"Dude, don't you have a cleaning lady who could do this?" I complained, as I wiped away dust and hair and god-knows-what else from around the base of his toilet.

"We used to," said Howie, spraying the mirror with glass cleaner, "but Leigh let her go while I was living in L.A., and I haven't gotten around to hiring her back."

"Well, you should definitely hire her back. Like, today. I don't wanna pick up any more of your pubes."

"But you're so good at it!" He grinned down at me. "I bet you helped your parents clean the house when you were a kid, too, didn't you?"

I rolled my eyes at his weak attempt to motivate me, like I was still that little kid who could be encouraged with empty praise. "Dude, my parents had five kids. I don't think our house was *ever* this clean."

"Well, Leigh will freak out if this place isn't completely disinfected. You saw how she was with Holden last time they were here; she's so worried about germs and him getting sick..."

I sighed, but kept scrubbing. For Holden's sake. "He still doing okay?" I asked, wanting to keep Howie talking. Time went by faster that way.

"Yeah, Leigh said he is. His T-cell count is way up from where it was when he was diagnosed, so the meds they've got him on must be working."

"Oh, that's great." I met Howie's eyes in the mirror and smiled. "So does that mean he doesn't have AIDS anymore? Just HIV?"

Howie shook his head. "It doesn't work that way. Once you get an AIDS diagnosis, that's it. They don't take it back. Even if his immune system recovers, he'll always 'have AIDS,' thanks to me."

I set down my sponge. "Hey, man, you can't keep beating yourself up about it. You didn't know."

"Maybe not, but if I'd just kept my dick in my pants, none of this would have happened."

“Yeah, and you’d still be stuck in your sham of a marriage.”

He frowned at me. “It wasn’t a sham. I loved Leigh. I still love her.”

I raised my eyebrows, looking back at him skeptically. “I thought you loved me. I thought you were gay.”

He sighed. “I do... and I am, but... I dunno, Nick, it’s complicated. There are different kinds of love, you know? When I married Leigh, she was my best friend, and now she’s the mother of my children. I’ll always love her, in a way.”

“But not the same way you love me.”

He shook his head. “No. Not that way.” He paused, watching me in the mirror, and I could tell he was waiting for me to say something. It was the second time that week he’d told me he loved me, and I had yet to say anything back. He’d given me an out the first time, but now he looked like he expected some kind of response.

What was I supposed to say? It was way too soon to tell him I loved him, too. Truthfully, I *did* love him, but as a brother and a friend, not a... boyfriend. It was still weird for me to even think of him that way, let alone say it out loud. As far as I was concerned, we were just having fun, fooling around with each other. It wasn’t like we were some exclusive couple.

“I understand,” I replied finally. “I still love Lauren, too.” I said the last part almost defiantly, daring him to question my feelings for Lauren. Maybe I was bisexual, but I definitely wasn’t gay. I did still love Lauren, and if it weren’t for him, I would have been happily married to her by then.

“Have you talked to her lately?” he asked, his eyes boring into mine.

“No,” I admitted, looking away. “I’m giving her some space, so she can move on.”

“So you still love her, but you don’t see a future with her?”

I shook my head. “No. Not as husband and wife, anyway. I hope maybe one day we can go back to being friends, but I’m not gonna drag her down with all of my baggage and drama.”

“You mean your HIV,” Howie said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I don’t deserve her, and she doesn’t deserve to be stuck dealing with this shit the rest of her life. That day at the doctor’s office, when we found out she’d tested negative, she started talking about ways we could still have kids. It would have involved her having to be artificially inseminated... or taking all these antiretroviral drugs she didn’t really need, just so I could ‘safely’ knock her up the ‘natural’ way. But none of it actually sounded safe or natural. And you know Lauren; she likes things natural. She deserves to be able to get pregnant and have a baby without medical intervention if she wants to, and I won’t take that away from her.”

“You know Kevin and Kristin used fertility drugs to conceive Max, right?” Howie said. “It’s not really that big of a deal these days.”

“But Lauren wouldn’t need drugs if she wasn’t with me.”

“You don’t know that. You two never tried to get pregnant, did you?”

I shook my head. “You’re missing the point. It wasn’t just about having kids. Hell, we didn’t even know if we wanted kids. I just didn’t want her whole life to revolve around trying to keep us both healthy.”

He frowned. “But isn’t what her whole life revolves around already?”

“Ugh.” Annoyed, I picked up my sponge. “You don’t understand,” I said, as I started aggressively scrubbing the floor again. “Forget I said anything.”

“I do understand, Nick. I’m just playing devil’s advocate here, although I don’t even know why. It’s not like I want you to go back to her. I like having you here.”

“Yeah, so I can be your slave and scrub your friggin’ floors,” I grumbled.

“I hope you know how much I appreciate your help,” he said. “I promise, I’ll make it up to you.”

I glanced over my shoulder at him. “Oh yeah? How you gonna do that?”

“Well...” He raised one eyebrow. “When you’re done, if you want, I’ll get down on *my* knees and make it worth your while...”

I just laughed and scrubbed a little harder.

Chapter 61

Howie

More than a month had passed since I'd last seen my sons. It had been a memorable month, no doubt, but as nice as it was having Nick around, I was looking forward to spending the summer with James and Holden even more.

The day Leigh flew them down from New Jersey, I picked them up at the airport. Just like the last time, as soon as James spotted me in the terminal, he shouted "DADDY!" at the top of his lungs, dropped Leigh's hand, and ran straight to me, launching himself into my arms. I hugged him tightly and kissed the top of his head, remembering the tearful goodbye we'd said in this same terminal a few weeks earlier. I was used to leaving my family for work, but it felt different to watch them leave me. Then again, it made the sight of Leigh walking toward me with Holden in his stroller that much sweeter.

Holden recognized me right away this time. "Dada!" he cried, as he reached his arms toward me, demanding to be picked up. I bent down to scoop him out of his stroller without a second thought, forgetting my sore backside. Leigh must have seen me wince, because when I straightened up again, she was looking at me with concern.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," I replied quickly. "Just overdid it working out with Nick the other day." Well, it wasn't *technically* a lie.

Leigh smiled. "I'm glad you're getting back in shape. You look good."

"Thanks," I said, smiling back. Then I turned my attention to Holden. "How's my baby boy?" I asked, bouncing him on my hip until he gave me a slobbery grin.

"He's not such a baby anymore," said Leigh. "Holden, show Daddy your new teeth!"

"Wow, buddy," I said, taking Holden by the chin. "Do you have more teeth than last time I saw you?"

"Wait!" cried Leigh, as I went to put my finger in his mouth. "Hang on..." She fumbled with the diaper bag stowed underneath Holden's stroller for a few seconds. "Here, put some of this on first," she said, handing me a small bottle of hand sanitizer.

She made me feel so dirty, but I didn't complain, just diligently squirted some Purell into my palm to disinfect my hands. I still thought she was being overly precautionous, but she was probably right to be. I poked my finger, now 99.99% germ-free, into Holden's mouth and gently pulled back his lip to see the tiny, white tips of his canine teeth starting to come through his gums. "Wow, look at that! What a big boy!" I exclaimed.

"He gets pretty whiney while he's cutting teeth," Leigh warned me. "And drooly. We've found popsicles help."

"Popsicles?" James's ears perked up. "Do you have popsicles at your house, Dad?"

Your house. In his mind, the condo was no longer his home, but mine alone. That made me sad. "Hm, I don't know. You'll have to check the freezer when we get home," I said, winking at Leigh. Nick and I had just bought a big box of popsicles the last time we went grocery shopping.

"He also still likes to chew on teething rings," Leigh added, brushing Holden's blond hair back off his forehead. "I'll show you his favorites when we get back to the condo." I couldn't help but notice that she, like James, no longer called it "home."

"Sure, sounds good," I said, forcing a smile back onto my face, as we set off for the baggage claim.

When we got back to the condo, James raced right inside, Holden on his heels. "Hi, Uncle Nick!" I heard him shout. This was followed by a loud groan, a thud, and a shriek of high-pitched laughter. Leigh and I looked at each other, eyebrows raised, and rounded the corner to find Nick sprawled out on his back on the floor with both boys sitting on his stomach. All three of them were laughing.

"We've been here two seconds, and you're already roughhousing?" Leigh asked incredulously, shaking her head.

"Boys will be boys," I said with a shrug.

She looked at me and laughed. "You're gonna have your hands full, with three of them to keep an eye on all summer. You sure you're up to it?"

"Hey... I heard that," grunted Nick from the floor, as Holden bounced on his belly.

“Now, come on, boys, get off Uncle Nick before you make him puke,” said Leigh, picking up Holden and setting him down a few feet away.

“Ewww!” James screamed, scrambling off Nick at once. “Blech!” He mimicked puking all over the place, which made Holden laugh hysterically. Watching the two of them together, I could only shake my head and laugh.

“Sorry about them,” Leigh said to Nick, offering him a hand.

“They’re fine,” Nick replied, laughing. He took her hand, and she helped pull him to his feet. “It’s good to see you guys again.”

“It’s good to see you, too.” She smiled, hesitating for just a second before she gave him a hug. “How are you doing?”

“I’m great,” he said, and I could tell by his easy grin that he really meant it. It showed in his eyes. I couldn’t help but smile myself, my heart swelling with happiness at the thought of spending the whole summer here with James, Holden, and him.

“You look good,” said Leigh, nodding. “Whatever you and Howie have been doing is working for you guys. I hear you really busted his butt the other day.”

The look on Nick’s face when she said that was priceless. His eyes got really big, and his cheeks turned bright red. Behind Leigh’s back, I pantomimed running so he’d know what she meant. “O-oh... yeah,” he stammered, letting out a weak laugh.

His awkward reaction was not lost on Leigh. She looked over her shoulder at me, raising her eyebrows inquisitively. I just shrugged and quickly changed the subject. “Hey, I’m gonna put your bag back in the master, okay? I can sleep on the couch tonight.”

“Oh, don’t bother; I’m not staying,” she replied. When I gave her a weird look, she added, “I thought I told you over the phone? Maybe not. I’m gonna spend a few days with friends before I fly back. So, thanks, but you can sleep in your own bed tonight.” She smiled at me.

“Oh... okay,” I said. Well, it would certainly be less weird without Leigh staying in the same house as Nick and me. I wondered if she had come to the same conclusion. “Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“No, Ariella’s picking me up. I want to take you through Holden’s routine first, though.”

When most mothers talk about their toddler's "routine," they mean naps, diapers, meals, bottles, bedtime, and that sort of stuff. Leigh meant his medication regimen. She'd packed all of his prescriptions into a carry-on bag, which she emptied onto the bathroom counter for me to see. She went through each of the bottles one by one, explaining what the medication inside was for, how much, and how often I should give it to Holden. Since he was too young to swallow pills, all of the drugs were in liquid form, which meant I had to measure out each dosage carefully. Some he took twice a day, some only once, and one only on certain days of the week. It was a lot to remember, and even though Leigh had written it all down for me, I was starting to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of taking care of a sick child. This wasn't the same as giving James cough syrup when he had a cold. This was serious business.

"And on the back is a list of side effects to watch out for," Leigh said, turning over the neatly-typed medication schedule she'd made for me. "If he runs a fever or has a rash or any of these other symptoms, call Dr. Parr at this number and then call me. You do still have the thermometer here, right?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Good. Now I know this lists 'loss of appetite' as one of the symptoms you should be worried about, but Holden's going through a picky phase. Typical toddler - he pretty much only eats chicken nuggets, cereal, fruit snacks, and cheese. Sometimes not even those things. I've talked to his doctor about it, and she said it's not a big deal as long as he's eating *something* and that we can give him PediaSure to supplement his nutrition on days when he won't eat much else. But if he goes more than a day or so without wanting to eat anything, or if he seems lethargic or looks like he's losing weight, you should call her."

"Okay."

"And make sure you brush his teeth twice a day," Leigh went on, "but don't mix up his toothbrush and James's. The doctor said it's *possible* for HIV to be transmitted through sharing toothbrushes because of bleeding gums, even though it's unlikely. I bought them both brand new toothbrushes in different colors, just to be on the safe side..." Her voice had gotten higher-pitched and shakier the longer she talked, and, looking at her in the bathroom mirror, I suddenly realized there were tears in her eyes. Even though she seemed to have everything together, I could tell she was on the verge of falling apart.

"Leigh," I said, wrapping my arm around her. "Don't worry. We'll be fine." I tried to sound confident and reassuring, even though, truthfully, she had kind of freaked me out.

Leigh nodded, sniffing. “I know you will... but I can’t help worrying. It’s what moms do.”

“It’s what dads do, too,” I reminded her gently. “But you did such a great job getting everything organized, I don’t think you left me much to worry about.”

She smiled and wiped her eyes. “It was hard packing for this trip,” she admitted. “I’ve never been away from either of the boys for more than a few days, and now I won’t see them for the next two months...”

This was how you wanted it, remember? I thought. *It was your decision to move to New Jersey, not mine. You kept them away from me for five months!* But I didn’t want to start an argument or make her feel worse, so all I said was, “I know.”

“Just promise me you’ll keep me posted on how Holden’s doing? And let the boys Skype with me from time to time so I can see their faces, please?”

“Sure,” I agreed. “No problem.”

“Thanks.” Leigh let out a shaky sigh. “Well, I guess I’d better get the goodbyes over with...”

I hung back as she went to find James and Holden, who were still playing with Nick. Looking at the prescription bottles lined up across the bathroom counter, I had a newfound respect for Leigh, who had been handling all this mostly by herself over the last six months. I could see why she’d become such a worrywart. It was certainly a lot to handle.

When I went back into the living room, Leigh was kneeling on the floor in front of James, who was crying. “You’re gonna have so much fun with Daddy and Uncle Nick, you won’t even miss Mommy,” she said, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

Holden was oblivious to the fact that she was leaving. Once Leigh had kissed him goodbye, he went right back to playing peek-a-boo with Nick.

I walked her outside, where her friend Ariella was waiting in her car. As she turned to leave, I touched her arm. “Hey, Leigh? Thanks again for bringing the boys down here... and for everything you’ve done for them these last few months,” I said. “I know you’ve had to take on a lot of responsibilities yourself, and that can’t have been easy.”

She shrugged. “It hasn’t been that bad, really. I mean, all this stuff with Holden has been a lot to handle, but my parents have helped out a lot. If I pretend you’re just on tour, it doesn’t seem all that different from what life was like before.”

That stung a little.

“Sorry,” she said quickly, seeing the look on my face. “I didn’t mean that to sound so bitchy. I just meant, I’m used to playing the role of single parent. What I’m not used to being the one to leave. This is harder than I thought it would be.” She laughed and shook her head, brushing away a stray tear.

“I know,” I said. “It’s not easy. But you need some time to yourself. I hope you can relax and enjoy it.” I smiled at her. “You deserve a break.”

Leigh smiled back. “Thanks. You boys have fun, too, but be safe.” She wagged a finger at me.

I nodded, winking. “We will.”

Chapter 62

Nick

I wasn’t sure what it would be like to have James and Holden around all summer. It had been awhile since I’d spent a significant amount of time with little kids like that. The last time they’d visited, it was only for a few days, and Leigh was with them the whole time. This time, they were staying for two months without their mom, which meant Howie and I were on our own.

“Dude, if we just got Brian and an Olsen twin down here, this would be just like *Full House*,” I said, watching Howie wipe off Holden’s face, hands, and high chair after dinner that first night. The kid was a hot mess; he was probably wearing more food than he’d actually put in his mouth.

Howie laughed. “Why Brian?” he wanted to know.

“Cause he does the best impressions. He’d be Joey.”

“And who would you be?” Howie asked, walking over to the sink to rinse off the washcloth.

“Duh, Uncle Jesse!” I exclaimed. “I’m the young, hot, hip one!”

Howie snorted and shook his head. “You’re not hip if you still say ‘hip.’ Besides, I think AJ would be a better Uncle Jesse.”

“What?! No way! First off, AJ isn’t even here, so he doesn’t get to be on the show. Second, I’m way hotter than AJ, wouldn’t you agree?”

Howie tipped his head to one side and tapped his chin, as if he was seriously considering his answer. “Are we talking now or in the nineties?”

“Now! Why would we be talking about the nineties?”

“Well, my answer may have been different in the nineties. But now? Yeah, you’re hotter,” Howie admitted with a wink.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Are you saying you had a crush on AJ in the nineties?”

Howie raised his eyebrows. “Are you saying John Stamos is hot?”

“Well, he is a handsome guy...”

“Ha!” Howie snickered. “You’re so not straight.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shut up.”

“So who am I then, Danny Tanner?” he asked, as he wiped down the tray of Holden’s high chair one last time.

“Well, duh,” I said. “You’re the dad. And the neat freak.”

“I’m not that neat,” Howie protested.

“Yeah? How many times you gonna wipe off that tray?”

Howie looked down at the spotless tray and laughed. “Touché,” he said. “Okay, buddy boy, time to take your medicine.” He tickled Holden under the chin, then turned to me. “Wish me luck,” he muttered under his breath.

“Heh... good luck,” I said, settling onto a stool behind the breakfast bar. I watched as Howie set several bottles out on the counter, stopping every few seconds to look at the list Leigh had left for him. Behind him, Holden slapped his tray and then raised his arms over his head, demanding to get out of his high chair.

“Hang on, buddy,” Howie said absently, squinting down at Leigh’s instructions. “She said he hates the taste of this one and won’t take it unless it’s mixed with yogurt.” He held up one of the prescription bottles. “Should I give it to him first or last?”

I wasn’t sure if he was actually asking my opinion or just thinking aloud, but I decided to answer anyway. “Definitely last. Make it seem like dessert.”

Howie turned around and pointed his finger at me. “Good call, Uncle Nicky.”

I smiled. Even though I wasn’t their uncle by blood, I’d always liked being called by that name. Was it weird if the boys still thought of me that way, I wondered, when Howie and I were way past a “brotherly” relationship? Not that they knew about that part...

“Okay, Holden...” Howie had one of those clear, plastic medicine spoons half-filled with reddish-purple syrup. I gagged just looking at it, remembering the taste of liquid medicine from when I was a little kid. “Open up,” Howie said, guiding the spoon toward Holden’s lips.

Holden clamped his mouth shut and shook his head.

“Come on,” Howie coaxed. “Time to take your medicine, just like you do for Mommy.”

Holden squeezed his eyes shut and made a face, shaking his head even more emphatically.

Howie sighed and looked back at me in exasperation. “Any more ideas?”

“Um, call Leigh?”

He shook his head. “Only as a last resort. I told her to relax and take some time off from worrying about all this stuff; I can’t call her the first night. She’ll think I can’t handle it. She said he’s been a lot better about taking his medicine lately... He’s probably just testing me. So what else can I try?”

I shrugged helplessly. How was I supposed to know how to make a toddler take medicine? I couldn’t say I blamed the kid; I didn’t like taking mine either. “Hey,” I said

suddenly, “what if we take ours at the same time? Would that help, if he sees us doing it, too?”

Howie’s eyes widened. “Duh! Why didn’t I think of that? You’re a genius.”

I grinned. “Man, I wish I had a recording of you saying that...”

“Or maybe it’s that you still have the mind of a sixteen-month-old,” Howie added with a shrug, smirking at me. “Either way, it’s worth a try.”

As he went to get out his own meds, I said, “You know, if I have the mind of a sixteen-month-old, that means you’ve been giving blowjobs to a baby.”

“Shh!” Howie hissed, whirling around to give me a disgusted look. “Don’t say stuff like that in front of my son.”

I snickered. “What, like he knows what a blowjob is?”

“My five-year-old is right over there!” Howie pointed into the living room, where James was watching TV with his mouth hanging open, completely oblivious to the conversation we were having in the kitchen.

“So? You telling me *James* knows what a blowjob is?”

Howie gave me a look. “No, but he’ll repeat the word if he hears us saying it, so stop talking about it already!” He shook his head. “You’re sick.”

I loved getting him all flustered. He really was Danny Tanner.

“Look, Holden,” Howie said, showing him a handful of pills. “Daddy’s going to take his medicine, too. Watch Daddy.” He popped the pills into his mouth and took a big swig of water. “See?” he said, once he’d swallowed. “Don’t you want to be like Daddy?” He picked up the medicine spoon again and pushed it gently against Holden’s sealed lips.

Holden shoved his hand out of the way. “No-no-no!” he screamed, still shaking his head.

“It doesn’t look like yours,” I observed. “He knows it’s not the same thing.”

Howie looked at me for a moment, his eyes narrowed. “You’re right,” he said finally. “I know what we can try. I’ll be right back.” He set the spoon down on the counter and disappeared.

I looked at Holden. “You like giving your dad a hard time, huh? You sure we’re not related?” He just stared at me, blinking his tear-filled blue eyes.

When Howie came back into the kitchen, he was carrying a clean medicine spoon and a bottle of children’s cough syrup. I watched him pour some of the syrup into the spoon. Then he turned to me. “C’mere, Nick, time to take your medicine.”

“Wait, what?” I quickly recoiled. “You want me to take that?”

“Yes, Nick,” Howie said in a loud, patronizing voice. “You want to stay healthy, don’t you?” He came toward me, holding the spoon out in front of him. “*Play along*,” he whispered. “It’s just cough syrup; it won’t hurt you.”

“No, but it might make me puke,” I muttered back.

He rolled his eyes at me. “This was *your* idea.”

“My idea was to take my *actual* medicine, not that nasty shit.”

“Ummm! Uncle Nick said a bad word!” I looked over, surprised to see James standing at the edge of the kitchen.

“We don’t say that word, Uncle Nick,” Howie scolded me in a warning tone. “What happened to your show, James?”

“It went on commercials. Will you come play with me, Uncle Nick?”

Before I could answer, Howie said, “He will in a minute. First he’s gonna help me get Holden to take his medicine. Right, Nick?” He stared at me with pleading eyes. “Are you ready to take *your* medicine?”

James was watching me curiously. “You take medicine too, Uncle Nick? How come? Are you sick?” he asked.

I looked at Howie, unsure of how to answer that. He quickly shook his head and replied, “No, he’s not sick. This just helps him stay healthy, like Holden’s medicine does.”

“Oh.” James cocked his head to one side. “Can I take some, too?”

“No, you don’t need any. You’re healthy already... thank God,” added Howie, and I saw a flicker of emotion pass across his eyes. “Go back into the other room and watch TV, buddy. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

When James had run off, Howie turned back to me. “Ready?” he asked, holding up the spoon of cough syrup.

I sighed. “Okay, *fine*.”

Howie smiled. “What a good boy, Nick,” he said, going back to that same, loud, patronizing voice. “Now open your mouth wide.”

Grudgingly, I opened my mouth and allowed him to stick the spoon inside. I tried not to gag as I swallowed the sickeningly bittersweet syrup and forced a smile onto my face when I was done.

“Good job, Nick!” Howie was really piling on the praise for Holden to witness. “You’re such a big boy!”

“Damn right I am,” I muttered, smirking at him. He rolled his eyes at me before turning back to his son.

“Holden, don’t you wanna be a big boy like Uncle Nick?”

Holden, who had been watching me with fascination, suddenly nodded. Howie and I looked at each other. *Success!* I thought. It was that simple: Howie offered the spoon of medicine again, Holden opened his mouth, and down it went with no fuss.

“You’re a lifesaver,” Howie sighed, sagging with relief once Holden had swallowed. “Thanks, Nick.”

“No problem,” I said, grabbing a soda from the fridge to rinse the taste out of my mouth. “But next time, you’re taking the cough syrup.”

By the time Holden had finished taking his medicine and both boys had been bathed and tucked into bed, Howie and I were ready to turn in ourselves.

“I dunno how you do it, man,” I said, as I followed Howie back to his bedroom. “Being a parent is exhausting.”

He chuckled. "You have no idea." He started to reach for the doorknob, but then I saw him hesitate. "Nick, it may be better if you stayed in your own room tonight."

That statement took me by surprise. I didn't think he minded sharing his bed, seeing as how I'd been sleeping in it every night since the first time. It was less lonely that way - for both of us, I'd thought.

Before I could even respond, Howie quickly added, "It's just, James sometimes gets up at night-"

"Yeah. I know," I said flatly.

"What?" Howie gave me a questioning look. I guess I'd never told him about my awkward, late-night visit from James the last time he'd been there.

"Never mind." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Can't we just lock the door if we decide to do anything?"

He sighed. "I'm worried he'll have nightmares, being away from his mom and all, and if he does, I want him to be able to come to me."

"But you don't want him to find me in your bed," I finished, finally understanding what the issue was.

Howie opened the door to the guest room instead and motioned me inside. "I'm sorry," he said, shutting the door, "but I just think it would be confusing for him. You know, he's still getting used to the idea of Leigh and I splitting up, so if he were to find Daddy sleeping with Uncle Nick..."

I wrinkled my nose. "Please don't ever put it that way again. It makes us sound like we're in some incestual, redneck relationship."

He laughed. "Yeah, you're right - sorry."

"What if we just say we're having a sleepover?" I asked, as I walked over to the bed and sat down. "He's only five; he doesn't know anything about sex and stuff yet, right?"

Howie shook his head. "No, but... I guess I'd be more worried about him saying something to someone else."

"Like who, Leigh?"

“I was thinking more along the lines of *my* family,” said Howie, sitting down beside me on the edge of the bed. “They don’t know about us or the cruise or... anything. I haven’t even come out to them yet.”

“Yet?” I looked over at him, raising my eyebrows. “Does that mean you’re going to come out to them?”

He shrugged. “Maybe someday, yeah. I’m sure my brother and sisters would be cool with it. Mama’s the one I’m most worried about. You know, she’s a pretty hardcore Catholic, and-”

“She thinks the gays are all going to Hell?” I interjected.

“I don’t know if *she* thinks that, specifically, but... some Catholics do,” he admitted, looking downward. “As much as I want to believe she’d accept me, no matter what, I’m worried it would break her heart if she knew. And I could just see James innocently letting something slip if he saw us together.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. So... I guess I’ll see you in the morning, then?”

Howie seemed to hesitate, but then he nodded. “Yeah,” he said, sliding off the bed. “We should both get some sleep. The boys’ll be up at the crack of dawn.”

“Well, enjoy getting up with *your* kids,” I replied, grinning at him. “I’m gonna sleep in.”

“You can try,” Howie countered, “but I can’t promise they won’t run in here and jump on top of you to wake you up.”

“They won’t if I lock the door!” I said triumphantly.

“No... then they’ll beat on it until you’re forced to get out of bed just to stop the pounding.”

“Ugh,” I groaned, realizing he was probably right about that.

Howie grinned back at me. “Aren’t kids great?” he said, chuckling, as he walked to the door. “Goodnight, Nick.”

“Night, Howie.” I felt strangely empty inside as I watched him leave. I couldn’t believe it, but I was actually disappointed. Being with Howie had reminded me how good it felt to have someone to share a bed with. Without him, I was lonely.

I lay back on the bed, folding my arms behind my head, and looked up at the ceiling fan. Its blades were spinning slowly, continuously, just like the thoughts in my brain. I knew I wouldn't be able to shut them down long enough to fall asleep anytime soon.

As I replayed my conversation with Howie over in my mind, my thoughts turned to the people in my own life. What would they think if they knew what we'd been doing down here in Florida?

I didn't care what my family would say. Ever since Leslie's death, I'd barely spoken to my parents or my other siblings. None of them knew I was sick, and I damn sure wasn't going to tell them about Howie.

But what about the rest of the guys, my real brothers? It was going to be awkward reuniting with Brian, Kevin, and AJ after the recent developments in my relationship with Howie. Would we tell them the truth, I wondered, or try to keep it a secret? I wasn't sure we'd even be able to keep it under wraps, as well as we all knew each other.

And then there was Lauren. I knew if AJ found out, it would only be a matter of time before Lauren learned the truth, too, as close as she was with Rochelle. AJ would never be able to keep such a juicy secret from his wife, and she would surely tell Lauren, and what would Lauren think? That I'd left her to be with Howie? That would probably hurt her. Like Leigh, she'd be left with the realization that our whole relationship had been a lie, that I'd never really loved her at all. Except that wasn't true, in our case. I did love her. I didn't want to hurt her. But, again, I reminded myself that hurting her feelings would be better than infecting her body. At least if she thought I'd moved on with Howie, she would be able to move on, too. So maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she found out.

I picked up my phone and looked at the clock. It was getting late here, but it was three hours earlier in California. Lauren would still be up. Impulsively, I sent her a text. All it said was "*Hey,*" but as soon as I sent it, my heart started to pound. I hadn't talked to her at all since my hospital stay in Tennessee. I'd been trying to give her time to move on without me, and so far, I'd done a good job at not reaching out to her, even when I wanted to. Now I regretted my temporary moment of weakness.

A painful few minutes passed without a reply, and I wondered if she was busy or just ignoring me. Then my phone beeped. My heart leaped in my throat as I looked down. Her text simply said, "*Hey. What's up?*"

I had to say something back now that she'd asked, so I wrote, "*Nothing, just wanted to say hi and see how you were doing. I'm doing a lot better. Feeling healthy and happy again.*"

“Glad to hear that,” she texted back. “Take care. Goodnight.”

Her short response made it clear to me that she wasn't in the mood to talk. It stung a little, but I understood. Either she was still mad at me, or she was moving on, and wasn't that what I wanted?

I missed her, though. Being with Howie had done wonders to take my mind off Lauren, but I'd never really stopped missing her. It was just worse at night, when I was lying awake in bed by myself. I'd always hated sleeping alone.

Back when the group was first starting out and we'd shared hotel rooms, the older guys would always fight over who got to sleep solo. I wouldn't admit it then, but I'd never minded sharing. Maybe it was because I'd grown up in a crowded house with a family of five kids, or maybe I was just codependent, but the soft, steady sound of someone else's breathing and the warmth of another body in my bed brought me comfort. It was too quiet, otherwise, with only my own thoughts to keep me company. I couldn't sleep that way. Once we'd stopped sharing rooms, I'd replaced the guys with a steady string of girlfriends and one-night stands so that my bed was rarely empty. On nights when I had no one, I'd fall asleep to the sound of the TV talking to me.

There was no TV in this room. I turned my phone over, toying with the idea of watching some Netflix on it, but instead, I set it down and got out of bed. I padded barefoot across the room to the suitcase I'd been living out of for the last month or so. Howie had said I could hang my clothes in the closet, but I still hadn't bothered to unpack. My stuff was strewn all over the place. I dug through the layers of t-shirts and underwear to get to the bottom of the suitcase, where I'd packed a notebook and pen. I never traveled without taking this notebook. It wasn't a diary, per se, just a place to write down my thoughts, song lyrics, and that sort of thing. I'd found that it helped to free my mind when I wrote out the ideas that were filling it. So I turned to a fresh page and tried putting pen to paper.

“I'm lying in this bed, staring at the ceiling fan. I wanna be with you instead...”

Chapter 63

Howie

The summer was flying by way too fast. First I was celebrating Father's Day with my sons, and the next thing I knew, it was already the Fourth of July.

We spent the day at the Kennedy Space Center's visitor complex, introducing the boys to some American heroes and a slice of history. James and Holden were fascinated by the giant rockets on display outside. Nick was like a little kid himself, equally enthusiastic about seeing all of the space artifacts inside. "Look!" he kept saying, pointing at virtually everything. "Did you see this?" Then he would read the description of whatever it was he wanted me to look at aloud.

James, of course, couldn't read yet and didn't have the attention span to stand in one place and look at anything too long. He just wanted to touch everything and push all the buttons. He kept running ahead of us, while Nick lagged behind.

Meanwhile, Holden had had enough of riding in his stroller. He wanted to run and touch everything, too. All I could think about was how many germs must be lurking on every surface. *Don't be like Leigh*, I told myself. *Let him live a little. Babies learn through touch.* But I knew I'd never forgive myself if he got sick again on my watch, and Leigh would probably never let me forget it either.

Nick must have noticed me starting to stress out because, out of the blue, he suddenly appeared next to Holden's stroller and said, "Hey, want me to take Lil' Man for awhile?"

Holden must have understood, because he stopped slapping the tray of his stroller and reached his arms out toward Nick, a look of desperation in his big, blue puppy dog eyes. He made me feel horrible, like I was holding him hostage.

I sighed. "He wants out of his stroller, but I don't want him touching everything and then putting his hands in his mouth. Leigh'll kill me if I let him get sick."

"I've got him." Nick knelt down to unbuckle Holden, picked him up out of the stroller, and put him on his own shoulders. "There," he said. "Now he can see, but not touch."

Holden clapped his hands, looking delighted to be sitting up so high. I felt less so, but at least I no longer had to contend with a toddler on the verge of a tantrum. "Just don't drop him on his head," I begged Nick, "or Leigh'll kill us both."

Nick laughed. "I told ya, I've got him," he insisted, his hands wrapped around Holden's ankles. "You take the stroller and go ahead with James. We won't be far behind."

"Okay... Let me know when your back starts to hurt," I said and went to find my five-year-old. I was a little hesitant about leaving Holden with Nick at first, but when I

looked back at my son sitting happily on his broad shoulders, I had to admit it was a sweet sight. Watching the way Nick interacted with Holden, pointing at things and telling him about them, I was struck by what a natural he was. He would have made a great dad someday.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who had noticed. When we met up at the end of the exhibit on the Apollo moon missions, an elderly woman approached us. "Excuse me," she said, smiling. "I couldn't help watching your sweet family in there. What beautiful boys you have - and each just the spitting image of one of you."

"Oh, thank you," I said, smiling back at her. Then I glanced at Nick. He was already blushing, clearly embarrassed to have been mistaken for a couple of gay dads.

But it didn't end there. "I want you to know, I'm not close-minded like some other old folks in this state," the woman went on. "I've been following that court case down in Miami, and I hope they get the ban on same-sex marriage overturned so that nice couples like yourselves can enjoy the same rights as the rest of us."

I was about to thank her again and move on when Nick suddenly blurted, "We're not a couple. We're just... brothers."

"Oh!" The woman's eyes widened, as she looked between the two of us.

"Step-brothers," I added, knowing no one would believe Nick and I were actually related. He was tall and fair, while I was small and dark - we looked like total opposites.

"Ohh," the woman said again, nodding. "I see. So sorry if I offended you. Have a nice day!" She walked away in a hurry.

I looked at Nick again. He looked mortified. We both laughed about the encounter, but later I would wonder, what was he so embarrassed about? We'd all made jokes about how Holden looked more like Nick than me, so it couldn't have been the woman mistaking the little blonde boy for his son that bothered him so much. It had to be her assumption that we were a gay couple. That bothered *me*... because, well, weren't we? We'd certainly been living like one all summer. I wasn't going to bring it up in front of the boys, but I made a mental note to ask Nick about it when we were alone.

The opportunity came late that night, after we'd eaten some barbeque, watched some fireworks, and put the boys to bed. Nick and I were chilling on the balcony, the door cracked open behind us in case one of the kids woke up. We had a beautiful view of the empty beach at night, but neither of us were paying much attention to it. He was playing with his phone, and I was looking through the photos I'd taken earlier on mine.

When I came across one of him carrying Holden on his shoulders, I knew I'd found my opening. I texted the photo to him without a word and waited for him to get it.

"Aww," I heard him say a few seconds later and glanced over to see him smiling at his phone. "Cute pic. He looks so happy."

"I know, he loved being up so high," I replied. "You're really good with him, you know. I can see why that woman thought you were his dad."

Nick rolled his eyes. "That woman shouldn't have been sticking her nose in other people's business."

"Don't be mean," I said, frowning at him. "She was just trying to be nice. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "I just hate getting stopped by people when I'm out in public."

"Aren't you used to it by now? It happened all the time in L.A."

"I know. That's why I hate it," he said.

"Come on, it's not like she was paparazzi or even a fan. She had no idea who we were."

He snorted. "Obviously, since she thought we were a gay couple."

"Well, aren't we?" I asked.

His eyes widened, and for a few seconds, he just looked at me, apparently at a loss for words. I recognized the look on his flushed face. It was the same look he'd given me at the space center, a look of embarrassment. "Well... not *openly*," he answered awkwardly. "I mean, how could she tell? Do we *look* like a gay couple?"

"Do gay couples look a certain way?" I countered.

He sighed. "Howie, don't start. Before you go accusing me again, no, I'm not a homophobe. All I'm trying to figure out is why she assumed we were a couple and not just friends or brothers or cousins or something."

"Obviously she noticed the undeniable chemistry between us," I said, winking at him. He just rolled his eyes back. "Why do you even care?" I pressed him. "If you're *that* afraid of people finding out we fool around together, maybe you *are* a homophobe."

His face got even redder. "I am *not*. I just don't wanna get made fun of any more than we already do."

"But that's just it, Nick - *we already do*," I replied. "People have been calling us the 'Backdoor Boys' since the beginning. Maybe it's time to embrace it. We *are* the Backdoor Boys. 'Which Backstreet Boy is gay?' Well, whaddya know - it's Howie!"

"Sure, says the guy who hasn't even come out to his own family." Nick shook his head. "I also noticed your *People* article made no mention of the fact that you got infected from fucking another guy. So don't you go all 'gay pride' on me when you've still got one foot in the closet."

I had to admit, he had a point there. How could I call him out on wanting to keep our relationship a secret when I'd been hiding my feelings for most of my life? But for the first time, I'd found a partner I didn't have to pretend with, who allowed me to truly be myself. I didn't want to hide anymore.

"You're right," I told Nick. "I should tell my family the truth."

"About us?" he asked uncertainly.

"About me. Don't worry, Nick, I won't out you the way you outed me."

His eyes flashed with anger. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Instantly, I regretted saying it. We had done so much healing over the last seven months. Why would I want to re-open old wounds? But since he'd asked, I felt forced to answer. "Well... you did tell the other guys and their wives that we slept together on the cruise."

Nick's face fell. "Shit, man, you're right. I almost forgot about that," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry... I shouldn't have done that."

"It's okay. In a way, I'm glad you did. It wasn't the right time or place, but at least it got the truth out in the open... well, sort of."

"The guys know I didn't mean all that stuff I said," Nick assured me. "It came up last time they were here, when you were in the hospital. I set the record straight."

"Really?" I raised my eyebrows, wondering what, exactly, he had said. "Did you tell them you enjoyed it?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. “No. I blamed it on the alcohol.” He sighed. “I’m sorry, but I’m just not there yet.”

I nodded. “I know. It’s okay. Baby steps, right?”

Nick gave me a grateful smile. “Right.”

“Speaking of babies...” I said, standing up. “I’d better go check on mine.”

When I went inside a few seconds later, I noticed Nick had left the TV on in the living room. He’d been watching a *South Park* marathon on Comedy Central earlier, but in honor of Independence Day, they had started showing the movie *Team America: World Police*. I stopped and stood behind the couch to watch a few seconds of it.

The puppets onscreen were performing in a parody of the Broadway musical *Rent*, singing a song that went, “*Everyone has AIDS! AIDS, AIDS, AIDS!*” I shook my head. I remembered watching this movie with the guys sometime during our *Never Gone* tour and laughing right along with them at this scene. It didn’t seem so funny anymore. The song made me feel sick to my stomach.

I shut off the TV and tiptoed down the hall to my kids’ room. As I walked inside, I could hear the sounds of the boys’ deep, steady breathing. They were both sound asleep. After checking on James, I stopped by Holden’s crib. He was curled up in a ball at one end, his thumb hanging halfway out of his mouth. His blonde curls were plastered to his forehead, and I couldn’t help reaching down to feel his head with the palm of my hand, in case he was running a fever. His skin was warm, but not unusually hot, so I withdrew my hand. I stood there for a few minutes, watching him sleep, and wondered if I would ever stop hating myself for what I’d done to him.

I knew I needed to let go of my guilt at some point in order to reach a state of acceptance... but like Nick, I just wasn’t there yet.

Chapter 64

Nick

On the morning of his forty-first birthday, Howie looked at me across the breakfast bar and announced, “I’m gonna tell them tonight.”

With James and Holden in the room, he didn't say who or what he was telling, but he didn't have to. I understood. We'd been invited to his mom's house that evening for a birthday celebration with his family. All of his siblings would be there, so it was the perfect opportunity for Howie's coming out party. He could tell everyone at once - preferably *after* cake and presents, so that if it didn't go well, we could get the hell out of there.

Truthfully, though, I wasn't too worried about how Howie's family would take the news that he was gay. He had the most supportive family in the world, and I had no doubt that, despite their religious beliefs, they would stand by him. I knew he was nervous, though, especially about his mom's reaction, so I gave him an encouraging smile and said, "Go for it."

He was unusually quiet all that day. I didn't know if he was just busy rehearsing the conversation in his head, or if he was starting to get depressed because summer was almost over and his boys would be leaving soon. Howie's birthday was on a Friday, and we were flying James and Holden back up to their new home in New Jersey the following Monday. After that, the two of us would travel to L.A. to start rehearsals for our fall tour. I was looking forward to getting back to work, and I knew Howie was, too, but it would be hard for him to say goodbye to his sons, not knowing when he'd get to see them again. If I was being honest with myself, I was going to miss those little guys, too.

It had been fun having Howie's kids around all summer. I'd never spent that much time around small children before and wasn't sure I wanted to, but James and Holden were a blast. Sure, James could be whiny when he didn't get his way, and Holden still shit in a diaper, but I let Howie deal with that stuff. He was the Danny Tanner to my Uncle Jesse, after all. I liked being the cool one, the fun one, their crazy Uncle Nick, who could belch on command to make them laugh and liked to eat a bowl of Cookie Crisp cereal with them for breakfast. I built epic sand castles, gave the best horsey rides, and was an expert at hide-and-seek. And even though I would often go to bed with sand in my butt crack from letting them bury me on the beach and wake up with my back aching from hauling them around the house on my hands and knees, it had been one of the best summers of my life. I was sad to see it end.

Hanging out with James and Holden had made me realize I might have made a good dad someday, under different circumstances. A part of me regretted waiting so long to propose to Lauren; if we'd gotten married sooner, we could have started a family before I got infected. But then, I reminded myself, we might have ended up in the same situation as Howie and Leigh. Watching him struggle through all the drama of the divorce settlement and custody arrangement and separation from his kids, I didn't envy

him that at all. But just the fact that he was a father made me jealous, mostly because I would never have what he had. It wouldn't have bothered me before... but now I knew what I was missing.

As I watched James and Holden "help" Howie open presents at his parents' house that night, I thought, *At least he'll have those two to take care of him when he gets old. I'll probably die alone.* I didn't know why I was being so negative all of a sudden. Maybe Howie's nerves or depression or whatever it was had started rubbing off on me.

When Mama D took the little helpers with her into the kitchen to get his cake ready, Howie decided it was time for his big announcement. He cleared his throat loudly and looked around the living room. His brother, John, and sisters, Pollyanna and Angie, were all there. When he cleared his throat, they looked his way.

"I have something to tell you guys," Howie said in a low voice. He glanced toward the kitchen, probably to make sure his mom and kids were still out of earshot. "I don't have a lot of time, so I'm just gonna say it."

I cringed at that introduction; he made it sound like he was dying or something. My eyes panned the room, taking in everyone's expressions. They all looked very serious. "He's not dying," I interjected quickly, before Howie could continue. "It's nothing bad."

Howie looked over at me in surprise. Then it seemed to dawn on him what he'd said, and he started to laugh. "Oh - no!" he said. "Sorry, it's nothing to do with my health. I'm doing fine, as far as that goes." The mood seemed to lighten some, as the others let out relieved chuckles.

"So what's going on, Howie?" Pollyanna pressed.

Howie took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders. "Okay, so you already know I was unfaithful to Leigh. I had a one-night stand last summer; that's how I got HIV."

His siblings nodded slowly, appearing uncomfortable again.

Howie looked up at the ceiling, avoiding eye contact with them. "What you don't know," he went on, "is that it was with another guy. I'm... I'm gay."

A few seconds passed in which nobody spoke. I saw Angie and Pollyanna exchange glances. Then, suddenly, they both burst out laughing. Howie looked at them in surprise.

“Honey, we know,” said Angie, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. “We’ve known, or at least suspected, since you were a kid. But then you grew up and became a Backstreet Boy and started dating a bunch of women, and we thought, ‘Well, maybe not.’”

That was when I started cracking up, too. “Ha!” I shouted, pointing at Howie. “Dude, you’ve been so worried about telling them this big secret, and they knew the whole freaking time!”

“Well, *I* didn’t know,” admitted John, shrugging, “but whatever, bro. It doesn’t matter to me whether you’re gay or straight. I still love you the same.”

Howie smiled, tears swimming in his big, brown eyes. “Thanks,” he whispered, trying to discreetly wipe them away.

Pollyanna got up and gave him a hug. “Thanks for confiding in us,” she said, patting his back. “That must have taken a lot of courage.”

Howie sighed and shook his head. “Not as much as telling Mama will take.”

“Aww, Howie, you know there’s nothing in this world that would change the way Mama feels about you,” Pollyanna assured him. “You’ve always been her favorite.”

“What?” He chuckled and shook his head. “I am not her favorite.”

“Um, yeah, you are,” John said. “You’re the baby of the family *and* the famous one. You can do no wrong in her eyes.”

“Just tell her,” Angie encouraged Howie. “I bet she’ll take it better than you think.”

“Tell me what?” We all looked up in surprise as Howie’s mother, Paula, appeared in the doorway. She looked around the room, frowning. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Mama,” Howie said quickly. “I do want to tell you something, but it can wait until after we have dessert. How’s that cake coming along, anyway?”

“I just came to tell you we’re ready,” Mama D replied with a smile.

Howie was lucky to have a family like this, I thought, as we all sat down at the dining room table. I couldn’t remember the last time the entire Carter clan had gathered to celebrate one of our birthdays. Probably not since we were kids. And yet, here was

Howie, turning forty-one, and his sweet old mother still made his birthday cake, complete with forty-one candles burning on top. We even sang “Happy Birthday” as she carried it slowly into the darkened room and set it on the table in front of him.

“Make a wish,” she said.

While Howie thought of his wish, I looked around the table at all of his family members watching him, their faces shining with anticipation. I remembered sitting with them in the waiting room at Cedars-Sinai, wondering whether or not Howie would live to see another birthday. The fact that he was here to celebrate his forty-first was nothing short of miraculous. As Howie filled his lungs with air, his face aglow in the flickering candlelight, and leaned forward to blow out his candles, I made a wish of my own: that I would never have to face the fear of losing him again.

After we’d made a considerable dent in the cake, Howie asked his mother to join him out on the patio, while Pollyanna and Angie went into the kitchen to start cleaning up. John was keeping the kids entertained, so I decided to help with kitchen duty by clearing the table.

When I walked into the kitchen, carrying a stack of dessert plates, Angie and Polly were whispering to each other. They stopped abruptly when they saw me, and the awkward looks on their faces made it obvious that whatever they were saying, they didn’t want me to overhear. To be polite, I pretended not to notice. “Hey, where do you want these?” I asked.

“Oh, thanks, Nick!” Angie exclaimed. “You can just put those on the counter. We’ll load the dishwasher.”

“Okay.” As I set a stack of plates down next to the sink, I snuck a glance out the window overlooking the patio outside. Howie and his mom were sitting side by side on a bench in the backyard. I couldn’t see their faces, but I could tell by the way he was turned toward her that he was in the process of telling her.

“So, Nick,” said Pollyanna suddenly, startling me. I spun around to see her standing behind me with a big smile on her face. “Sorry for being nosy, but I just have to ask: are you and Howie together?”

My heart leaped into my throat. “What?” I said, forcing myself to laugh. “Why would you think that? Just because he’s gay doesn’t mean-”

“Oh, come on, Nick, you’ve been living with him for, like, three or four months now,” Polly interrupted. “Did you think we wouldn’t notice how long it’s been?” She winked, looking a lot like Howie. “And you obviously knew about his big announcement before he told us, which makes me wonder. No offense, but why would he tell you before he told us? I know you guys are like brothers, but he really *is* our brother.”

“He seems a lot happier lately,” added Angie. “I haven’t seen him this happy in a long time... certainly not since Leigh left.”

“It’s just ‘cause the kids are here,” I said, shrugging.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Pollyanna. “But we think there’s something more to it than that. So...?” She raised her eyebrows inquisitively.

I wanted to deny it. I wanted to lie and tell them they were delusional, that I was just trying to be a good friend and help Howie get back in shape for the tour. But then I thought, *Why?* It wasn’t like I was dealing with the media or a pair of prying fans. These were Howie’s sisters. I’d seen the way they’d reacted to his admission with nothing but love, acceptance, and a surprising level of intuitiveness. So what was I so afraid of?

“Okay, fine,” I said finally, throwing my arms in the air. “Yes... we’re together.”

Together. It really was the best word for what Howie and I were. We still hadn’t defined our relationship, hadn’t put any labels on what we were to each other. I didn’t feel comfortable calling him my “boyfriend” or thinking of myself as his. But “together” accurately described how we’d spent the summer, enjoying each other’s company.

Pollyanna’s eyes lit up. “Wow, did we call that or what?” she said, grinning at Angie

“We had a feeling,” Angie agreed. “Something seemed different between you two. So is that why you ended your engagement?”

I didn’t want to answer any more of their questions; the conversation was quickly getting way too personal. I had known Howie’s sisters for twenty-some years, but it wasn’t like I knew them well. I wished I could escape, but I saw no way out. After a few seconds’ hesitation, I shook my head. “No... that had nothing to do with Howie.” It wasn’t entirely true, but I didn’t want Angie and Polly thinking I’d left Lauren to be with their brother.

“Oh.” They exchanged glances again. I turned away to take another look out the kitchen window. Howie and his mom were hugging now. Apparently she’d taken the news well, just like Howie’s siblings had said she would. I smiled, but the sense of relief I felt was short-lived. “So,” I heard Angie say, “does that mean Howie’s suicide attempt had nothing to do with you?”

I turned around and looked at her incredulously, at a loss for words.

“We’re not accusing you of anything,” Pollyanna added quickly. “We were just wondering what you knew. He never really gave us a good explanation of why he did it, you know.”

“Why would you think it had something to do with me?” I asked. My heart was racing, and my throat felt tight. I remembered rushing over to Howie’s house on New Year’s Eve after he’d left his goodbyes on my voicemail. The memory of finding him the way I had, unconscious and barely breathing, still haunted me. If Lauren and I had waited any longer to check on him, Howie would have been dead by the time we broke down his door.

“You were the one he called that night. Not Leigh. Not one of us. He called you,” said Polly. “Why?”

I shrugged. “I dunno, maybe it was a cry for help. Maybe he called someone he knew was nearby because wanted somebody to find him.”

“Maybe?” Angie raised her eyebrows. “Does that mean you don’t know either?”

I could have kept denying everything they asked, but it didn’t seem like they were going to stop grilling me anytime soon. Clearly, they’d had these questions for awhile. I supposed it was time to swallow my pride and give them some answers. Sighing, I said, “No... I do know. He called me to tell me he was sorry.”

Angie’s eyes narrowed. “Sorry for what?”

I took a deep breath before answering. “For infecting me.”

Her eyes widened again. Pollyanna looked equally shocked. “With HIV?” she asked. “You have it, too?”

I nodded and left it at that, knowing they could figure out how it had happened without me providing all the details. Some things were better kept private.

“I’m so sorry, Nick,” said Polly, and Angie nodded in agreement. “We knew something was up when Howie was in the hospital, but we had no idea that was why you didn’t want to visit.”

Here I thought I had hidden my true feelings from Howie’s family so well, and turns out, they’d suspected something was going on with us the whole time. I guess I wasn’t as good of an actor as I’d thought.

“Yeah... I was having a pretty hard time with it,” I admitted. “Things are better now.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Angie, smiling. “We’re glad Howie has you in his life. You guys are great together.”

I smiled back, my heart settling into its normal rhythm as I started to relax. “Thanks. I’m glad to have him in mine, too.”

“So, Mama D took it well?” I asked Howie later that night, after we’d gotten home and put the boys to bed. We were sitting on his balcony, enjoying a nightcap of sparkling grape juice. It was the first opportunity we’d had to talk privately since he’d taken his mother outside to tell her. When they came back in, he’d given his siblings and me a smile and a thumbs up, but he didn’t want to say too much when James and Holden were within earshot.

“I wouldn’t say ‘well,’ but better than I thought,” said Howie. “She cried... but then she told me she loves me and just wants me to be happy.”

“Sounds like acceptance to me,” I offered, taking a sip of my drink.

He nodded. “I think it’s the best I could have hoped for, considering the generation she’s from and the beliefs she grew up with. I’d like to think Dad would have reacted the same way.” He glanced up at the sliver of moon just visible in the sky over our heads.

It always made me feel guilty to hear Howie talk about his father. I knew he would give anything to spend another day with his dad, who had died of cancer six years ago. Meanwhile, my dad was still alive, and I rarely spoke to him. I knew I should while I still could, but the thought of having the same conversation with my dad that Howie’d had with his mom made me break out in a cold sweat. I had distanced myself from my family for a reason. They weren’t like Howie’s family.

“I’m sure he would have,” I assured Howie, reaching over to pat his arm. Then, eager to change the subject, I added, “Your sisters know about us.”

“I know,” he said, smiling over at me. “Polly told me she and Angie got it out of you.”

“Man, those two could be police interrogators,” I said, shaking my head. “They wouldn’t stop asking me questions.”

He laughed. “You should have had your lawyer present.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t told him either!”

Howie smiled and took a sip from his glass. “It was brave of you to tell them, Nick. Not just about us, but your status, too.”

I shrugged. “They were asking me about... about New Year’s Eve. About why you did it. They knew I would know, that I was involved in it somehow.”

“I’m so sorry that I called you,” said Howie, sighing.

“I’m not,” I replied quickly. “I’m glad you did, and thank god I got your message in time, or you wouldn’t have made it.”

He nodded. “No, I know. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m grateful to you for saving me, Nicky, you know that. I just meant I was sorry for involving you at all. That was the only part of the story I couldn’t explain to them - why, of all the people I could have called, I chose you. I never really told them why. I was trying to protect you.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, “but now that they know we’re together, it was probably time for them to know the truth.”

“Well, thanks for sparing me from having to tell them *that*, too,” said Howie. “Like I said... it was very brave of you.”

I shook my head. “You’ve the brave one. You came out to your family, you went public with your status in *People*, and, dude, you had a freaking *liver transplant*. Meanwhile, I freak out every time someone gets too close to finding out the truth about me.”

“You didn’t tonight,” Howie pointed out. “It takes time, Nick. You have to accept the truth yourself before you’ll be ready to tell other people.”

I nodded, knowing he was right. Angie and Pollyanna had seemed so grateful to me for being there for Howie these last few months, helping him get back in shape and get on with his life, but they didn't know how much Howie had helped me, too. I was in a much better place, both physically and emotionally, than I had been at the beginning of summer. This was the happiest and healthiest I'd felt since finding out I was HIV-positive, and I had Howie to thank for that.

His words reminded me of something - the birthday gift I had yet to give him. I'd been waiting all day for the perfect time, when the two of us could be together in private. "Hey, I have something for you," I said, standing up suddenly. "Come inside with me."

Looking at me curiously, Howie got up and followed me into the condo. We went into my room, where I turned on the light and shut the door. Howie sat down on the edge of the bed, as I opened the top drawer of the bedside table and took out a picture frame, wrapped in purple paper. "Here," I said, handing it to him. "Happy birthday."

"Hey, thanks, man." Howie slit open the wrapping paper and slowly pulled it away from the frame. I watched his face as he studied the piece of paper inside. It wasn't a picture, but a page out of my notebook, and on it were the words to a song I'd been working on, scribbled in my own sloppy handwriting. It was a simple gift, but one I hoped he would appreciate, once he read the lyrics and realized I'd written them for him. I saw his eyes widen as they moved back and forth across the page, a smile slowly forming on his lips. When he finally looked up again, I was shocked to find his eyes shining with tears. "You wrote this?" he asked hoarsely.

I nodded.

"Wow..." He shook his head. "Who would have guessed the most romantic gift I've ever gotten was a love poem written by Nick Carter?"

I felt my face flush. It sounded so gay when he said it like that, but I was glad he liked it. "It's a song," I said.

"Really?" He was still looking at me all dewy-eyed. "Will you sing it for me?"

I hesitated. "I haven't worked out all the chords yet." I had been playing my guitar whenever he and kids were out of the house, rehearsing the song in secret. It was still in pretty rough shape, though. I wasn't ready to sing it in front of anyone just yet, not even Howie. Especially not Howie.

“That’s okay,” he said encouragingly. “You can sing it à capella. I just want to hear the tune. Please?”

I sighed. “Okay.” I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and opened my mouth to sing.

*“I take back what I said. I didn’t mean a word of it.
I was all in my head; I was too afraid to let you in.
When you opened your heart up, should’ve done the same thing.
You told me you loved me; I sat quiet.
I don’t wanna say it till I really feel it,
So just give me a while.”*

*“Cause I’m halfway there to loving you, so wait there for me,
And there’s nothing that I wouldn’t do to be where you be,
But I can’t say those words right now that you want to hear.
I’ll meet you at the finish line. I just need a little more time,
But I will be there.”*

When I opened my eyes again, Howie had a huge smile on his face. “That was beautiful, Nick,” he said. “You’re not gonna sing the rest?”

I shrugged. “Maybe once I can do it with my guitar. I mean, you get the idea, right? It’s just weird singing in front of someone by myself, without any accompaniment or harmony. I’m not used to it.”

“Well, maybe I can help you add in some harmony,” Howie suggested, winking at me. “Seriously, Nicky, I love it. I love *you*. If you’re not ready to say it back yet, that’s okay, but I’m going to keep saying it. I love you.” He stood up and wrapped his arms around me. “I love you,” he repeated, planting a kiss on my lips. “I love you.”

I wished I could be as open as Howie was, but I still wasn’t there. “Thanks,” I whispered, hugging him back. “Happy birthday.”

Chapter 65

Howie

Having Nick in my life was the only thing that made saying goodbye to my boys again bearable. When I hugged them both and sent them running into the arms of their mother at the airport in New Jersey, he was there to walk me to the gate to wait for our connecting flight to L.A. to begin boarding.

I was glad we were going back to work. The upcoming tour gave me something to look forward to, something to take my mind off missing my children. Leaving them for work was a part of my life I was used to. It made it easier for me to pretend everything was back to normal.

Nick was certainly acting like we'd gone back to "normal." He was careful not to show any sign of affection toward me while we were in the airport, and once we boarded the plane, he put on his headphones and pretty much ignored me the whole flight. I had hoped that his telling my sisters about us would help him feel more comfortable coming out to other people, but I could tell from his body language that he was going to stay in the closet for as long as he could. He felt safer there. It bothered me that Nick acted completely different toward me in public than he did in private, but at the same time, I understood. After all, I wasn't publicly "out" yet, either, and had no interest in appearing on another *People* cover anytime soon.

When we landed at LAX, we went to baggage claim to wait for our luggage. There, we were approached by a pair of paparazzi. "Hey, Nick... Howie... how's it goin', guys?" one of them asked, as if we were old friends, recording us with a video camera while his partner snapped photos.

I forced a smile onto my face and replied, "It's going good, thanks." Dealing with paparazzi was one of the worst parts of flying into LAX or living in Los Angeles, period, but I'd learned over the years that it was best to be polite and answer their questions as briefly as possible. If you tried to ignore them, they would just harass you more, and if you were rude, then your bad behavior would end up on TMZ for the whole world to see.

"How's your health, man?" the cameraman pressed.

I looked hopefully at the baggage carousel, which had started to turn. *Just a few more minutes, and we'll be out of here*, I told myself. "Fine, thanks," I said. "Feeling good."

"Good to hear, bro, good to hear! And how about you, Nick? Any truth to those rumors that you're also HIV-positive?"

"Nope," said Nick as shortly as possible, refusing to look at either camera.

“Really? How about the rumors that you split with your fiancée? No one’s seen the two of you out together in months.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to listen to rumors?” Nick asked, scowling.

I could hear the annoyance in his voice and see a muscle twitching in his jaw, and I thought, *Come on, Nicky, keep your cool.*

The paparazzo laughed. “We make a living off rumors, kid.”

“Why don’t you try getting a real job then?” Nick fired back.

The baggage carousel was starting to spit out suitcases. I prayed ours would be among the first to hit the belt so we could get out of there before Nick and these assholes got into a real confrontation.

“Good idea! Maybe we’ll start our own boyband!” The paparazzo looked over at his partner and laughed some more. “What’s the latest with the Backstreet Boys, anyway?”

“We’re going back on tour next month,” I answered quickly, before Nick could get another word in. “We’ve got rehearsals starting tomorrow.”

“There’s our stuff,” said Nick suddenly, making a beeline for the baggage carousel. He hoisted our suitcases off it, one by one, and handed them to me.

“Good luck with the tour, guys!” one of the paparazzi called to us as we dragged our bags hurriedly toward the exit.

“Why can’t the FAA ban people like them from hanging out in airports?” Nick grumbled, as we got into a cab.

“It’s a public place, Nick,” I said, buckling my seatbelt. “I know they’re obnoxious, but they’re not doing anything illegal.”

“That’s my point. They should make it illegal!”

“I don’t disagree. But until they do, try to be nice, okay? Otherwise, they’ll make you look bad.”

Nick mumbled something unintelligible in return, turning toward the window as the cab pulled away from the curb. I looked out my window as well, watching as we merged into

a long line of cars waiting to leave the airport. “Welcome home,” I said sarcastically, when we passed the giant letters L-A-X. Nick just snorted. Although we were both ready to go back on tour, neither of us were all that excited about returning to L.A. It had been nice to get away from it all for a while: the paparazzi, the traffic, the pretentiousness, the smog. I missed the Space Coast already.

“Where to?” the driver asked, and I gave him my address. Since Nick had apparently let Lauren keep his condo, he had nowhere else to stay in L.A.

Our living arrangement was more than fine with me, but I couldn’t help wonder what the other guys would think about the fact that we’d been cohabitating for the last four months. Would they think it was weird? Would they wonder about us, the way my sisters had? I didn’t know how long we’d be able to keep our relationship a secret once rehearsals started. The five of us knew each other so well, it would be hard to hide something that big from the other three. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to hide it, but I had a feeling Nick would. We hadn’t discussed it yet, but I knew we needed to get on the same page before we met with the rest of the group.

I brought it up with Nick that night. “Hey, what are we going to tell the guys?” I asked, as we sat outside by the pool, enjoying the warm, evening air. The view from my backyard wasn’t as beautiful as the beach by Cape Canaveral, but the palm trees and mountains still made for a pretty sight.

“About what?” was Nick’s response.

“Gee, what do you think? About *us*,” I replied. “Are we gonna tell them we’re together?”

Nick looked at me like I was crazy and started shaking his head. “No way. Bad idea, dude.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Are you kidding?” Nick exclaimed. “Because - it’d be bad for the group!”

“How?”

“Well... I mean, the five of us have always had this brotherly relationship, right? But if two of us take it to another level - turn the bromance into a romance - it ruins the whole group dynamic.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Too late, Nick, we’ve already *done* that.”

“Yeah, but *they* don’t know that,” he pointed out. “What they don’t know won’t hurt them, right?”

“You really think we’re gonna be able to hide it from them? We’re talking about Brian, Kevin, and AJ here. They know us better than just about anyone.”

“We have to,” Nick insisted, “for the good of the group.”

I just shook my head.

“I mean, what if we have a falling out?” he added. “What if we ‘break up’?” He actually made air quotes with his fingers, as if we weren’t a real couple who could have a real break-up. “Do we really wanna bring that drama into the group? Think about other bands whose members have dated, like Fleetwood Mac... and No Doubt...”

“Bad examples,” I replied. “Both of those bands outlasted the relationship drama.”

“Oh.” Nick frowned. “Yeah, I guess you’re right...”

I was frowning, too. “You sound like you’re arguing against us having a relationship at all, rather than just telling the guys we’re together.”

His mouth fell open. “That’s... that’s not what I’m saying,” he stammered. “I like being with you; I just-”

“You’re too embarrassed to admit it to anyone else,” I finished for him. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You’re afraid. You’re afraid of being judged, being made fun of. You’re still so damn concerned about what other people think of you, you can’t just be comfortable in your own skin.”

“Who are you to talk?” he retorted, scowling at me. “You stayed in the closet for forty fucking years, Howie! You dated all kinds of women and even married one just so nobody would know you were gay. Yet you’re telling me *I’m* the one who cares too much about what other people think?”

I understood why he thought I was being hypocritical. “I’m only saying that because I know how it feels,” I admitted. “You’re right, Nick. I’ve been there, too. I didn’t want anyone to know. I still wouldn’t be comfortable telling the whole world. But AJ, Kevin, and Brian? They’re our brothers. We should be able to tell them anything.”

“Yeah,” Nick sighed, “I know, but... I’m just not ready yet.”

I wanted to argue that *I* wasn’t ready when he’d outed me at Q’s visitation, but fighting would only make things worse. I knew I couldn’t push him too hard. He had come a long way in a short amount of time, but forcing him to reveal what he saw as this deep, dark secret before he was ready would only damage our relationship and ruin his trust in me. Just like before, I had to follow Nick’s lead. That way, he’d know I was behind him when he was ready to take that next step.

“I understand,” I said. “We don’t have to tell them now.”

Nick looked relieved. “Thanks, man,” he muttered. Then he abruptly stood up. “I’m goin’ for a swim.”

“What, now? It’s like nine o’clock,” I said, looking at the dark sky. I could barely see the mountains in the distance anymore.

“So?” said Nick, as he stripped off his shirt. “I like swimming at night.”

“You also like skinny-dipping, apparently,” I added, raising my eyebrows, as he took off his pants, too.

He grinned. “Aren’t you gonna join me?”

I knew Nick was just trying to avoid any more conversation about coming out to the guys, but how could I resist him when he was standing naked in front of me? “Of course,” I said, climbing to my feet. I started to take off my clothes, but when I noticed Nick turned toward the pool, not paying any attention, I saw a rare opportunity and took advantage. I ran up behind him, pressed my hands into his back, and gave him a firm push into the pool.

Nick fell in with a huge splash and came up spluttering and laughing at the same time. “Damn it, Howie!” he exclaimed, wiping the water out of his eyes.

I snickered. “You should’ve seen that coming. You’ve done it enough times to me.”

“True dat,” said Nick, swimming up to the side of the pool. He folded his arms over the edge and grinned up at me. “At least the water’s warm.”

“Is it?” I took a tentative step toward the edge, but before I could dip a toe in, Nick lunged out of the water like a breaching shark, grabbed the front of my t-shirt, and pulled me in, too.

“Hahaha!” he cackled as I surfaced, coughing. “Howie, Howie, Howie... when will you learn? Never try to mess with the master.”

“You got me,” I admitted and shook my head. “You could have at least waited until I took my shirt off, though.” I peeled off the soaked t-shirt and tossed it onto the patio.

Nick shrugged. “I didn’t wanna wait. C’mere.” I swam closer, and his arms encircled my neck. I thought he was going to dunk me under the water, but he kissed me instead. “See, why can’t we just keep this between us?” he whispered. “Let it be our little secret?”

I was tired of keeping secrets. Secrets had ruined my marriage, fractured my family, and threatened my friendship with Nick. But I wasn’t going to argue with him anymore, especially not now. Nick knew it, too. He was not only a master prankster, but a master manipulator; he knew just how to use his sex appeal to get exactly what he wanted.

“Sure, Nick,” I said. “It can stay between us. No one else needs to know.”

But in my head, I kept coming back to the same thought I’d had earlier. Keeping our relationship a secret from my kids had been relatively easy. Hiding it from the guys was going to be a whole lot harder.

Chapter 66

Nick

As much as I’d enjoyed my summer in Florida, I was looking forward to going back on tour. The day after Howie and I flew to L.A., we met AJ, Kevin, and Brian for our first rehearsal.

It had been almost nine months since our last show together, and we were all a little rusty with the choreography. But dancing is a lot like riding a bike: even if you haven’t done it in awhile, it comes back to you quickly. Once we heard the music, muscle memory kicked in, and we were able to remember most of our moves. It helped that we

had worked a lot of old, familiar routines into our show, so we spent most of our time rehearsing the newer songs.

The last number we ran through before breaking for lunch was “Love Somebody.” This had been one of my favorites to perform on the first leg of the tour. I was a bit biased, of course, having co-written it, but it was a fun, upbeat song that always got a good reaction out of the crowd. The choreography was simple, too: point, step, touch, repeat, every time we sang the chorus. I liked to do my own little dance on the verses, which the guys made fun of me for, but the fans seemed to love. I didn’t feel much like dancing to it this time, though.

As soon as I heard the jangly intro of the music, my heart dropped into my stomach. It was my first time listening to it since I’d broken up with Lauren, who had been the inspiration behind my lyrics: *“You’re the reason why cavemen drew on the wall, the reason why after every summer we fall. You’re the reason I never wanna sleep at night, ‘cause nothing I can dream is better than you by my side.”* Hearing those words made me miss her so much.

“You know that I... woo-who... love somebody, love somebody...” I watched the five of us point and step-touch in the mirror on the wall. Howie was in the middle, standing next to me. He caught my eye and winked as we sang the chorus. *“I’m so in love, I can die right now and be fine; I need you tonight. You-you-you know that I... woo-who... love somebody, love somebody...”*

Feeling my face flush, I shook my head a fraction of an inch. *Quit flirting, Howie*, I thought furiously, hoping he’d get the message. He couldn’t keep doing stuff like that in front of the other guys, or they’d figure out something was going on with us. It made me wonder, though: who had Howie had in mind when he wrote the song with me?

When we finished with “Love Somebody,” it was lunchtime. Brian left right away to meet up with Leighanne and Baylee, but the rest of us lingered in the rehearsal room for a few minutes. I was just about to suggest that we all go out to lunch together when AJ asked, “Hey Nick, wanna grab a bite with me?”

I noticed he didn’t extend the same invitation to Howie or Kevin, which was weird. Before I could answer, Kevin looked at Howie and said, “There’s a new Chinese place that just opened down the street. You wanna check it out?”

“Oh, yeah, sounds good,” said Howie, giving me an awkward look.

I just shrugged and told AJ, "Sure." So the four of us split into twos and went our separate ways for lunch. AJ took me to a vegan cafe, which I thought was an odd choice for a burger-and-fries kind of guy. "You giving up meat, bro?" I asked, as we sat down at a table on the sun-soaked patio. It was a warm day, but the umbrella overhead gave us some shade.

AJ laughed. "Hell no. I've just been trying to eat healthier and get back in shape for the tour."

"Ah." I opened my menu, scanning the options. "I was afraid Lauren had bribed you to make sure I only eat from her list of immune-boosting superfoods or something."

"What?" AJ said, laughing again. When I looked up from the menu, I saw that he already had his phone out and appeared to be sending a text. He finished and set his phone facedown on the table. "I'm not the friggin' health food police. You're a grown-ass man, Nick. You can eat whatever the hell you want."

That sounded more like the AJ I knew, but still, something seemed off. I realized what was going on a few minutes later, when he suddenly said, "Speak of the devil..." and started waving at somebody behind me. I turned around to see a smiling Rochelle strolling across the patio towards us, holding Ava on her hip, followed by none other than my ex-fiancée.

To her credit, Lauren looked just as surprised to see me as I was to see her. I could tell AJ and Rochelle were acting, though, when they exclaimed what a coincidence it was that we should end up at the same cafe for lunch. "We were enjoying our girls' day out, weren't we, Monkee?" said Rochelle, smiling down at her daughter. "But I guess we could join Daddy for lunch. You don't mind if we crash your lunch date, do you, Nick?" She batted her eyes sweetly at me, until I had no choice but to pull out one of the extra chairs for her.

"Nope," I said shortly. "Go right ahead."

"Thanks! Lo, you sit there. Ava and I are going to go potty first. If the waitress comes, will you order me a water with lemon?"

"Sure," said Lauren, sitting down next to me.

At the same time, AJ jumped out. "I actually need to go potty - I mean, use the bathroom - too."

Lauren snorted with laughter as he scurried away with the rest of his family, leaving the two of us sitting alone at the table. “I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head at me. “I swear, I didn’t know they were going to set us up. Ro invited me out for a girls’ day with Ava. We got mani-pedis this morning, and we were supposed to go shopping this afternoon. I knew nothing about this part.”

“Me neither,” I said, “but now I know why AJ wanted to come to a vegan cafe so bad.”

She smiled. “They’re not very good at the whole ‘stealth’ thing, are they?”

“I dunno, they got us both here, didn’t they?” I countered.

“Good point,” Lauren admitted. “How long do you think they’re gonna leave us sitting here by ourselves?”

“Knowing AJ, he probably took Rochelle and Ava to the nearest McDonald’s to get some ‘real food.’”

She laughed and shook her head. “Yuck. This sounds a lot better to me,” she said, looking at the menu. “Since we’re here anyway, should we go ahead and order? You must be hungry, after dancing all morning.”

“How’d you know I’d been dancing all morning?” I asked, narrowing my eyes suspiciously at her.

She blushed. “Well, Ro did say you guys were starting rehearsals today. That’s why she asked me to do something, since AJ wasn’t going to be around. I think she gets bored at home, trying to keep Ava entertained all day by herself.”

“Yeah, I could see that. Toddlers just wanna do the same stuff over and over again.”

Lauren looked at me curiously, raising an eyebrow, as if to ask, *How would you know?*

Smiling self-consciously, I said, “I spent some time in Florida with Howie, you know, and James and Holden were there for the summer. I’ve learned a lot about little kids.”

“Well, I’m impressed,” she said, smiling. “How is Holden doing, anyway?”

“He’s great, actually. Other than having to make him take medicine twice a day, you would never even know he was sick. He’s a happy little guy.”

“That’s good to hear. And how about you?” she asked. “How have you been?”

“Better,” I said. “A lot better than last time you saw me.”

“That’s an understatement,” she replied, shaking her head. “You were so sick... You scared the shit out of me, Nick.”

I felt guilty for inadvertently making her fly all the way to Tennessee to check up on me. Thank God she had, though, or who knows what would have happened. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I know I was in pretty bad shape then, but I’m in a much better place now, physically and mentally.”

She nodded. “I can tell. You look good. You look healthy.”

I smiled. “Thanks. So do you.” She had gained some weight, but I didn’t mind her with a little extra meat on her bones. I guess she was no longer worried about maintaining her ‘wedding body.’ It didn’t matter, though. She would always be beautiful to me.

Lauren blushed and ducked her head, allowing a few loose waves of her hair to fall in her face. “Thanks.”

Once we ran out of small talk, an awkward silence settled over the table. We both stared at our menus, taking an insanely long time to decide what we wanted. Where was the waitress, anyway? I wondered if AJ had told her to wait awhile before taking our orders so we’d be forced to talk to each other. Would he and Rochelle really just leave us there?

Watching Lauren turn her menu over, I noticed she was no longer wearing her engagement ring. Her left hand looked naked without it. I’d thought it would make me feel better to see such a clear sign that she was moving on, but instead, it hurt. Even though I was reasonably happy and certainly less sexually frustrated with Howie, I still missed her. Seeing her without the ring only confirmed that, no matter what AJ and Rochelle were thinking, Lauren and I were never getting back together.

She must have caught me staring at her hand because she suddenly said, “Do you want it back?”

Her voice startled me out of my own thoughts. “What?”

“The ring. Do you want it back?”

“Oh... no,” I said, shaking my head. “No, you keep it. Or sell it or something. Either way, it’s yours, so do whatever you want with it.”

She nodded. “Okay. You can have the condo back, though. I moved in with my dad until I can find a new place to live.”

I set my menu down, suddenly not hungry anymore. My heart had started beating faster, and my stomach felt sick. It was really happening, I realized. She was moving on without me. “You didn’t have to do that,” I said. “I told you, it’s yours to keep.”

“But it’s *not* mine, Nick. Everything’s in your name, and I’m not gonna let you keep paying for a place you’re no longer living in so I can stay there for free. Despite what your fans may think, I’m not a gold-digger.”

“I know you’re not,” I replied, frowning. “We can transfer it to your name, if that’s what you want.”

She shook her head. “You know I can’t afford that. If you don’t want to live there anymore, then you should sell it.”

I should have known she wouldn’t want to mooch off me for long. That was one of the things I loved about Lauren: she was an independent woman. She didn’t need me. I didn’t need her either... or, at least, that’s what I tried to tell myself.

After what felt like an hour but was probably only about five minutes, the McLean family finally rejoined us at the table. “Sorry about that,” said Rochelle, sliding into the seat across from me. “Did you two have a chance to catch up?”

Lauren and I looked at each other. I started laughing first, and she quickly joined in. “You guys can drop the act,” she said to Rochelle. “We know you set us up.”

AJ and Rochelle exchanged sheepish glances. “We just wanted to get you talking again,” AJ admitted. “Did it work?”

I looked at Lauren again. “Well... we did talk,” I said with a shrug, “so... yeah, I guess it worked.” I smiled at her, and she gave me a tiny smile in return. It didn’t quite reach her eyes, though; I could still see a shadow of the pain I’d put her through.

As my eyes dropped to her bare left hand, I started to wonder if Lauren was really over it or just trying to hide the fact that she wasn’t. I remembered the word AJ had used to

describe her after our breakup: *devastated*. She may have moved out, but she hadn't moved on from me yet.

Chapter 67

Howie

After a week of rehearsals in L.A., we flew into New York a few days early for a final production rehearsal with our full stage setup before our first show in Wantagh. It had been almost a year since we'd performed on that stage, but once we hit the risers, it felt like we had never left.

We ran the whole show before breaking for lunch. I was sweating buckets by that point, and the last thing I felt like doing was eating, but I knew I needed to refuel in order to get through the afternoon. There was a catered spread set out for us backstage, so I followed the other guys through the line and filled my plate.

"How ya doin', D?" Brian asked, as the five of us sat down to eat in our dressing room. The others looked over at me. We were all still soaked with sweat and breathing hard, but seeing as how I was the only one who'd had major surgery since our last show, I attracted the most concern.

"I'm exhausted," I admitted, "but otherwise okay." I'd just had a checkup with my transplant doctor while in L.A., and he'd said everything looked good with my liver. He had even lowered my dosage of anti-rejection drugs a little to allow my immune system to strengthen some, since I would be around so many different people during the tour. The last thing I needed was to get sick again.

Brian nodded. "I know the feeling, man. You remember how I'd be sucking oxygen backstage between sets those first few shows after my heart surgery. It just takes awhile to build up your stamina again."

"I don't know how you did it," I said, shaking my head. "You only took, like, two months off after your surgery, right? It's been nine since mine, and I'm still feeling it."

"Yeah, but not by choice," Brian replied with a grim smile. "Besides, I just had an organ repaired. You had one *replaced*. I think you've got me beat, man."

“Can we talk about something else while we’re eating, please?” asked AJ, making a face as he looked down at the barbecued chicken wings on his plate.

Kevin chuckled. “AJ’s gettin’ squeamish, y’all.”

“I’m with AJ,” Nick spoke up. “No more medical talk at lunch.”

“And here I was about to ask how you were doing next, Nick,” said Brian, glancing his way.

Nick shrugged, his face reddening. “Bro, I’m good,” he replied quickly, casually. I could tell he didn’t want to talk about his own health issues either. In fact, over the past few months, Nick had gone from being overly paranoid about his HIV to pretending it didn’t exist. He still took his medicine every morning and night like he was supposed to, but beyond that, he barely acknowledged it. He and I hardly ever spoke about it anymore, which worked for me. I didn’t want to keep dwelling on the mistakes I’d made, the people I’d hurt. I’d learned to live with my guilt, just like Nick had learned to live with the virus.

“He’s almost undetectable,” I added, unable to stop myself from sharing the good news Nick had gotten at his last doctor’s appointment before we’d left Florida. His CD4 count had risen to the normal range, and his viral load had dropped considerably.

“What does that mean?” Kevin asked, looking from Nick to me. I realized then how far removed he and the other guys were from our new reality.

“It means the anti-HIV medications are working. The virus is almost undetectable in his blood,” I explained.

“Oh, wow - so you *are* good then!” said Kevin, smiling at Nick. “That’s great, bro.”

Nick looked embarrassed. “Yeah. Now can we please change the subject before AJ passes out over there?”

“I’m not gonna pass out,” said AJ, shaking his head. “I can’t promise I won’t puke, though, not if you guys keep going on about blood and body parts.”

We all laughed at that, although I wasn’t sure he was kidding - he did look a little pale. Poor AJ had always been freaked out by blood and other body fluids. I still didn’t understand how a guy like that could get so many tattoos.

“Gotten any new ink lately, AJ?” I asked, just to change the subject.

“Not since the *Friends* tat I got a few months ago. Did I show you that?” He held up his right hand, pointing out a series of colorful dots along the side of it.

“Oh, cool,” I said. “Um, how does that relate to *Friends*?”

“It’s the dots between the logo. Look...” He found the *Friends* logo on his phone and showed me a picture.

“Ah, I see.”

Nick snickered. “Dude, you know you’re like twenty years late on that.”

“So?” said AJ. “The show’s clearly timeless.”

“Yeah, but it’d be like me getting a tattoo of George Clooney on *ER*.”

AJ snorted. “Nick, I would *pay* you to get a tattoo of George Clooney on *ER*.”

“I’d go in on that too,” I said, secretly thinking that, if done right, it would only make Nick hotter. After all, George Clooney was a pretty attractive guy, especially in his *ER* days.

“Hey, didn’t we say no more medical talk?” Nick replied, ignoring us both.

“You’re the one who brought up *ER*, dumbass.”

“Moving on,” said Kevin loudly, “what parts of the show do you think we should rehearse again after lunch?” Before any of us could answer, he added, “I wanna do the acoustic set again. I think the balance was off; my keyboard sounded too loud.”

“Yeah, I could barely hear Howie’s bass,” Brian said.

“That’s probably a good thing,” I muttered under my breath. My bass guitar skills were mediocre at best, and that was when I was playing every night. Since I’d barely practiced in months, I was pretty rusty.

“And I think Nick’s guitar needed to be tuned some more,” Brian went on.

Nick scowled at him. “Who says it’s my guitar that needs tuning and not yours?” He put down his plate and picked up his acoustic guitar, strumming a few chords. “See? Sounds fine to me.”

“Chill out, Nick,” said Kevin. “We’ll make sure they’re both tuned when we get back onstage.”

But Nick, ever the perfectionist when it came to performing, continued to fiddle with his guitar while the rest of us finished our lunch. He played parts of all the songs in our acoustic set, and then he picked out something only I recognized.

“What’s that one?” Kevin asked, looking over at him curiously.

Nick’s cheeks reddened. “Just something I wrote.”

“Really? I like it. Are there lyrics?”

Nick started to shake his head, but I said, “As a matter of fact, there are.” Nick gave me a murderous look, but I continued, “The song’s called ‘Halfway There.’ Nick wrote it this summer. He and I have been working on the harmonies for it. We thought it could be contender for the next album.”

I knew Nick would be mad at me for telling them about his song, but I only did it because I thought it was a good song, definitely worth hearing. Obviously I wasn’t going to tell them he’d written it for me.

“Well, let’s hear it,” said Kevin. He set down his empty plate, sat back on the sofa, and folded his arms over his chest, waiting.

Nick and I looked at each other. “Come on,” I encouraged him. “Let’s sing it for them.”

Nick sighed. I could tell he wanted to say no, but he must have realized it would make the guys wonder why he wouldn’t sing the song if he refused. It would be easier to just get it over with. “Fine,” he said. “You take the first verse. I’ll sing the second.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

I scooted over to sit next to Nick. He started strumming, and I started singing his lyrics. *“I take back what I said... I didn’t mean a word of it. I was all in my head; I... was too afraid to let you in...”*

I stole a glance at him out of the corner of my eye as I continued to sing. He was staring down at his guitar, concentrating on playing the right chords and self-consciously avoiding eye contact. Why did he care so much about what other people thought? I wondered. Why couldn't he get over his fear of the guys finding out about us?

“Cause I'm halfway there to lovin' you, so wait there for me... and there's nothing that I wouldn't do to be where you be...” I couldn't help smiling at Nick as I sang that line. The first time we'd tried singing it together, the lyric “be where you be” had made me laugh.

“What?” Nick had asked, almost defensively.

“Well... it's not quite grammatically correct,” I pointed out.

He hung his head. “I know. But ‘be where you *are*’ doesn't rhyme with the rest of the line. I couldn't think of how else to write it.”

“It's okay,” I said. “I kinda like it the way it is. It's so *you*.” I loved that lyric now. It was perfectly imperfect, just like Nick was - poor grammar and all.

“I'm lying in this bed... staring at the ceiling fan,” he started the second verse, and the depth of his voice sent chills down my spine. *“I wanna be with you instead. Why couldn't I say it then?”* I loved hearing him sing in his lower register. His vocals were like chocolate, rich and smooth. *“I didn't wanna lie so I just kept my mouth closed. Wanna feel it with you so damn bad...”* His voice crescendoed as he hit the higher notes, and with it, his confidence seemed to grow. *“I feel it getting closer every time I hold you, so baby, take my hand...”*

On the chorus, he finally looked up. *“Cause I'm halfway there to loving you, so wait there for me,”* he sang, glancing my way. *“And there's nothing that I wouldn't do to be where you be... but I can't say those words right now that you want to hear. I'll meet you at the finish line... I just need a little more time...”*

“But I will be there,” I filled in, as Nick went on to the bridge.

“Wait for me... I will never waste your time... Yes, I've been hurt before... I've been to war... I made it out alive...” I watched him sing, marveling over the raw emotion in his voice. It was like hearing the pain I'd put him through, set to music.

My own voice shook as I sang my response, looking right into his eyes. *“You've got me... I'm not going anywhere...”* Even though they were his words, I wanted them to

reassure him. *“So give me a minute, baby; I’m right behind you when love is on the line.”*

“I’m only halfway there to loving you, so wait there for me.” Finally, our voices blended together to create the harmony we’d been working on. *“And there’s nothing that I wouldn’t do to be where you be.”* I caught his eye, and he cracked a smile. *“But I can’t say those words right now that you want to hear...”*

“I’ll meet you at the finish line,” I sang, winking at him.

“I just need a little more time,” he added, shaking his head at me. *“But I will be there...”* He let his voice trail off, softly strumming the final chords on his guitar.

When we finished, Kevin, Brian, and AJ all clapped. “Wow... that was great, fellas,” Kevin said, and Brian and AJ nodded in agreement. But I could tell by the way they kept looking at each other that there was more they wanted to say.

Nick seemed to sense the same thing. “It was great, but...?” he prompted, apparently expecting Kevin to give some constructive criticism. The question we got instead caught us both off-guard.

“Are you *sure* there’s nothin’ goin’ on between you two?”

At first, I thought Kevin was just kidding. But even though he was wearing an amused smile, his eyebrows were cocked with suspicion, and I could tell he was asking seriously. My eyes shot immediately to Nick. Nick’s own eyes were wide, and his face was bright red. If that wasn’t a dead giveaway, I didn’t know what was. But I tried to play it off by laughing. “What? Why would you think that? I’m pretty sure Nicky’s proven he doesn’t play for the same team as me,” I said lightly.

“Um... you guys were definitely giving off some sexual vibes in that performance, just sayin’,” AJ added. “Kev’s not the only one who noticed.”

Nick looked helplessly at me. I shrugged, not sure what else to say. I wasn’t going to out him... but whether he wanted to admit it or not, it sounded like he’d just outed himself.

“Nick’s face is beet red,” Kevin said, snickering. “There somethin’ you wanna tell us, Nick?”

Nick stood up suddenly. “Yeah - fuck you all.” His guitar gave a discordant twang as he set it down with more force than necessary and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Kevin, AJ, and Brian looked at me in disbelief. AJ was the first to voice the question that must have been on all of their minds: “What the hell is going on, Howie?”

At that point, I felt I had no choice but to tell them the truth.

Chapter 68

Nick

I wasn't surprised when one of the guys came after me, but I had expected it to be Howie. Instead, it was Brian who found me hanging out behind the rehearsal venue, smoking a cigarette by the loading dock.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “You okay?”

“Yup,” I replied, hoping my one-word answer would be enough to tell him I didn't want to talk. But if Brian got the hint, he ignored it, coming over to sit beside me on the curb instead.

“No you're not,” he said, eyeing the cigarette in my mouth. “You're smoking.”

“Yeah - so? You here to judge me, Brian?” *God damn Blurry Brian, back again*, I thought, annoyed. This was exactly why I hadn't wanted to tell the guys about me and Howie.

“I'm not judging,” Brian said mildly. “Just making an observation. I haven't seen you smoke in years; I thought you quit.”

“I did.”

“So where'd you get the cigarette?”

“Bummed it off one of the crew guys. What’s it matter to you?” I asked, waiting for him to start berating me about ruining my lungs and voice. And so help me god, if *Brian*, of all people, said anything about *my* voice, I was really going to lose my shit.

But all he said was, “Can I have a drag?”

I snorted, looking over at him in amusement. “Since when do you smoke?” I didn’t think I’d ever seen Brian so much as *hold* a cigarette, let alone take a puff of one.

He held out his hand. “C’mon, please? Pass it here.”

I rolled my eyes as I handed him the cigarette. I thought for sure he was just going to stamp it out, but he shocked me by putting it between his lips instead. My eyes widened as I watched him inhale. Who was this person, and what had he done with Brian? I wondered. Then he started coughing uncontrollably, and I knew the real Brian was back.

“Don’t suck in so much smoke, dude,” I said, laughing at the look on his face. “You’ve gotta get used to it first.”

“Damn,” he said hoarsely, shaking his head, as he gave me back the cigarette. His eyes were watering. “Sorry, but I don’t see the appeal in that at all.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t tell you to smoke it.”

“I know,” said Brian, wiping his eyes. “I was just trying to understand.” He glanced over at me. “What’s going on, Nick?”

“Nothing’s going on,” I replied, feeling annoyed again.

“Not even between you and Howie?”

I didn’t answer that time, taking a drag of the cigarette instead.

“He told us,” Brian said. “After you ran out, AJ asked Howie, and he said you guys have been together for a few months. Is that true?”

I felt blood rush to my face as I flushed with anger and embarrassment. How could Howie betray me like that? Why would he tell them about our relationship behind my back after he’d promised it would stay between us?

“If it is, I wanna hear it from you,” Brian persisted. “Are you two really together, or is that just wishful thinking on Howie’s part?”

“What if I say yes, we are?” I asked. “Are you gonna condemn me? Tell me I need to ‘pray the gay away’ or I’ll go to Hell?”

Brian frowned. “Why would I do that?”

“Oh gee, I dunno, ‘cause you’re a self-righteous dick sometimes?” I replied. “I can tell you’re trying not to be, and I appreciate that, but let’s not forget that you wouldn’t even show your face on *House of Carters* when you thought it might hurt your Christian music career. Why would I expect you to do anything different?”

“Because this *is* different,” Brian said. “We’re not talking about some E! reality show designed to exploit you and your dysfunctional family for so-called ‘entertainment.’ Why would I condemn you for loving someone? If you and Howie really are in a relationship, then I’m happy for you, just as long as it makes *you* happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you, Nick.”

I puffed on my cigarette, considering what he’d said. I appreciated the sentiment behind his words, but something about them still bothered me. “Then why the tone of doubt?” I asked. “You don’t believe Howie?”

“I just want your take on it,” said Brian. “That song you sang in there... was that for real? Do you really have those feelings for him?”

I sighed, wishing I wasn’t so passionate when I sang. I should have known I wouldn’t be able to hide my feelings the whole song. Damn Howie for forcing me to sing it in front of the other guys. I took another long drag off the cigarette, stalling for time. I’d hoped the smoke would calm my nerves, but I still felt tightly wound, like my stomach was twisted into knots.

“Gimme that, would ya?” Brian held out his hand, motioning for my cigarette. I passed it to him without a word, wondering if he was planning to take another puff of it or put it out.

It was at that exact moment - the worst possible one - that the back door opened, and before I even bothered to turn my head and see who was there, I heard a high-pitched voice screech, “Brian Thomas Littrell!”

Brian dropped the cigarette butt and stamped it out with the toe of his shoe, but not before his wife saw him with it.

“You’re *smoking*?!” Leighanne said, looking incredulously from him to me and back to Brian again. “Who are you, and what have you done with my husband?”

“My thoughts exactly - except for the husband part,” I muttered.

Leighanne narrowed her eyes at me. “Gee, let me guess where he got the cigarette,” she said sarcastically, folding her arms over her boobs.

“Guilty,” I said, holding up my hands. “There I go being a bad influence on your saint of a husband again. Better tell him to blur his face out next time we’re on TV together so I don’t ruin his reputation.”

Brian closed his eyes and shook his head. “Nick, please don’t start...”

Leighanne frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” Brian answered before I could say anything else. “What do you need, babe?”

“I just came to find you. No one knew where you went. Why are you guys out here, anyway?”

“Smoke break,” I said, without missing a beat.

“We’re just talking,” replied Brian. “Tell the guys we’ll be back in soon.”

“Sure, baby.” Leighanne started to turn away, but then she stopped, her eyes shifting from him to me again. “Is everything okay?” she asked, and to her credit, she actually sounded concerned.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, and then, because I couldn’t resist getting a rise out of her, I added, “By the way, I’m fucking Howie.”

Leighanne’s eyes widened. “Nickolas Gene Carter! Language!”

The fact that she was more offended by the word ‘fucking’ than the actual act made me laugh. “Sorry, my bad. I meant I’m *having sex* with Howie. Hot, steamy, butt sex.”

“Very funny,” she said huffily, rolling her eyes. “Don’t stay out here too long; Kevin said they want to start rehearsing again soon. And Husband, if you ever want to kiss me again, you’d better never let me catch you with another cigarette.” Then she turned on her heel and stormed back inside.”

Brian and I looked at each other. “She didn’t even believe me,” I said, surprised.

He raised his eyebrows. “Were you telling the truth or just saying that to mess with her?”

“Both,” I admitted.

“So... you and Howie really are...?”

I nodded, feeling my face flush as I focused on the ground. I really wished I had another cigarette.

“Wow,” said Brian.

“Yeah.”

A few seconds of awkward silence passed before Brian spoke again. “So is that the real reason you left Lauren?”

“What, to be with Howie? Hell no,” I said, shaking my head. “No, that didn’t happen until way later.”

“Then why did you leave her?” he asked. “If it wasn’t to be with Howie, then was it like AJ said? Were you afraid of infecting her?”

I sighed. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“I see. So now that you’re with Howie, you don’t have to worry about that anymore. That must be a relief.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Looking over at him, I could tell there was more he wanted to say. “Where you goin’ with this, B? Whatever’s on your mind, just spit it out already.”

Brian opened his mouth and closed it again. He did this several more times before he finally spoke. “I guess I’m just wondering if you’re with him because you’re genuinely attracted to him or because you feel like you have no other options.”

I blinked. “What, you think just cause I’m HIV-positive, I couldn’t find anyone else?”

“I don’t think that at all,” said Brian. “I’m asking, do *you* think that?”

“N-no,” I answered uncertainly.

“Can you see yourself having an intimate relationship with someone who’s negative?”

I kept my mouth closed, unable to answer. The sad truth, I realized, was *no*. If I couldn’t make it work with Lauren, who was as supportive and open-minded as they come, then how could I be with anyone else? Suddenly, I understood what Brian was trying to ask. Had I settled for Howie because I knew there was no one else?

“I... I don’t know,” I admitted.

He put his arm around me. “Look, I’m not trying to make you doubt yourself, Nick. I just don’t wanna see you or Howie get hurt. Like I said, if y’all are happy together, then I’m happy for ya, man.” He patted my shoulder.

“Thanks, Bri,” I replied. “I am happy... happier than I’ve been since all this shit started, anyway.”

“Then that’s all that matters,” he said. “I hope it works out with Howie, if that’s what you want, but if it doesn’t, I know there’s someone else out there for you. If it’s meant to be, you’ll find her - or him.”

I didn’t believe him, but I smiled anyway and thanked him again, knowing he was just trying to make me feel better.

After a few more seconds, Brian stood up. “You ready to head back in and face the music?”

I rolled my eyes at his pun. “Not really.”

“C’mon, man... you can’t sit out here and smoke all day. You’re outta cigarettes.”

I sighed. “I know.” He offered me his hand, and I took it, allowing him to slowly pull me to my feet. “How did Kevin and AJ react when Howie told them?” I asked, as I brushed off the back of my shorts.

Brian shrugged. "They both just seemed to think it was funny."

"Great," I said sarcastically, knowing they'd never let me live this down.

"Honestly, bro, it's not a big deal to any of us, as long as it doesn't affect the group. No lovers' spats onstage, ya hear?"

I smiled, feeling a sense of relief. If Brian was being this open-minded about it, I knew AJ and Kevin would be okay with it, too. "Got it," I said.

"C'mere, man. Gimme a hug," he said, opening his arms to invite me in. I put my arms around him, grateful for his acceptance. But as he embraced me, Brian whispered, "This isn't, like, turning you on, is it?"

I just laughed as I pulled away. "Trust me, dude, you're not my type."

Howie pulled me aside as soon as Brian and I went back in. "You okay?" he asked, putting his arm around me.

"Yeah," I said.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have made you sing the song in front of them."

"It's okay." I shrugged. "I guess it was only a matter of time before they found out, right? It was probably stupid to think we could hide it from them the whole tour."

"Maybe, but I wish we'd been able to tell them on our own terms," said Howie.

I glanced up at the stage, where AJ, Kevin, and Brian were getting their instruments ready for the acoustic set. AJ saw me looking and gave me a little wave. I felt the knots in my stomach slowly unravel. "Actually, I think we did."

Howie smiled. "So you're not mad at me?"

I thought about it for a second, then shook my head. I knew Howie hadn't meant to out me, but in a way, I was glad he had. Because now we were both out in the open. No more hiding our feelings. No more keeping secrets. Really, it was for the best.

"Nah," I said. "It's all good, man. Now c'mon, let's go sing."

Chapter 69

Howie

The morning of our first show, I woke up with butterflies in my stomach. I looked over at Nick, who was still sleeping peacefully beside me. What did he have to worry about? He wasn't the one who had tried to kill himself, survived a liver transplant, gotten a divorce, and gone public with his HIV status since the last tour. Sure, performing would be a walk in the park compared to all that, but I was more worried about the soundcheck party than the actual show. Facing the fans was the biggest fear on my mind.

In the eight months since my suicide attempt, I had pretty much stayed away from social media, wanting to avoid the gossip and negativity. I hadn't had many fan encounters in real life, either. I knew most of our fans would be supportive, but I also knew they would have some hard questions for me at soundcheck, questions I was dreading having to either dodge or answer. It wasn't that I didn't want to be open with my fans, but there was still so much about my situation - and Nick's - that they didn't know.

Nick had it easy, I thought, watching him with envy. No one was asking him awkward questions. The rumors about his status and our relationship had died down since he'd left L.A. and disappeared from the public eye. The paparazzi were relentless, of course, but the rest of the world had moved on to juicier stories: Brad and Angelina were married, Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez were back together, Joan Rivers was dead, and nude photos of several A-list starlets had leaked online. With all that in the entertainment news, no one was worried about Nick Carter, and Nick had no reason to worry, either.

Meanwhile, I was a nervous wreck. I knew I'd never be able to get back to sleep, so I decided to get dressed and go to the gym. A good workout would give me something positive to focus on and take my mind off my fears.

"What are you doing?" Nick groaned, when he woke and found me stretching on the floor of our hotel room. Technically, it was his room, but I'd been sleeping there ever since the guys had found out about us. Now that they knew we were together, there was no reason for us to stay in separate rooms.

"Getting ready to go work out," I answered. "Wanna join me?"

Nick blinked, bleary-eyed, at his phone. "It's five in the morning."

"Says the guy who woke me up at six every day this summer."

"That was six, not five," mumbled Nick. "Go back to bed. Save your energy for the show tonight."

"I can't sleep," I admitted.

"How come? First show jitters?"

"Something like that."

Nick sat up. "You're gonna be great tonight," he said, smiling at me. "You're ready. You've got this."

I smiled back. "Thanks for the pep talk. I'm still going to the gym."

I left the room with a little spring in my step and a lot on my mind. Knowing Nick had confidence in me helped me feel a bit better, but like I said, it wasn't really the show I was worried about.

When we took the stage for soundcheck that afternoon, I got the loudest cheers of all - louder than Kevin when he first came back, even louder than Nick got every night. I guess there's a first time for everything, right? Anyway, it made me feel loved - and a lot less nervous.

We sang a couple of songs, and then it was time for the Q&A. Eddie had asked each of us beforehand, were there any topics that were off-limits? In the spirit of openness, I'd answered no. We had always tried to be pretty forthcoming with our fans, and if I didn't allow them to ask questions about my health or personal life, it would look like I had something to hide. So I braced myself for the inevitable, and sure enough, the very first question was directed at me.

"Well, first of all, I just want to say welcome back, Howie!" gushed the girl holding the microphone. She had to wait for the fans to stop cheering for me before she could continue. "I think we're all wondering, what has your recovery been like, and how are you doing now, health-wise?"

I swallowed hard. It was a fair question, one I'd been expecting, but that didn't make answering it any easier. I forced a smile onto my face, though, and replied, "Thank you. It's been a hard road, and I've had to really work to get back into shape, but I'm doing great. Definitely ready to get back on tour. I've missed you guys," I added with a wink, earning another round of cheers from the fans.

"Who else has a question?" asked Eddie, as he took the mic from her and looked around for another fan.

The next question was for Nick. "Hi, Nick! I was just wondering when you're getting married - congratulations, by the way," said a woman wearing a Backstreet Boys t-shirt. "Have you and Lauren set a date yet?"

"Um... not at this time, no," Nick replied shortly and left it at that. I saw the raised eyebrows and suspicious looks being exchanged in the audience, but thankfully, Eddie moved on quickly to another girl who had a question for Kevin.

At the end of the Q&A, the five of us took our places for the meet-and-greet and photos with fans. "Do you think we should say no hugs or handshakes?" Kevin asked quietly, as Eddie and our security team got the fans lined up.

Nick and I looked each other. "Dude, you know you can't 'catch' HIV from casual contact, right?" he muttered out of the side of his mouth.

Kevin rolled his eyes. "No shit, Nick. What I meant was, I don't want *you guys* getting exposed to extra germs."

I glanced at Nick again. I didn't know how he felt about it, but I hated the idea of limiting physical contact with the fans. It may have been the smart thing to do, but it seemed so cold. "We'll be fine," I said. "I'm more concerned about the fans catching 'Nick Plague' from Carter here than them getting one of us sick."

Nick cracked a smile and coughed into his hand. "The struggle is real," he said. "My immune system sucked even before I got HIV, but we're not going back behind that stupid barrier like a bunch of caged animals in a zoo. I always hated that. Let them hug us or shake hands if they want to. They're not gonna hurt us."

Kevin shrugged. "If you say so."

I wasn't worried. If anything, it was the fans who seemed worried about hurting me. While some of them squeezed me tightly, telling me how happy they were to see me,

many embraced me as if I were made of glass and would break if they applied too much force. Others avoided the hug altogether, settling for a handshake and hello. As I watched one of the latter group go on to hug the rest of the guys, Nick's words echoed in my mind. *"Dude, you know you can't 'catch' HIV from casual contact, right?"*

I thought everyone knew that by now, but was it possible that, even in 2014, that sort of paranoia still existed on some level? People were hugging Nick without hesitation, I noticed, but then, none of them knew he had it, too. I couldn't help but wonder: *Would they treat him differently if they did?*

All fears aside, the reception I got when I took the stage that night was nothing short of extraordinary. When our faces flashed across the big screen one by one at the start of the show, mine got the loudest cheers, even louder than Nick's. And when it was my turn to talk to the crowd, the standing ovation I received lasted so long, I could hardly speak.

Blinded by the bright lights, I squinted out into the sea of faces in front of me. They went blurry as my eyes filled with tears. I could feel the love radiating from the fans' beaming smiles. In that moment, I realized how lucky I was to be on that stage, making people happy by doing what I loved. This was the kind of life people dreamed of having. How could I have even thought of throwing it all away?

Overwhelmed with emotion, I wiped away the tears and tried to compose myself before I addressed the crowd. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I shouted, "Thank you, New York!" My voice still wavered as I continued, "I can't tell you how much I appreciate all the support you've given me this year, from your prayers and well wishes and kind words to the incredible love you've shown me tonight. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. It feels great to be back on this stage, performing for you all."

I paused, as another round of cheers and applause rang out from the audience. "We love you, Howie!" I heard one voice rise above the others.

"Thank you," I repeated. "I love you, too. On behalf of the Backstreet Boys, we always love coming to New York, and the song we're about to sing is all about love. This next song is a song that Nick and I wrote together, a song called 'Love Somebody.' I feel like there's a lot of love in the air tonight, so I want you to do me a favor right now. I want you to look to the left or to the right of you. If you love that person, I want you to tell them, 'I love you!'"

I looked to my left, where Nick was standing next to me. On the last leg of the tour, when we did this (admittedly scripted) part of the show, he would often come up to me and say those words, grabbing hold of me to give me a big hug or a smack on the cheek. I had always known he was just joking around - anything to keep the fans' attention on him - but at the same time, I secretly looked forward to it. But that night, when I turned to Nick, I found him facing the other way, hugging on AJ instead. As stupid as it sounds, it sort of made me angry to see that he was still so insecure about our relationship, he wouldn't even say the words to me jokingly anymore. But I recovered quickly and continued on with my introduction to our song.

"And if you love the Backstreet Boys, put your hands in the air!" The fans threw up their arms and screamed as I sang the opening notes of "Love Somebody." Then I turned it over to Nick to start the first verse.

"Is it too much to ask for one minute to breathe?" he sang, his voice oozing with passion. *"Cause you take my breath away, like I've never seen."*

"You're the reason why cavemen drew on the wall," I chimed in, watching Nick out of the corner of my eye as I joined the others in harmony. *"The reason why after every summer we fall."* He was drawing every eye away from the rest of us by doing the spazzy little dance he always did, his own special version of the Carlton dance from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which we called "The Carter." *"You're the reason I never wanna sleep at night..."*

"Cause nothing I can dream is better than you by my side," finished Nick, and he glanced my way for just a second before he looked out at the audience again. *"You know that I..."*

I smiled to myself as we launched into the chorus. *"Woo-who... love somebody, love somebody..."* He may have been afraid to say the words out loud, but I knew that Nick loved me, in his own special way.

By our last set in the show, I was exhausted. It was a relief to take a breath backstage while Brian introduced the next song. "You okay, man?" Kevin asked me, as we waited for our cue to take the stage again.

"Yeah, I'm good," I said, smiling. The combination of emotions and physical exertion had worn me out, but even though I was tired, I had never felt better. I fed off the energy of the crowd as we went back out to sing "In a World Like This."

“You got me wide open, wide open; now I’m yours.” As AJ started the first verse, my eyes strayed again to Nick, who was strumming his guitar on the far side of the stage. *“You found me heartbroken, heartbroken on the floor.”* Eight months ago, he had found me at my lowest point and picked me back up again, both physically and figuratively.

“Became my salvation, salvation through the war.” In more ways than one, Nick had saved my life, and I felt a surge of gratitude as I stood alongside him on the stage, surrounded by the love and support of our fans. *“You got me wide open, wide open; now I’m sure.”* In spite of Nick’s insecurity and my own uncertainty, there was one thing I felt sure of: I was glad to be alive, glad to be back, and glad I didn’t have to go at it alone anymore. We were in this together.

The crowd screamed louder than ever as I came down the center catwalk to sing my solo. *“You got me wide open, wide open, yeah... and now I’m free falling, free falling...”* I got the fans pumping their fists as the music picked back up for the final chorus.

“In a world like this, where some back down, I, I know we’re gonna make it.” Nick was jumping up and down, his guitar bouncing along with him, as Brian’s voice rang out over the rest, powerful and perfectly pitched.

“In a time like this, when love comes ‘round, I, I know we’ve gotta take it.” AJ and Kevin threw their arms in the air, encouraging the crowd to sing along. And sing they did, a chorus of voices accompanying ours.

“In a world like this, where people fall apart...” I reached out to the front row, touching as many hands as I could.

“In a time like this, when nothing comes from the heart...” I tried to make eye contact with the fans who were further back, offering a smile here, a wink there. But on the very last line, I couldn’t help but look across the stage at Nick.

“In a world like this, I got you.”

Chapter 70

Nick

I was glad to be back on tour, but by the second show, I was sick of being asked the same questions. *When are you getting married? Have you and Lauren set a date yet? Why isn't Lauren on the road with you?*

I had never understood why the fans cared so much about my personal life, my relationships, but for whatever reason, they did care, and their constant inquiries were starting to make me feel guilty. It was like Lauren and I had let them down somehow, like we were lying to them by not making it public knowledge that we'd broken off our engagement. I knew it was none of their damn business and was sure Lauren would want to keep the details of our break-up private, but I was starting to think maybe we should release a statement, just so the fans would stop asking about a wedding that was never going to happen.

"What do you think?" I asked Howie the next morning as he was getting dressed. We had the day off, so we'd spent the night in a hotel room instead of staying on the bus. Since we were in New Jersey, he was spending the morning with Leigh and his kids. She'd brought them to our show the night before, and he was planning to meet them for Sunday mass, followed by brunch with the in-laws (*ex-in-laws?*) before we got back on the bus to head to Boston that afternoon. It sounded sufficiently awkward to me, but who was I to judge?

"I think you should talk to Lauren," said Howie, adjusting his tie in the mirror. "Get her blessing before you say anything to the media."

"Oh, I know," I replied quickly. "I wasn't gonna go behind her back. I was just wondering, do you think it's a good idea to give a public statement, or should we keep it private?"

"I don't know, Nick," said Howie, shrugging. "I think that's up to you and Lauren to decide; it's not really my place to say."

"Yeah, but you've been there," I said, hoping for some advice. Howie had always given me good advice. If only I'd listened to more of it...

He shook his head. "I didn't have much of a choice in my situation, since my divorce was a matter of public record. Once Leigh filed, the press was eventually going to find out one way or another. You and Lauren don't have any legal ties to each other, though, so you shouldn't feel obligated to make a statement." He paused, then turned around to look me in the eye. "But if you want the fans to stop asking about her, you should probably let them know it's over."

I nodded. That was what I had been thinking, too. “Yeah... I guess I’ll give her a call after you leave.” I looked at the clock, calculating the time difference. It was only six-thirty on the West Coast, but knowing Lauren, she’d be up before long. She liked her early morning workouts. “We’ll see if she even answers,” I muttered, more to myself than anyone.

Howie frowned. “Why wouldn’t she answer?”

“I dunno, she barely replied to my texts this summer. I think she’s trying to sever ties with me so she can move on, y’know?”

He gave me a weird look. “I didn’t know you were still texting her over the summer.”

“Just a couple times. So?” I asked defensively, wondering why he would expect me to tell him who I was texting. “You jealous or something?”

“No,” he snapped in a tone that totally made him sound jealous. I didn’t know whether to be amused or annoyed by that.

“We’re still friends,” I said, “or at least, I want to be. Not sure she does, but maybe down the road she will. That’s not gonna be a problem for you, is it?”

“No, of course not,” Howie replied quickly, but it made me wonder what he thought was going on between Lauren and me. Didn’t he understand why I could never go back to her, even if I wanted to? And why would he think I’d want to, anyway? He and I had never actually defined our “relationship” - or whatever you wanna call it - as exclusive or anything, but whatever it was, it was working for us.

“Good. ‘Cause, I mean, it’s fine with me that you and Leigh are still friends,” I added. “I have no problem with you hanging out with her today.”

Howie looked at his watch. “Speaking of which, I should get going,” he said. “The service starts at ten. You sure you don’t wanna come?”

I snorted. “What, come ‘pray the gay away’ with your ex-wife and her family? Thanks, but no thanks. You have fun with that, though.”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s not what Catholic church is like... which you would know if you came.”

“I’d be more worried about the brunch afterward. Dude, don’t you think Leigh’s dad wants to castrate you for what you did to her?”

Howie’s face went pale. “Do you think it’ll be that bad?” he asked in a whisper.

“Well, I don’t think he’ll actually try to castrate you, but do I think it’ll be extremely uncomfortable? Oh hell yeah.”

His shoulders slumped. “I know. Leigh and I are just trying to keep things as normal as possible for James and Holden. It would be hard for them if they thought their grandparents and I didn’t get along.”

“I understand. I was just joking, anyway,” I said quickly, even though I didn’t and wasn’t. I tried to put myself in Howie’s shoes. I loved Lauren’s dad, Larry, but would I have the balls to sit down for a meal with him after breaking his daughter’s heart? I didn’t think so. I hadn’t even spoken to him since I’d left L.A. last March. It was too awkward.

Howie sighed. “Well... wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” I said, thinking he was going to need it. “Gimme a call if Mr. Boniello brings a hatchet to brunch.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Jesus, Nick.”

“Yeah, you better pray to Jesus that Leigh’s dad doesn’t use his steak knife to cut something other than his own meat.”

Howie winced. “Nick! Stop.”

I snickered. “See ya later... I hope.”

“Ugh.” He stuffed his wallet in his back pocket and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

I waited until ten to call Lauren. It was seven o’clock in California, and I figured she’d be awake by then, getting ready to go to the gym. But would she answer her phone for me?

The phone rang a few times, and then I heard her voice. “Hi... Nick?” She sounded puzzled, like she wasn’t sure it was me. She was probably curious about why I was calling. I hadn’t talked to her since our lunch with AJ and Rochelle.

“Hey, yeah, it’s me,” I replied. “I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“No, I was up. Is everything okay?” I heard the concern in her voice and hated that she assumed I was calling because something was wrong.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Um, how are you?”

“Fine...” she said slowly. “So... what’s up?” Clearly, she wanted me to get to the point.

“Well, I wanted to run something by you. I’ve been getting a lot of questions from fans about you - well, about *us*, really - like ‘When’s the wedding?’ and that kind of thing. So I was wondering, would it be okay with you if I announced that we ended our engagement?”

“*We* didn’t end anything,” she corrected me. “That was all you.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, mostly because they were true. She had played no part in our break-up; in fact, she’d begged me to stay. I was the one who had left her, and even though I knew it was for the best, I still felt guilty for hurting her the way I had.

“Okay, so... would it be okay if I announced that *I* ended our engagement?” I asked, amending my original question.

“Hell no!” she snapped. “If you say it that way, your psycho fans who’ve spent the last six years giving me shit for dating you will think that they were right about me all along and that you finally saw the light. I’m sorry; I know I sound like a bitch right now, but just the thought of giving them that sense of self-satisfaction makes me sick to my stomach.”

I laughed awkwardly, even though I knew she wasn’t kidding. “So I take it that’s a ‘no’ to making an announcement of any kind.”

Lauren sighed. “I didn’t say that. Personally, I would prefer our business be kept private, but I understand why you want to let the fans know. Could you please just do it in a way where our relationship drama won’t be plastered all over the cover of *People* magazine?”

I knew she was alluding to the article about Howie, the headline promising juicy details about his HIV diagnosis, health crisis, and divorce. He had put his story out there to take the heat off me, I reminded myself. I hadn't wanted that kind of media attention then, and I definitely didn't want it now, either.

"Absolutely," I agreed. "I was thinking a simple statement on our website and maybe a tweet. Short and sweet, to the point, not too many details."

"That sounds perfect," she replied, her voice softening. "Maybe just say we've decided to go our separate ways and leave it at that."

"Yeah... what's that phrase you always hear when celebrity couples get divorced? 'Irreconcilable differences?' Maybe we could throw that in there."

"Whatever you wanna do, Nick," Lauren said. She sounded sad - dejected, even. I didn't know what else to say. Maybe she didn't see it that way, but in my eyes, we *did* have irreconcilable differences. I was HIV-positive, and she was negative. I couldn't change my status and didn't *want* to change hers, so there was really no way for us to reconcile our differences and have a healthy marriage.

"Alright... well, do you at least want me to send you a draft to approve before I post anything?" I offered.

"Sure. I'd appreciate that."

"Okay. I'll do that."

We both fell silent for a few seconds, neither of us sure what to say next. Finally, Lauren asked, "So is that all you wanted?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said. I wasn't ready to get off the phone with her yet, but could see no point in making small talk just to keep her on the line. "I should probably let you go now."

"Yeah, I'm getting ready to head to the gym," she replied. I smiled to myself; she hadn't changed a bit. I was the one who had changed.

"Enjoy your workout. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay. Take care, Nick."

Awkwardly, we hung up.

I was already on the bus when Howie got back from brunch. “How’d it go?” I asked, as he came down the aisle of the tour bus the two of us were sharing.

He made a face. “It was... uncomfortable,” he admitted.

My eyes dropped to his crotch. “Are you still ‘intact’ down there, at least?”

Howie laughed and shook his head. “It wasn’t *that* bad.”

“Good.” I smiled. “So I talked to Lauren.”

“Was she okay with you releasing a statement?”

“Yeah, as long as it’s not in a magazine.”

“What, no *People* interview about your break-up?” He smiled knowingly, as I shook my head. “Did you tell her about us?”

I raised my eyebrows, surprised by his question. Howie and I were still hiding our relationship from everyone except our closest friends and family, so it hadn’t even occurred to me to tell Lauren. Sure, she had once been my closest confidant, but not now that we were no longer together. We could barely carry on a five-minute conversation without it feeling awkward. I couldn’t imagine admitting to her that, after all the drama over what happened on the cruise, I had ended up with Howie. It would only hurt her, not to mention how mortifying it would be for me.

“No,” I said. “Should I have?”

He hesitated. “Don’t you think she’ll find out from one of the wives? I don’t know if she still talks to Kristin or Leighanne, but she and Rochelle were close, and AJ can’t keep a secret to save his life. He probably called Ro right after that rehearsal when the guys found out about us to tell her what happened.”

My heart sank. I hadn’t thought of that, but Howie was right. There was no way AJ and his big, fat mouth would be able to keep something like that from his wife. “She didn’t say anything about it when I talked to her today...”

“Maybe she was waiting to hear it from you.”

That made me feel guilty, like maybe I should have told Lauren I’d moved on from her with Howie before she found out from someone else. Then another thought occurred to me. “Have you told Leigh about us?” I asked.

Slowly, he nodded. “I told her today.”

“At *church*??”

He rolled his eyes. “No, not at church. I pulled her aside at brunch, while the boys were with her parents, so we could talk privately. I’ve been wanting to tell her, but I felt like that kind of conversation needed to take place in person, you know?”

“Wow,” I said, stunned. “I guess that makes you a better ex than me. So how’d she take it?”

“Not bad.” He shrugged. “To be honest, I think she already knew, or at least suspected. She didn’t seem too surprised. She said she hopes it works out for us.”

Somehow, I couldn’t imagine Lauren reacting quite the same way. Unlike Leigh, she’d been nothing but supportive after my HIV diagnosis, but she also hadn’t been the one to leave. That, as she’d said earlier, was all me. So while Leigh, having made the decision to move on herself, could be happy that Howie was doing the same, I just felt like Lauren would be hurt. And the last thing I wanted to do was hurt her again.

Chapter 71

Howie

Our second show was in Camden, New Jersey, less than a hundred miles from Leigh’s parents’ place in Long Branch, so I was able to talk her into bringing the boys down to spend the day with me and come to the concert that night.

I hadn’t planned on her parents coming along, too, but Leigh insisted they were just there to help with Holden. “He’s really too little to sit through a Backstreet Boys show,” she said. “Mom and Dad will take him back to the hotel and put him to bed so James and I can stay for the show.”

I had always been close to my in-laws, but I hadn't had any contact with them since Leigh left last December. The Boniellos had welcomed me into their family with open arms when we'd first started dating, but now that we were divorced, I wasn't sure I would receive such a warm reception.

All morning, I thought about what I would say when I saw Leigh's parents, Ralph and Patricia, for the first time since our lives fell apart. I knew I needed to pull them aside and apologize for what I'd done to their daughter. Truth be told, I should have apologized to them a long time ago.

But when Leigh and the boys arrived at the venue alone that afternoon, I was grateful to have been granted another reprieve. "Where are your folks?" I asked her, after I'd hugged James and Holden and given her a peck on the cheek.

"They drove on to Philadelphia to do some shopping," she replied. "They'll be back to pick up Holden before the show starts."

"Oh, okay." I got the feeling my former in-laws were trying to avoid me, but at least I wouldn't have to face them right away. Instead, I enjoyed spending the afternoon with my sons, parading them across the stage during soundcheck (to the delight of the fans in attendance) and playing with them backstage before the show.

Not including Nick, it had been a long time since the other guys had seen my kids, and they couldn't believe how grown-up James seemed or how big (and blonde) Holden had gotten.

"He doesn't seem sick at all," said Kevin, smiling as he watched Holden run up and down the hallway outside our dressing rooms.

"No, he's been doing really well," I replied. "I just pray to God he stays that way."

Kevin nodded. "Amen to that." His eyes drifted to Leigh, who was standing at the other end of the hall. "How's Leigh doing?" he asked.

I followed his gaze to my former wife. She looked as vibrant as ever, effortlessly beautiful in a black t-shirt and a pair of coral-colored shorts that showed off her long legs, her hair hanging in loose waves. "As far as I know, she's fine."

"Glad to hear it," said Kevin. "It's good that you guys get along so well around the kids."

I nodded. "Yeah, we've tried to maintain a friendly relationship, for their sake."

"Does she know about you and Nick?"

My heart skipped a beat, then started to race. "No..." I said slowly. "Not that I know of, anyway. I'm gonna talk to her about it this weekend." I had been meaning to tell Leigh about my new relationship, but hadn't yet found the right moment. I wanted to get her alone so we could have that conversation in person and in private, without the kids around. But I knew if I didn't do it soon, she would find out from someone else.

The circle of people who knew about my relationship with Nick was still small, but it was a circle that, until recently, Leigh had been a part of, and it was only going to grow wider. I would be naive to think the other guys hadn't told their wives, and if the wives knew, it was only a matter of time before one of them - most likely Leighanne, since she was the only one on tour - brought it up to Leigh.

That was why, when she asked, I agreed to go to church and brunch with her family the following morning. I wasn't looking exactly forward to it, but I knew that, if nothing else, it would give me the chance to do what I needed to do: apologize to her parents and tell her about Nick.

I prayed about it all through mass in the morning and didn't pay much attention to the sermon. Nick's words kept echoing in my mind: "*Dude, don't you think Leigh's dad wants to castrate you for what you did to her?*" I knew he was just joking, but at the same time, I wouldn't have blamed Leigh's parents for wishing that level of pain and humiliation upon me. Several times during the service, I leaned back to sneak a peek at them. They were sitting at the other end of the pew with Leigh, who had Holden in her lap, while James was sandwiched in between us. Every time I looked, her parents were staring straight ahead, as if they were determined not to make eye contact.

The Boniellos had barely said two words to me when we met outside Old St. Mary's, the second oldest Catholic church in Philadelphia. The big, brick building was located just across the river from Camden and, from what Leigh had told me, had a lot of neat history. Some of the founding fathers, such as George Washington and John Adams, had even worshipped there. It would have been a cool experience to sit where they once sat, had I not felt so uncomfortable being there.

After mass let out, Leigh walked ahead with the boys while her parents hung back, admiring the architecture. I took advantage of the opportunity to talk to them privately. "Could I have a quick word?" I asked, and they agreed to walk with me around the corner, away from the other churchgoers.

“What is it, Howie?” asked Leigh’s father, Ralph. It was rare to see him looking so serious.

I swallowed hard. “Listen, I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I did to Leigh... and Holden... and our whole family. I know a simple apology isn’t enough to make up for my mistakes, but I don’t know what else to say or do. I can’t change what happened. Believe me, I wish I could.”

“We wish you could, too,” said Leigh’s mother, Patricia. “This has been so hard on Leigh, Howie. It’s been hard on us all, actually. We feel like we’ve lost a member of our family.”

She never raised her voice, but her softly-spoken words made me feel more ashamed than if she had shouted. “I know,” I whispered, hanging my head. “I feel that way, too. I know it’s all my fault and that it may be impossible for you guys to forgive me, but I at least wanted to tell you in person how sorry I am.”

Patricia nodded. “Thank you, Howie,” she said. Then she glanced at her husband, who was still stone-faced. “How could we call ourselves Christians and not forgive someone for their sins? If you’re truly sorry - and of course you are - then we forgive you... right, Ralph?”

“Mm-hm,” he murmured, but there was still no warmth in his eyes as he stood there, staring me down.

I felt the insane urge to laugh as I remembered what Nick had said just before I left. “*Gimme a call if Mr. Boniello brings a hatchet to brunch.*” How did his sick mind come up with this stuff? I wondered. I mean, a hatchet??

Smiling in what I hoped was a humble and repentant way, I extended my hand to my former father-in-law, and after a moment’s hesitation, he shook it. Patricia opened her arms, inviting me in for a hug. “We have missed you,” she whispered, giving me a squeeze. “Thanks for your apology. No matter what, you’ll always be a part of our family.”

“Thanks for your forgiveness,” I replied, feeling as if a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. We may never be one big, happy family again, but at least I had been forgiven, and that was the best outcome I could have hoped for.

There was only one thing left for me to do, and that was to tell Leigh about Nick. I waited until we'd both eaten our fill at brunch, then asked her to walk outside with me. We left the boys with their grandparents, promising to be back soon, and went across the street to a park along the riverfront. There were a few people out enjoying the warm, end-of-summer weather - a couple of families having picnics, a group of friends playing football - but otherwise, the park wasn't crowded. I led Leigh to a bench in a secluded spot, out of hearing range of the others, and invited her to sit down.

"What's going on, Howie?" she asked, looking at me with concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," I assured her. "Health-wise, I'm doing great, and emotionally, I'm in a much better place than I've been in a long time. That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. There's been sort of a new development in my life..."

"Are you seeing someone?" she interrupted, her eyes narrowing as she studied my face.

I felt a smile start creeping across it, which I tried to suppress. To me, being with Nick was a good thing, but I wasn't sure how she would take the news. "Yes," I admitted.

Leigh raised an eyebrow. "A woman? Or a man?"

I took a deep breath. "A man."

Her eyes narrowed again. "Is it Nick?"

How did she know? I wondered. Had one of the wives told her, or was it just that obvious? Feeling my face heat up, I bit down on my bottom lip. "Yes."

Leigh just nodded. For almost a full minute, she sat quietly, absorbing what I'd said, as I waited for her to have some kind of reaction. Then, finally, she asked, "So you're happy?"

"Yes," I replied honestly.

"Is he happy?"

"I think so."

She nodded again. "Then I'm happy for you both. I hope it works out for you." I thought I could sense just a hint of sarcasm in her voice, but mostly, she sounded

sincere. I knew it had to be hard for her to hear that I was moving on with someone else, especially when it was a man.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m sorry; I know this has to be weird for you, but I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

She cleared her throat. “I appreciate that. Actually, as long as we’re away from little ears, there’s something I wanted to tell you, too.”

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Well, I went to the doctor a few weeks ago and found out my viral load was up and my CD4 count had dropped below 500, so...” She let out a heavy sigh, looking down at her lap. “I’ve decided to start treatment.”

I nodded, not sure whether to say “Good for you” or tell her I was sorry. To me, her news was both good and bad - bad because it meant her health had declined to the point of needing treatment, but good because at least she’d finally agreed to antiretroviral therapy.

“The drugs really aren’t bad,” I assured her. “I haven’t had many side effects, even with the extra meds I started taking after my transplant. I know Nick had some trouble adjusting at first, but they got that figured out, and he’s fine now. And look how well Holden’s doing.”

Leigh nodded, but when she looked up again, I was startled to see tears swimming in her eyes.

“Hey... what’s wrong?” I asked, putting my hand on her arm. “Are you really that worried about taking the medication?”

She shook her head. “It’s not that... well, not *just* that,” she said, sniffing.

“What is it, then? Is this about me and Nick?”

Snorting, Leigh shook her head again. “Don’t flatter yourself. It has nothing to do with you, Howie.”

“Then what?” I said, starting to get annoyed. “Why are you crying?”

She sighed. “I dunno, I guess it just hit me that this is how it’s going to be for the rest of my life. The doctor said once I start these drugs, I shouldn’t stop-”

“No, you shouldn’t,” I interjected, thinking of Nick.

“-so I’m going to be taking them until I die.”

“Join the club,” I said. “It’s a small price to pay for prolonging your life, though, don’t you think?” I’m sure I sounded insensitive, but I was having a hard time understanding why she was so upset about taking a pill every day. If she only knew how many prescription bottles I’d had to pack to bring on the road with me..

“I know. It’s not that. It’s just...” She paused, struggling to explain herself. “I’ve spent so much time and energy worrying about Holden, trying to keep him healthy, that I took my own health for granted. It’s like I almost forgot I was sick, too. I felt fine, so it was easy to convince myself that I *was* fine. And then to find out otherwise, that, no, actually the virus *is* progressing... yeah, that was a hard pill to swallow - no pun intended.”

Smiling tearfully, she took a tissue out of her purse to wipe her eyes. “I can’t afford to be sick,” she continued. “The boys need me. My parents are getting older; I can’t count on them being able to take care of James and Holden if something were to happen to me, and down the road, *they’re* going to need me, too. The thought of not being there for them and our children terrifies me.”

“You’re going to be *fine*,” I told her firmly, squeezing her arm. “The medication will help keep you healthy so you *can* be there for your family. And if, God forbid, something were to happen, then I would take care of James and Holden.”

As I looked into Leigh’s misty eyes, I saw the doubt there and knew what she must have been thinking. My own health was even more precarious than hers. If my transplanted liver failed, or the combination of drugs I was taking caused other complications, or I contracted a serious infection that my weakened immune system couldn’t fight, then I might not be around, either. It wasn’t just the HIV I had to worry about anymore.

“I know,” said Leigh, nodding. Neither of us wanted to acknowledge what we’d been thinking about. “You’re right. We’re both gonna be fine. Holden, too.”

I put my arms around her, kissing the top of her head as she leaned into my chest. I wanted to reassure her that everything would be all right, but the truth was, neither of us really knew what the future would hold. Her fears certainly weren’t unfounded.

After our conversation, saying goodbye to my boys was particularly hard. I hugged them both a little tighter and a lot longer than usual, not sure when I would see them next.

“Take care of yourself,” I told Leigh, giving her hand a squeeze.

“You too,” she said, squeezing back. “See ya, Howie.”

“See ya,” I echoed, as I let go of her hand. It wasn’t like our old goodbyes, but then, we couldn’t go back to how things were. We could neither change the past, nor control the future, but like it or not, we had to keep moving forward.

Chapter 72

Nick

After I released a statement about my break-up with Lauren, the fans stopped bringing it up at soundcheck. But once the media got wind of it, the gossip mill started grinding out stories again, speculating about why we had ended our engagement, and the rumors about my health and sexuality resurfaced.

I tried to ignore them, refusing to answer questions or comment on any of it, as I waited for an A-list star to announce something more interesting. Since I was a B-lister at best, I figured it was only a matter of time before the media moved on to bigger and better stories. George Clooney getting married the weekend before our concert in L.A. was about the best thing that could have happened to me because it meant I would be left alone. When one of Hollywood’s hottest bachelors finally ties the knot, nobody cares about a washed-up Backstreet Boy.

It felt weird, being back in L.A. for a show. I used to look forward to performing there because I could spend time with Lauren and sleep in my own bed for a couple of nights. But L.A. no longer felt like home. To me, it was just another stop on the tour.

I stayed at Howie’s house, figuring he and I would be spending a lot of time together over the next few days while the other guys were with their families. It was easy enough to do our own thing away from the venue, but hard not to feel sorry for ourselves when AJ, Kevin, and Brian all showed up for soundcheck with their wives and kids. I’m sure it

was worse for Howie than for me; he had to be missing James and Holden like crazy. But although I'd never admit it to him, I also missed Lauren.

I could hardly remember the last time I'd performed in L.A. without Lauren in the audience, and a part of me wished she would come. *Don't get your hopes up*, the more cynical side of me warned. She had made it pretty clear she was moving on, or at least trying to. Coming to see my show would be taking a step backwards.

Even so, my mind kept going back and forth all day long, debating about whether or not she would show up that night. *Why would she?* I'd wonder. *Even when she was with me, she wasn't a Backstreet Boys fan.* Then I would argue with myself. *But it's not about being a fan. It's about supporting a friend. We can still be friends, can't we?*

Of course we can, I thought. *But are we?*

I wasn't sure.

"You feeling okay, Nicky?" Howie asked me that evening, as we ate dinner backstage before the show. "You're quiet tonight."

"I'm fine," I said quickly. Then, so he wouldn't think I was trying to blow him off or hide something, I added, "It's just hard not having anyone here with me, ya know?"

Howie nodded. "Believe me, I know," he replied with a sad smile. "But we have each other, at least."

I returned his smile. "True."

But the truth was, being with Howie made me feel even more isolated, especially from the other guys. Brian, Kevin, and AJ had been accepting enough, but there was still this awkwardness in the air whenever the five of us were together. Maybe it was just my perception, but I felt like they looked at Howie and me differently now that we were a couple. It was like we had crossed an invisible line, and there was no going back, not even if we broke up.

But at least we didn't have to pretend anymore, not even in front of the guys' families. I'd asked Kevin and AJ before we arrived in L.A., "Did you tell your wife about me and Howie?" Both admitted that they had, which didn't surprise me. I wasn't upset, either. It actually made things easier, not having to hide anything.

I wondered if Rochelle had said anything to Lauren, like Howie thought she would. I wanted to ask her, but she and AJ had been attached at the hip all day, making it impossible to get her alone for a private conversation. I looked around the green room and saw AJ feeding Ava cheese and crackers. Rochelle was nowhere to be found. Wondering if I might be able to catch her on the way back from the bathroom or wherever she'd gone, I stood up and set my plate down on my chair. "Be right back," I told Howie and walked over to AJ. "Hey, where's your wife?" I asked.

"She went to meet her date for the show tonight," AJ replied.

"I thought Ava was her date."

"I mean her *other* date. You know Ro - always gotta have her posse with her, wherever she goes. She's a big fan of the group date," he said, grinning.

I laughed, figuring he meant her friend Mark, who may as well have been a member of the McLean family, for as much as he hung out with them. I went back to my seat and didn't think twice about it, until Rochelle reappeared.

"Hey Carter, come here," she called casually from the doorway.

AJ must have told her I was looking for her, I thought as I followed her into the hall. I wasn't prepared to find Lauren waiting there.

"Hey," she said awkwardly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Hey!" I replied, hoping I just sounded surprised and not too excited. "I didn't know you were coming tonight."

"You weren't supposed to," she said, shooting Rochelle an annoyed look. I raised my eyebrows, and Lauren sighed. "I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. I wasn't even going to come backstage, but Ro said everyone would want to see me and that it'd be weird if I didn't."

"Damn right!" Rochelle chimed in, throwing her arm around Lauren. "Once a Backstreet Girl, always a Backstreet Girl. You're still a member of this family."

I snorted. "If that were true, we'd have a lot of other women hanging around backstage. Don't forget, Paris Hilton was once a 'Backstreet Girl' too."

“Ew.” Rochelle wrinkled her nose. “She was before my time, so she doesn’t count. Besides, from what AJ’s told me, she was never really a member of the Backstreet family. He said no one else liked her except you.”

“Well, yeah, that’s probably true,” I admitted, laughing.

“But everyone likes Lo,” Rochelle continued, squeezing Lauren’s shoulders, “so just because you guys are broken up doesn’t mean we all can’t still be friends, right?”

Lauren looked at me apologetically, her face bright red. Wanting to reassure her, I smiled and said, “Of course not. I’m glad you came.”

“See?” Rochelle grinned at Lauren. “He’s glad you’re here. Now I’m gonna go check on my kid while the two of you talk.” Then she let go of Lauren and went back into the green room.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren sighed, once we were alone in the hall. “I should’ve asked you if it was okay if I came.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked. “You’re always welcome. I would’ve invited you myself if I’d thought you wanted to come. Does this mean I finally succeeded in turning you into a Backstreet Boys fan?”

She laughed. “Something like that.”

“I knew it would happen someday,” I said triumphantly, smiling at her. As we joked around, the awkwardness between us faded away, but the whole time, I was watching her face, waiting to see some sign that she knew about Howie and me. But if Lauren knew, she didn’t let it show.

I have to tell her, I realized. If she went into the green room without knowing, it would only be a matter of time before someone else let the secret slip. Leighanne, most likely. If Lauren was going to find out, I wanted her to hear it from me first.

“Hey, will you walk with me?” I said, putting my hand on her shoulder.

“Sure,” she agreed, looking at me curiously. I led her into my empty dressing room and shut the door. “What’s up?” she asked.

I sat down on the couch and invited her to do the same. “I have something I need to tell you,” I said.

“That doesn’t sound good.” She gave me a concerned look. “Does it have to do with your health?”

I shook my head. “No... no, actually, I’m doing really good. I’ve been staying on my meds, and my latest tests showed the virus is almost undetectable.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, wow! That’s wonderful, Nick!” she said, smiling. “I’m so happy to hear you’re doing well.”

“Thanks.” I shifted uncomfortably on the couch, hating the thought of telling her something that would take that smile away. “So... something happened this summer that I think you should know about, if you don’t already,” I began, searching her face again for a sign that she already knew.

But Lauren just looked genuinely confused. “What?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well... Howie and I, uh... we’re sort of... together.”

Her eyes widened again, her brows arching as high as they would go. For a few seconds, she was speechless, her mouth hanging open like she wanted to say something, but didn’t know what. Finally, she said, “Seriously?”

Feeling my face flush, I slowly nodded. She probably thought I was trying to punk her, but Lauren should have known me well enough to know I wouldn’t be able to go this long without laughing.

“When you say you’re ‘together,’ you mean... sexually? Romantically?”

I closed my eyes, not wanting to see her reaction, as I nodded again.

“Wow.” It was a much different tone from her “oh, wow!” earlier. When I opened my eyes again, she was looking at me as if I’d suddenly sprouted a second head. “So is that why you broke up with me, so you could be with Howie? Did you have feelings for him then?”

“No,” I said adamantly. “That didn’t happen until later.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So on the cruise last year...?”

I sighed. “Okay, so maybe I did feel something then. I don’t know; I was drunk. I really didn’t think it meant anything... but maybe it did.”

“Is that why you were so upset with him? You didn’t want to admit you felt something, too?”

“I think it was more the fact that he gave me fucking HIV, but... I mean, yeah, maybe that, too. I dunno, Lauren, it’s complicated.”

She snorted. “Yeah, no shit.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, glancing over at her. She was still looking a little shell-shocked. “So you really didn’t know?”

“No,” she insisted, shaking her head. “How would I have known?”

I shrugged. “I thought Rochelle or one of the other wives would’ve told you.”

“Rochelle’s not the type of person to out someone else, not even to a close friend,” said Lauren. “So the rest of them know, too?”

I nodded. “The guys and their wives do, but no one else outside of Howie’s family. So you can’t say anything, okay? Please. We want to keep it private.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” she promised. “It seems like the press might be onto you, though. I’ve seen the stories they’ve been publishing... I thought they were just silly rumors.”

“They don’t know anything for a fact,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s all just speculation. If it weren’t for that stupid photo of me and Howie outside the AIDS clinic, they wouldn’t suspect a thing. That’s what started all that bullshit.”

Lauren raised her eyebrows again, and I realized: that photo was snapped the day I’d left her. If I hadn’t done that, there would be nothing to speculate about. I wondered if that was what she was thinking, too, but if it was, she didn’t say it. Instead, she asked, “So going back to you and Howie... how did *that* start? Who initiated it, you or him?”

It was my turn to raise my eyebrows. “Do you really wanna know the details?”

She shrugged. “Not really. I guess I’m just wondering if he manipulated you the same way he manipulated me.”

I frowned at her, taken aback by that statement. “What are you talking about? How did Howie manipulate you?”

Lauren pressed her lips together and took a deep breath, her nostrils flaring. “Remember when you were in the hospital in Tennessee? He’s the one who talked me into leaving. He told me to go home and give you some space, that if I ‘let you go’ and acted like I was moving on, you’d come crawling back to me eventually. And the whole time, he was just waiting to whisk you off to Florida and try to turn you gay!”

I bristled at that. “I’m *not* gay.”

She raised her eyebrows, looking at me skeptically.

“Okay, so I might be bi.”

“*Might* be? Are you or are you not fucking Howie Dorough?”

“Fine... I’m bi,” I admitted, feeling myself blush. “But he didn’t *make* me that way. You and both know you can’t *change* someone’s sexuality. Howie just sort of woke up feelings that were inside me all along, I guess.”

The whole time I was talking, my heart was fluttering so fast, I felt almost faint. But at the same time, it felt good to get my feelings out. No more secrets. No more hiding who I really was.

Lauren rolled her eyes. “I know, Nick; I didn’t mean he literally turned you gay - or bi, whatever. All I’m saying is, I think he knew he could get you to explore those feelings if he had you all to himself. So he came up with this plan to invite you to Cape Canaveral so he could ‘keep an eye on’ you, and he sent me away. Sneaky bastard.”

I had never considered that Howie might have had ulterior motives in asking me to come stay with him, but when I thought back to how he’d convinced me - by making *me* feel sorry for *him* even though *I* was the one who had just gotten out of the hospital - I could see her point. Maybe he *had* manipulated me.

“Well, I guess his plan worked out perfectly then,” I said. “If you’re waiting for me to change my mind, you might as well move on, Lauren, ‘cause I’m not gonna come crawling back. I hope we can be friends, but we can’t be a couple anymore.”

My bluntness made her recoil, but she composed herself quickly and replied, “Is that because you’re in love with Howie or because you’re HIV-positive?”

“Both.”

She raised her eyebrows again, like she didn't believe me. I was getting sick of seeing that same look over and over again. “Really?” she asked. “Are you sure you're not just 'in love' with Howie *because* you're both HIV-positive?”

She sounded like Brian. Why did everyone assume Howie and I were only together because we had the same status? Was it that hard for the people in my life to believe I could actually be happy with Howie?

“No,” I said firmly. “It has nothing to do with that.”

Lauren looked like she still didn't quite believe me, but she knew when to quit. “Okay,” she said, nodding. “Then I wish you both the best. Thanks for telling me.”

As she started to stand up, I reached out and caught her arm. “Wait... don't walk away,” I said. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry I walked out on you, Lauren. Sorry I hurt you. I wish things had worked out differently for us, but I don't regret leaving. You deserve better than me.”

She snorted and shook her head, pulling her hand out of mine. “So *I'm* too good for you, but Howie's not? What's that say about him?”

It was a rhetorical question, but as I considered the answer to it, I realized she was right. It wasn't that Lauren was a better person than Howie or that I loved him more. It was about HIV. She was negative, he was positive, and in my mind, that made all the difference. I didn't have to worry about infecting Howie like I had with Lauren. Our relationship, once we'd gotten past the initial awkwardness, was convenient and comfortable. That didn't make it better or worse than my relationship with Lauren, but it did make it work.

“Howie's not perfect,” I admitted. “I know you're not either, Lauren, but you are perfect for someone out there... just not me.”

She sighed and shook her head. “I shouldn't have come here tonight. It was stupid. I just didn't think it would be this hard.”

I knew how she felt. Even though I had wished she would come, it was hard for me to see her struggling. I just wanted to wrap my arms around her and hold her the way I

used to, but I couldn't. For her own health and happiness, I had to help Lauren move on, even if it meant hurting her again.

"It'll get easier," I said. "You just need to get out there and start dating again. Find someone you can be happy with, like I did. I want you to be happy."

She sniffled and nodded, wiping away the tears that had started in her eyes. "I want you to be happy, too," she replied. "You do seem a lot happier than you were last winter."

"Yeah... but I was happy with you before then," I insisted, not wanting her to think everything was better with Howie. It wasn't.

"Before you got HIV, you mean."

I sighed and shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so. What else do you want me to say? It changed me, Lauren. It changed my whole life. I'm a different person now than I was when I proposed to you. I'm sorry."

"Change isn't a bad thing," she said. "Couples can change together. I just wish you'd given me the chance to change with you before you decided our relationship wasn't worth it."

I shook my head. "You don't understand."

"Oh, of course not!" she snapped. "How could I understand? I'm not in the club with you and Howie."

"What, and you wish you were?" I asked incredulously, my voice rising. "Did you *want* me to infect you?"

"No, but sometimes I think it would have made things easier if you had! Then you wouldn't have left me."

I snorted and shook my head again. "No... then *you* would've left *me*."

Her eyes flashed with anger. "No, I would not have! Give me some credit here, Nick! I took care of you! I kept track of your medication, I cooked you healthy meals, I came to all of your doctor's appointments... and I would have happily done that for the rest of my life because *I love you*. Negative or positive, nothing could change that."

A lump had risen in my throat. Swallowing hard, I whispered, “And that’s why I don’t deserve you.” Then I forced myself to stand up and walk out on her for the second time.

I felt bad about the way I’d left Lauren. She was so upset, I assumed she wouldn’t stay for the show, so it was a surprise to walk to the front of the stage for “Incomplete” and see her standing in the second row, sandwiched between Rochelle and Leighanne. I wondered how much she and Brian’s wife had been badmouthing me before the concert began. But when I caught her eye, she gave me a tiny smile, which I returned, even more convinced that I didn’t deserve someone like her. Howie was great, but Lauren? Lauren was incredible.

I hoped one day, when she was old and gray and happily married to someone else, she would be able to look back and understand that I had done what I did for the right reasons. That even though I had hurt her, I’d had her best interests at heart. But mostly I hoped that one day we could really be friends again, and not just ex-fiancés who missed being more than friends.

“I try... to go on like I never you. I’m awake... but my world is half asleep. I pray... for this heart to be unbroken, ‘cause without you all I’m going to be is... incomplete.”

As I sang the chorus, I locked eyes with Lauren. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but I could swear I saw tears sparkling in her eyes as she looked up at me. I had always loved singing that song, but the lyrics had never impacted me as much as they did then. I had to look away.

Throughout the rest of the show, I was struck by how many of our songs were about a guy who’d either been treated badly by a girl or was promising not to treat a girl badly. Either way, they pretty much all painted us guys in a positive light. There weren’t really any songs about a guy who’d messed up and broken the girl’s heart... until we got to “Shape of My Heart.”

“Baby... please try to forgive me...” As Brian sang the first verse, I thought about how I’d hurt Lauren. And when the stage lights came up during the chorus, I looked down in her direction. I couldn’t see her from that far away - the lights were too blinding - but I could imagine her looking back at me.

“Looking back on the things I’ve done... I was trying to be someone. I played my part... and kept you in the dark. Now let me show you the shape of my heart...”

On the second chorus, I walked to the edge of the stage so I could see her as I sang my verse. I wanted her to know they weren't just lyrics; I meant every word.

"I'm here with my confession... got nothin' to hide no more." I winked her way, and she smiled, shaking her head. *"I don't know where to start... but to show you the shape of my heart."* As I held the last note, I pulled a Brian move, putting my hand over my heart and pounding my chest a couple of times. *"I'm sorry,"* I mouthed at her, while the music swelled. She nodded, and I blew her a quick kiss before turning to rejoin the guys in the center of the stage.

To me, it was nothing but a small gesture to show Lauren I still cared about her. I had no idea it was about to blow up in my face.

Chapter 73

Howie

The tour had taken its toll on me. Even though I'd worked hard to get back into shape, my body didn't recover as quickly as it used to. My muscles would ache after every show, and my legs would swell. I felt tired all the time. By the L.A. show, I was completely worn out.

I tried to hide how fatigued I was feeling from the other guys, not wanting them to worry about me. It was easy enough once we got to L.A. because everyone went their separate ways, wanting to spend as much time with their families as possible. Kevin and AJ went home to see their wives and kids. Brian, Leighanne, and Baylee stayed in their house in Hollywood. That left Nick and me to do our own thing, although we didn't really "do" much at all. He didn't want to go out, afraid of running into paparazzi, and I didn't feel up to it anyway, so we spent our days off just hanging around my house and catching up on sleep.

The day of the show, Kevin, AJ, and Brian all brought their families with them to the venue for soundcheck. Although I was happy to see everyone, it was hard watching the kids play backstage before the show when I was missing mine so much. Maxwell was the same age as Holden, and Mason was just a couple years older than James. If my boys had been with me, they would have had a blast together. It was slightly less painful to see the other guys with their wives because even though I'd lost Leigh, at least I had Nick to keep me from feeling like I was alone.

And then Lauren showed up.

If Nick knew she was coming, he didn't mention it to me. I have no idea what happened between them backstage, but onstage, he only had eyes for her. It was impossible not to notice the way he kept looking at her whenever he was on that side of the stage, offering a smile here, a wink there. It went way beyond his usual attempts to charm the crowd; he was clearly flirting with her.

It made no sense to me because Lauren must have been to hundreds of Backstreet Boys shows, and Nick had never been that distracted by her before. We all liked to wave and blow kisses at our wives when they came to our concerts, but he and Lauren weren't even together anymore. Why was he so mesmerized by her?

"What was going on with you and Lauren tonight?" I asked him after the show, as we were getting ready to go to bed.

Nick took off his t-shirt and wadded it into a ball. "What do you mean?" he replied casually, tossing it toward the overflowing suitcase sitting at the foot of my bed.

I walked around the bed and picked it up, dropping it into the laundry pile instead and making a mental note to wash a load of clothes before we left in the morning. "You couldn't take your eyes off her during the show," I said. "Do you still have feelings for her?"

His face reddened, confirming my suspicions. "So what if I do?" he replied defensively. "It doesn't change the way I feel about you, so don't go getting all jealous. She and I are done."

"It sure didn't look that way," I pointed out, annoyed that he'd picked up on my paranoia.

Nick rolled his eyes. "Dude, you know I'm never gonna go back to Lauren, and you know why, so just drop it, okay?"

I frowned at him. "That makes it sound like you *would* go back to her if it weren't for your HIV. I mean, that's why, right?"

"Well, no shit, Sherlock!" Nick exploded. "I never would've *left* Lauren if it hadn't been for my HIV! We'd be married by now!"

His words were like a slap in the face. *Wake up, Howie! Of course he still loves Lauren,* I realized. *He's only with you because he can't be with her.*

“So yeah, maybe I do I still have feelings for her,” Nick continued, seeming oblivious to the pain he was causing me, “but it doesn’t matter anymore. That chapter in my life is over, and I’ve moved on.”

“It matters to me,” I said quietly. “How do you think it makes me feel to know that even though you’ve, quote, ‘moved on’ with me, you’re still in love with your ex-fiancée?”

Nick’s face reddened, like it had just occurred to him how insensitive he sounded. But instead of apologizing, he decided to get defensive. “You should feel lucky! You got a second chance at life, a way out of your fake marriage, and now you’ve got me all to yourself. Everything worked out exactly the way you wanted, didn’t it?”

“What?!” I cried, shocked by what he was implying. “How dare you say that, like I somehow planned it all? Damn it, Nick, you know I didn’t want any of this to happen! I didn’t want a divorce... or a transplant... and I sure as hell didn’t want anyone to get sick.”

“But you wanted me,” he interjected, before I could continue. “Lauren told me what you did, how you convinced her to leave when I was in the hospital in Tennessee so you could swoop in and be the hero who stuck around to take care of me.”

“That’s not true!” I sputtered, even though it sort of was.

Nick raised his eyebrows. “So Lauren lied?”

I sighed. “I did tell her to go home,” I admitted, “but only because you’d made it clear the relationship was over, and I didn’t think you’d appreciate her being there, acting clingy.”

“Our *engagement* was over, not our whole relationship,” Nick said. “I still wanted to be friends with her, but then she left and didn’t speak to me for six months, and I thought she’d moved on. Come to find out, you told her to *pretend* she was moving on just so you could get her out of the picture!”

I couldn’t believe what a hypocrite he was being. “Do you hear yourself right now?” I fired back. “*You’re* the one who left and stopped speaking to everyone! Then you got sick, and suddenly you wanted to be friends again?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Nick replied. “When you were sick, you didn’t seem to have a problem with everyone flocking to your side, but when I was at rock bottom and needed a friend, you made sure you were the only one around. You manipulated us both.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I wanted to deny Nick’s accusations, but in a way, he was right. I had taken advantage of the situation to ensure that I would be the one staying to take care of Nick. Sure, I owed him for taking care of me after my transplant... but I also wanted to be with him. There was no denying that.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I didn’t mean to manipulate anyone. But you’re right... I did want you. Still do.” I reached out to touch his bare chest, hoping to appeal to the sexual frustration he was no doubt feeling after flirting with Lauren all night. That had always worked for me before, but this time, Nick pulled away.

“No. Not tonight,” he said firmly. “I’m sleeping in the guest room.” Then he walked out, slamming the bedroom door shut behind him.

The five-hour bus ride to San Francisco the next day was long and silent. Nick stayed in his bunk with the curtains drawn and only emerged to get something to eat or go to the bathroom. He barely spoke to me. Meanwhile, though I pretended to be keeping myself busy, all I did was sit around and stress about the fact that Nick seemed to be pulling away.

Nick wasn’t known for having long-lasting relationships, which was why we’d all sensed there was something special about Lauren, long before he’d realized she was “the one.” Now I worried he was regretting his decision to leave her - and rethinking his relationship with me.

I didn’t know what I would do if he decided to end it. The thought of putting myself out there, trying to find another guy who wouldn’t be turned off by my HIV status, was almost as scary as the thought of being alone for the rest of my life.

Nick didn’t have to worry about any of that. I knew if he could only get over his fear of infecting her, Lauren would welcome him back with open arms. One look at her face in the audience at the last show told me she was still in love with him. And Nick hadn’t even tried to deny the fact that he was still in love with Lauren. Was that why he’d never been able to say the words to me? I wondered. I’d always thought it was his homophobia that held him back, but maybe it was because his heart still belonged to her.

Our next show wasn't until the following night, so when we got to San Francisco, we checked into a hotel. I was worried Nick would ask for his own room or get Kevin or AJ to switch with him, but he didn't. I wondered if that meant we were okay, or if he just didn't want to involve anyone else in our drama.

"Do you know what time we're meeting tonight?" I asked Nick once we were alone in our room. Since we had the night off, the five of us guys were going out for Kevin's birthday, which was the next day.

"Seven," was all he said.

"Okay." I took off my shoes, then checked the time on my phone. It was only four o'clock. "I'm gonna lie down for a little while."

Nick glanced back at me as he set his bag down. "You okay?"

"Yeah... just tired. I didn't sleep well last night." It was the truth, although, like I said, I'd been feeling sort of "blah" since before then.

"Oh." He looked away. I wanted to ask how well he'd slept in my guest room, but resisted the temptation, not wanting to hear some snarky reply in return.

I stretched out on the bed by the window, and Nick flopped across the one nearest the door. When I looked over at him, he was lying on his stomach, facing the wall, with his feet hanging off the side closest to me. I could tell he was bent over his phone and wondered what he was doing that he didn't want me to see. Texting Lauren, probably.

I rolled over onto my side so that my back was to him and closed my eyes, trying to block out the bright light and my own dark thoughts.

I woke up to the sound of Nick saying my name. I had been having this weird dream about a dog that could sing the "Happy Birthday" song, but every time it opened its mouth to sing, this mad scientist guy in a white coat would run up and pour a beaker of yellowish liquid down its throat. The poor puppy's belly got bigger and bigger as the scientist pumped it full of chemicals, until it was as swollen as an inflated balloon. I was actually afraid it would pop. "Stop!" I cried, as the puppy howled in pain. "Stop! Stop it!" That's when I started to hear Nick's voice, soft at first, then right in my ear.

“Howie... Howie...”

I felt a hand on my shoulder and instinctively squirmed away. “Stop!”

“Dude, if you’re going to dinner with us, you gotta get up now.”

“What?” I opened my eyes, finally awake. As the details of my dream faded away, I looked up and saw Nick leaning over me. “What time is it?” I asked groggily.

“Six thirty.”

I sat up. “Seriously?” I grabbed my phone off the bedside table and checked the time to make sure he wasn’t messing with me. Sure enough... “I slept for two-and-a-half hours??”

“You must’ve needed it.” Nick’s eyes narrowed as he looked me over. “You sure you’re okay?”

I took the fact that he was worried about me as a sign that he’d forgiven me for starting a fight the night before. Trying to shake off the fog that set in whenever I napped too long, I said, “Yeah, I’m fine,” and forced myself to get off the bed.

But that was a lie; I felt worse than I had when I’d lain down in the first place. I wondered if I was coming down with something. It would have been a miracle if I’d made it through the whole tour with a weakened immune system and not caught so much as a cold, but I’d come pretty close - we only had two more days to go. It was just my bad luck that I would be sick for the last show. I took a Tylenol with my evening medication, hoping it would help my headache go away, and got dressed to go out.

We went to a seafood place on the waterfront, where we were given a table by the window. The view of the sun setting over San Francisco Bay was absolutely beautiful. I had just turned to tell Nick so, when I heard him say, “Yo, Frick, trade me seats.”

I looked at Brian, who was about to sit down across from Nick. He shrugged and came over to our side of the table instead, taking Nick’s seat next to me, while Nick went around to the other side to sit by AJ. AJ and Kevin, who was on the end, both watched him with raised eyebrows.

“What?” said Nick defensively, seeing the looks they were giving him. “Me and Howie aren’t joined at the hip, you know. We don’t have to sit by each other all the time.”

No one argued with him, but AJ let out a low whistle and looked across the table at me. “Trouble in paradise?” he muttered.

“Butt out, AJ,” Nick snapped, picking up his menu.

AJ snickered, which seemed to piss Nick off even more.

“Hey now, fellas, no fighting during my birthday dinner,” said Kevin. His tone was light-hearted, but I could tell he meant it.

Nick scowled, but said nothing more until the waiter came to take our drink orders. AJ asked for a Coke, I ordered iced tea, and Brian and Kevin both got a beer. “I’ll have the same,” I heard Nick say, after Brian had ordered.

I looked at him over the top of my menu, as the waiter walked away. “You know you shouldn’t drink,” I said quietly.

“Who are you, my sobriety coach?” Nick retorted.

“Well, actually, yeah, I thought I sort of was...”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m having *one* beer to celebrate Kevin’s birthday. So what?”

I shrugged. “Just saying... mixing meds and alcohol is stupid. Speaking from experience here.”

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “You also drank a whole bottle of tequila and took a bunch of Tylenol PM, if I remember correctly. There’s a big difference between doing that and drinking *a* beer. I’m not trying to kill myself.”

I felt my face flush. “I know. I just don’t want you to do it accidentally,” I muttered.

“Howie, chill,” said AJ. “It won’t hurt him to have one. We all know Nick’s done a lot stupider shit and survived somehow.”

I let the issue drop, but inwardly, I worried about Nick all night, as one beer turned into two, then three. Why wasn’t anyone else trying to stop him? I wondered, watching him talk about sports with Kevin and Brian.

AJ saw me looking and shook his head. “You can’t make him stop,” he said, just loud enough for me to hear. “He’s gotta learn his limit and make that decision for himself.”

I sighed. "I know. I just don't want him to make himself sick again. You didn't see what bad shape he was in the last time he went on a bender," I said, thinking back to Tennessee.

AJ cracked a smile. "I don't think three beers qualifies as a bender."

But I knew - as AJ should have known, too - that three beers was only the beginning. Nick had no self-control when it came to alcohol. To me, his decision to throw away six months of sobriety for one night's "celebration" was a warning sign that he was headed for another downward spiral. I couldn't understand why no one else saw it or seemed to care.

But as I sat there listening to Kevin and Brian razz him about the Buccaneers' dismal season so far, it occurred to me that maybe this was just Nick's way of trying to distance himself from me and bond with his "bros" again. Despite the guys all claiming to be cool with Nick's and my new relationship, the five of us didn't seem as close as we'd been on the first leg of the tour, before the last cruise. We didn't spend as much time together outside of work, doing things as a whole group like this. It made me wonder if Nick just wanted everything to go back to normal, even though we both knew it never could.

I woke in the middle of the night to the sounds of someone getting violently sick. Fumbling out of bed, I followed a sliver of fluorescent light to the bathroom, where I found Nick on his knees, bent over the toilet bowl.

I stood in the doorway for a few seconds, waiting for him to stop vomiting, then took a few tentative steps inside. "You okay?" I asked.

Nick lifted his head long enough to nod, then lowered it over the toilet again just in time. I knelt beside him and put my hand on his back, rubbing it in circles as he retched, his whole body racked with dry heaves. It didn't sound like he had anything left in his stomach to throw up.

While he waited for the nausea to pass, I wet a washcloth and brought him some bottled water. He wiped his mouth, took a sip of water, and finally leaned back against the wall, looking pale and exhausted.

I flushed the toilet and sat down on the floor with him. "Feeling better?"

“I feel like shit,” he croaked. “Guess that’s what I get, huh? Now it’s your turn to say ‘I told you so.’”

“I don’t need to say it,” I replied. “What can I do to help?”

He closed his eyes. “Can you get me one of my Compazine tablets? They’re the little, round, yellow ones.”

“Sure.” I found his pill organizer on the counter and fished out a dose of his anti-nausea medication. He swallowed it with another sip of water, and we both sat and waited to see if he would be able to keep it down. After a few minutes, I said, “You ready to go back to bed? We should try to get some more sleep... We have a show tomorrow.”

Nick groaned. “Yeah...”

I got up first, then reached down, offering him my hand. He took it, and I pulled him to his feet.

“Thanks,” he said, as we went back into the other room. After what I had just witnessed, I was secretly glad we were sleeping in separate beds. “Night.”

“Goodnight, Nick,” I said, as I crawled underneath the covers and closed my eyes.

“I can’t believe I have a friggin’ hangover,” Nick complained the next morning, holding his head. “I only had a few beers!”

“Yeah, but you hadn’t had any in, like, six months,” I reminded him. “Your tolerance was low. “

“No shit. I’ve never been such a lightweight.” He actually looked disappointed in himself.

I laughed. “It’s not your fault. I heard that alcohol can have a stronger effect on people with HIV. Drinking the same amount raises your blood alcohol level more than before. Not sure if it has something to do with the virus itself, or if it’s just because of drug interactions, but that’s probably why you were so sick last night.” I wanted to say “*I warned you that would happen,*” but I held my tongue. Nick looked like he felt bad enough already.

“Well, thanks for your fine diagnostic work, Dr. Dorough,” Nick muttered sarcastically. “When did you become such a fucking expert on the subject?”

“I like to drink too, Nick,” I replied, annoyed by his tone. “Or at least, I did. After I was diagnosed, I asked my doctor if I could still do it, and that’s what he said. Not that it matters much now. I’ll never be able to have a beer with you guys again.”

Nick gave me a guilty look. He knew, as I did, that liver transplant recipients were strictly forbidden from drinking alcohol. If I were to reject my new liver and need another transplant, any evidence of alcohol consumption would be enough to take me off the list. I couldn’t chance it, especially with the way I’d been feeling lately.

I hadn’t had a drop to drink the night before, but my head hurt, too. So did my stomach. I felt bloated and slightly nauseous, which I blamed on eating too much greasy food at Kevin’s birthday dinner, but in the back of my mind lurked another, more frightening thought: that my transplanted liver was starting to fail.

I didn’t say anything to anyone that day or the next, as we traveled to Seattle for our final show. Nick was still acting distant, so it was easy for me to keep quiet. I stayed in my bunk on the tour bus and slept for most of the thirteen-hour trip. I didn’t feel any better when we arrived, but I kept shoving the bad thoughts to the back of my mind, telling myself, *There’s only one more show. Just get through it, and then you can go home and get checked out.*

But then, backstage before the last show, I was getting dressed for our opening number when I realized the black pants I wore on stage every night wouldn’t button. They’d felt tight in San Francisco two nights ago, but now there was a two-inch gap between the pieces of fabric. Embarrassed, I tried on a different pair of pants. Same problem. I watched myself in the mirror, straining to stretch the waistband so it would fasten. My belly looked bloated, like I’d somehow gained ten pounds in two days. That was when I knew for sure that something was seriously wrong.

Chapter 74

Nick

When the tour ended, I was going home to Tennessee. I’d decided that the day after the L.A. show, on the long bus ride to San Francisco. Howie and I had already booked our

flights from Seattle to Orlando for the morning after our last show, but I was going to switch for a one-way ticket to Nashville instead. We were hardly speaking after our fight the night before, and I needed some space.

More than that, I needed time - time apart from him, time alone to sort out my feelings. So much had changed over the last year. I felt like I no longer knew who I was, what I wanted, or where I was going in life, and I needed to figure it all out. But the first thing I had to figure out was how to tell Howie I wasn't going back to Florida with him.

Then he got sick, and everything changed again.

I should have noticed something was wrong, but I didn't. The last few days of the tour, I tried to spend as little time with Howie as possible. When we were in a hotel room, we slept in separate beds, and when we were on the bus, I stayed in my bunk with the privacy curtains closed. It wasn't even that I was still mad at him for manipulating Lauren and me as much as I just needed to be away from him.

The five of us guys always got to this point toward the end of a tour, when we were sick of each other and couldn't wait to go home. There's just something about spending so many weeks traveling together, sharing buses and hotels and dressing rooms, that does that to you. I'm a firm believer in the phrase "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," the idea that you need some time apart to appreciate the time you have together. It was true: the guys and I didn't see much of each other when we weren't working, but whenever it was time to go back on tour, we couldn't wait to be together again.

But Howie and I hadn't been apart since April, when he'd convinced me to come to Cape Canaveral with him. For six months, we had been living together, working together, and hanging out together. I wasn't used to spending so much time with one person. When I was engaged to Lauren, we lived together, of course, but she didn't always come out on the road with me, so we would sometimes go several weeks without seeing each other. It was hard, but it worked for us. It made us look forward to my time off and her trips to join me on tour that much more. With Howie, though, there was no separation, and all that "togetherness" was starting to take its toll on us.

That's why it didn't seem strange to me that Howie was distant and moody the last two days of the tour. I didn't wonder why he was sleeping so much or saying so little. I just figured he felt the same way I did. It never occurred to me that he wasn't feeling well, that he wasn't just sick of me, but actually, physically *sick*.

I didn't notice anything until our last show in Seattle. Even then, it took me almost the entire show to realize something was wrong. It wasn't until our last set, as we stood backstage before the encore, that I heard Kevin ask Howie, "You okay, man?"

"I'll make it," was Howie's answer, which I thought was weird. Then I looked over at him and saw how much he was sweating. That in itself wasn't unusual; we all sweat buckets each show, but usually I was the worst offender, with beads of sweat pouring down my beet red face after just a few songs. Howie normally didn't sweat that bad, but now he was sweating profusely after two sets with mostly slow songs and little to no dancing.

I didn't have time to worry about what that meant. No sooner had the thought that something might be wrong crossed my mind than I heard the opening chords of "Everybody," which was our cue to run up to the risers onstage.

Howie was on the opposite side of the stage for most of "Everybody," so it was hard for me to see him, but during "Larger Than Life," I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He seemed to be struggling to keep up with the dance moves, and I could hear the breathlessness in his voice as he sang.

When we went backstage after taking our final bows, everyone was high-fiving and congratulating each other on finishing another successful tour. I looked around for Howie, wanting to make sure he was okay, but he had already headed off to his dressing room. That was where I found him a few minutes later. He was doubled over, holding his side, and breathing so hard his shoulders were heaving.

"Howie?" I asked, putting my hand on his back. His black, sleeveless shirt was soaked with sweat. "Are you alright?"

Howie shook his head, and when he looked up, I was startled to see tears in his eyes. "No," he whispered. "Nicky, I need you to take me to the nearest hospital. Now."

The next half-hour seemed to happen in a blur. If this were a movie, everyone on film would have been out of focus and moving at super-fast speed. First I ran to get Kevin, who then called for the EMTs. They came backstage quickly and checked Howie's vitals, and before I knew it, Howie was being loaded into the back of an ambulance.

"Go with him, Nick," Kevin told me. "We'll be there as soon as we can."

So I rode with Howie to the hospital. I sat on a bench on one side of the ambulance, trying to stay out of the paramedics' way as I watched them work on Howie. They had strapped an oxygen mask to his face, which seemed to help his breathing, but they said his blood pressure was low, likely from dehydration. I had to look away as they started an IV in his arm to give him some fluids. The whole time, I tried to reassure myself that Howie was going to be fine. The last time he'd been hospitalized, it had turned out to be nothing but a minor infection. But something about the way Howie had looked at me made me think the situation was more serious than that.

When we got to the emergency room, Howie was whisked inside and seen right away. I guess when you arrive by ambulance, you get to skip the waiting room. A nurse brought him straight back to an exam room, where she took his vitals again, swapped the oxygen mask for smaller nasal cannula, and hooked him up to some monitoring equipment. Then she started asking him all kinds of questions about his medical history. Howie was having an easier time breathing by then, so I sat back and let him do the talking while the nurse scribbled notes on his chart.

I may have zoned out a little as he told her about his HIV, his liver transplant, and all the medications he was taking, but when he started listing the symptoms he'd been experiencing, I sat up straight and listened. Headaches, fatigue, stomach pain, swelling... How could I have not known about any of that?

As soon as the nurse left, I looked at Howie. "How long have you been feeling like this?"

Howie shrugged. "Just for the past few days."

I stared at him, incredulous. "And you didn't think you should say anything??"

Before Howie could answer, the nurse came back in, accompanied by a gray-haired man in navy blue scrubs, who introduced himself as Dr. Ross. "So, Mr. Dorrough, I hear you were having some trouble breathing after your concert tonight?" the doctor asked.

Howie nodded. "I just couldn't catch my breath. Too much dancing, I guess." He tried to smile, but I could tell he was scared. "You can call me Howie, by the way."

"From the Backstreet Boys, right?" Dr. Ross grinned. "I remember you guys from the nineties. Lots of patients who were fans back then. Lean forward for me, please." He slipped his stethoscope into his ears as Howie sat up. "Deep breath." He pressed the end of the stethoscope against Howie's back and listened. "I've got twin daughters, but they're more into One Direction these days. Deep breath again."

Howie inhaled, then looked over at me and winked. I smiled, as the memory of us painting his spare bedroom entered my mind. I'd had so much fun with him that day.

"Okay, you can lie back again," said Dr. Ross.

"How old are your daughters?" Howie asked politely, as the doctor slid his stethoscope down the front of Howie's shirt to listen to his chest.

"Sixteen next month." Dr. Ross made a face. "Scary, isn't it? Another deep breath."

Howie chuckled before inhaling again.

"Either of you got kids?" asked the doctor, looking from him to me.

I shook my head, but Howie said, "Two boys. Five and one."

Dr. Ross smiled. "Enjoy them while they're little. They grow up fast. One more deep breath for me."

Howie smiled back sadly. "I know." He took another breath and let it out slowly, almost like a sigh.

"Normal heart sounds, and lungs are clear," Dr. Ross said to the nurse, who added his notes to Howie's chart. "Well, Howie, everything sounds good so far. Let's see what else is going on here. You said you've had some stomach pain?" he asked, pulling on a pair of latex gloves.

Howie nodded. "Bloating, too. I could barely button my pants the last two days."

I frowned, leaning forward for a closer look as Dr. Ross lifted Howie's shirt to expose his midsection. Howie had always had a flat stomach, sometimes even a six-pack, but suddenly, it looked more like the beginnings of a beer belly. How could I not have noticed that? I wondered. We'd been sharing a hotel room; we'd gotten dressed in front of each other. But I'd been so preoccupied lately, I hadn't been paying attention. I suddenly felt really bad about that.

Dr. Ross had a frown on his face, too. "How long since your liver transplant?" he asked, as he pressed his fingers against Howie's abdomen, feeling around in different places.

"It'll be nine months tomorrow," answered Howie.

“Did you have any episodes of rejection or other complications during your recovery?”

Howie winced as the doctor palpated a spot on his side, right over his surgical scar.

“No,” he said.

Dr. Ross glanced over at the nurse. “Right upper quadrant tenderness,” he muttered out of the side of his mouth, then returned his attention to Howie. “Have you been taking all your medications as directed?” he asked, now listening with his stethoscope as he tapped on Howie’s stomach.

“Yes.” Howie hesitated, then added, “It’s my liver, isn’t it?”

Dr. Ross didn’t answer at first. He took the stethoscope out of his ears and pulled a small pen light out of his pocket. “Look here,” he said, shining the light into Howie’s eyes. When he lowered the light, he continued to look Howie straight in the eye. “We won’t know for sure if it’s your liver until we run some tests, but it looks that way, yeah. You’re a little jaundiced, and the bloating in your belly is from fluid build-up, which can be caused by liver failure. That also might be why you were short of breath earlier, from the fluid accumulation compressing your diaphragm. I’m amazed you were able to make it through a whole concert.”

“Barely,” said Howie with a sigh. “So what now?”

“Well, now I’m going to order some labs, a chest x-ray, and an abdominal scan so we can see what your liver’s looking like. Then I’ll come back and drain some of that fluid from your belly so we can make sure there’s no infection. Just sit tight for now, and someone should be in to collect the samples soon.”

After the doctor and nurse had left, Howie sighed again and looked over at me. “I’m sorry, Nick,” he said. “You don’t have to stay for all that. Go back to the hotel and get some sleep. I’ll call you in the morning when I know more.”

I blinked at him in disbelief. “Are you kidding? I’m not gonna leave you here by yourself. Besides, the guys are on their way; they’ll probably be here any minute.”

Howie groaned. “I hate having everyone see me like this.”

“Oh relax, your hair looks fine,” I said, rolling my eyes. But when I looked at him, knowing what I did now, I saw the signs of sickness I had somehow missed before, signs that were suddenly much more visible under the bright, florescent lights. Howie’s skin had a slight yellow tone that could have been mistaken for a golden tan. Even the whites

of his eyes had taken on a faint yellow hue. He had pulled his shirt back down over his stomach, but it didn't completely hide the small pooch of a belly that hadn't been there just days before. Now I knew why he'd been on the verge of tears when he told me he needed to go to the hospital. Howie was in bad shape... and he knew it, too.

When Kevin, Brian, and AJ arrived, they all crowded around Howie's bed and tried to keep him company as he waited. After awhile, the nurse came back to collect blood and urine samples.

"This is some after party," AJ said sarcastically, when Howie walked back from the bathroom wheeling his IV stand and carrying a cup of fresh pee for the nurse.

"We just need Nick to spin some records... 'Shots! Shots! Shots! Sh-sh-shots! Shots! Shots!'" Brian chanted, as the nurse finished labeling the little containers filled with Howie's bodily fluids.

She laughed and said, "I'm off to get these to the lab. Don't party too hard without me."

"We won't," said Howie, shaking his head at Brian. "You guys really don't have to hang out with me all night. I know you all have early flights out of here tomorrow."

Brian, Kevin, AJ, and I looked at each other. I'm sure we were all thinking the same thing, but Kevin was the one who said it. "No one's leaving town till we know what's going on with you."

As AJ and Brian nodded in agreement, Howie smiled. "I appreciate it, guys, but seriously, you don't have to stay. Go home to your families."

"You're our family, too," said AJ. "Hate to break it to ya, bro, but you're stuck with us."

Howie rolled his eyes, but I could tell he was touched.

Soon after that, someone came to take Howie to radiology for his scans. As soon as he was gone, Kevin turned to me and asked, "How long has he been feeling like this?"

"I dunno, a few days?" I answered.

Kevin frowned. "Why didn't you say anything?"

“I didn’t know,” I admitted, ashamed that it was the truth. “We hadn’t really been talking much.”

“See? Trouble in paradise - I called it the other night,” said AJ, almost triumphantly. “So what happened? Howie’s not around. Spill.” He looked at me expectantly, as if waiting to hear some hot gossip.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re worse than the fucking paparazzi. Nothing happened.”

“Then why weren’t you talking?” Kevin wondered, still frowning.

Brian came to my defense. “Leave him alone, guys. Whatever’s going on, it’s between Nick and Howie. It’s none of our business.”

“Thank you, Brian,” I said, glaring at AJ. I wasn’t really mad at him, just annoyed that he was still acting like Howie’s and my whole relationship existed for his entertainment. It was almost like he didn’t believe it was for real. That would explain why he and Rochelle kept trying to bring Lauren back into the picture, anyway.

Between AJ’s antics and Brian asking if I was only with Howie because I had no other options, it seemed like none of the guys took us seriously. But maybe that was my fault. I had been so careful not to show any sign of affection toward Howie in front of them, afraid of making things awkward, that maybe they just couldn’t see it. I decided it was time for me to change that.

When Howie was wheeled back into the room, I leaned over the gurney and gave him a kiss on the lips. “How ya feelin’?” I asked, as I pulled away.

For a second, Howie just stared at me with wide eyes, stunned by what I had just done in front of the other guys. “Better now,” he said, as a smile spread across his face. “What was that for?”

I could feel the eyes on my back and the heat rising in my cheeks. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “Sorry for ignoring you, for making you feel like you couldn’t confide in me. I had no idea you were sick.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Nick; it’s not your fault,” Howie muttered back. “And it’s not that I felt I couldn’t confide in you. I didn’t tell anyone because I didn’t want to deal with it until the tour was over.”

“Well, that was pretty damn stupid, D,” AJ blurted suddenly. I turned around, expecting to see Brian, Kevin, and him staring at me with raised eyebrows, but if that was their initial reaction, it had worn off by now. They seemed completely unfazed by the kiss. Then again, given the seriousness of the situation, I supposed they had more important things to think about. “You two dumbasses deserve each other,” AJ added, and then he winked at me, which I guess was his weird way of giving his approval.

Brian changed the subject. “Do you really think you’re rejecting the liver?” he asked, his voice catching in his throat.

Howie nodded grimly. “Yeah, I do. But I won’t know for sure until the test results come back.”

“When will that be?” Kevin wondered, his brow furrowed with concern.

“Probably not for a couple hours.” Howie glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s late, guys. You should really go back to the hotel and get some sleep. You can come back in the morning if you want to. I should know more then.”

Brian, Kevin, AJ, and I all looked at each other. “I’m not leaving,” I said, remembering how Howie had stayed by my bedside at the hospital in Tennessee, waiting for my fever to break. It didn’t matter if he’d done that to manipulate me or not; he was still my best friend, and I wasn’t going to walk out on him now. “You guys can go, though. I’ll text you if we hear anything.”

The guys exchanged glances, shrugging uncertainly. No one seemed to want to make a decision. Finally, Kevin smiled at me and said, “I think Howie’s in good hands. Why don’t we let him get some rest? C’mon, fellas.” He started walking toward the door. Hesitantly, AJ followed.

Brian grabbed Howie’s hand. “Hang in there, man,” he said, giving it a squeeze. Then he looked at me. “Call if you need anything, Nick.”

I nodded, and he and the others left. Alone with Howie, I settled into a hard chair for what was sure to be a long, sleepless night.

Chapter 75

Howie

It's crazy how quickly life can change.

In just a few days, I'd gone from feeling good to falling apart again. I had worked so hard before the tour to build up my stamina, and now, hours after the final show, I was struggling just to breathe. I didn't need to wait for the test results to know what they would reveal. My body was rejecting my new liver, which had started to fail.

The condition of my relationship with Nick was less clear. For awhile, I'd thought that was failing, too. But then he had kissed me - in front of the other guys. It was a small gesture, but it held such huge weight. If Nick could overcome his insecurity over the way he felt about me, then we had a fighting chance at making this work, in spite of the fact that he was still in love with Lauren. That one kiss left me feeling a lot better than before.

It's crazy how quickly life can change.

I thought about that as I lay on my back in the emergency room, watching my handsome, salt-and-pepper-haired doctor get ready to drain the fluid from my belly. Dr. Ross had brought a portable ultrasound machine into my room, and as he smeared some gel on my stomach and started moving the transducer around, I said to Nick, "This reminds me of going with Leigh to get a sonogram when she was pregnant." I could picture her lying in a bed like this, her shirt pulled up, laughing as the doctor slathered that stuff all over her baby bump. She had always been ticklish. I'd held her hand as we'd both turned our heads toward the monitor, watching our son squirm inside her. I remembered being there the first time we'd heard the baby's heartbeat, the incredible feeling of seeing a flicker of life on the black-and-white screen.

Nick wrinkled his nose. "Well, you do sort of look pregnant, but unless we're living in one of those fan fiction stories with guys giving birth, there ain't no baby in there."

I gave him a weird look. "What the hell have you been reading?"

His face reddened. "I don't read them! I've just heard about them."

"Yeah, sure, Nick," I said sarcastically, grinning at him. "Whatever you say."

"I don't!" Nick insisted, his face still bright red.

Dr. Ross chuckled. "Don't worry, fellas, there's definitely no baby. But there is a decent-sized pocket of fluid right here," he said, pointing out a black void on the screen.

Definitely no baby. My memories of feeling happy and hopeful as I'd looked at Leigh's sonograms suddenly seemed far away, as if they were from another lifetime. And in a way, they were. In this new life, in which I was the one lying on the bed, I just felt sad and scared. I wished Nick would take my hand and squeeze it and tell me it was going to

be all right, but I knew he wouldn't, not in front of the doctor. Still, the fact that he had stayed, even though I knew it made him uncomfortable, meant the world to me. I tried to find hope in that.

"See that white shape? That's your liver," added Dr. Ross, looking at the ultrasound monitor.

"How does it look?" I asked hoarsely. My throat suddenly felt dry. I swallowed hard as I waited for his answer.

"Slightly enlarged," he said. "I'm still waiting on your test results, but it's looking like you're going to need a liver biopsy."

Nick gave me a worried glance, but I just nodded, not surprised by that news.

"I'm gonna go ahead and drain all the fluid so they can do a needle biopsy," Dr. Ross continued. "Otherwise they'll want to go in through your neck."

I laughed, thinking he was just joking, until I looked at his face and saw that he was serious. "That sounds awful, so... yes, drain away," I said, trying to keep my voice light so I didn't sound as uneasy as I felt. Nick was still sitting there, nervously licking his lips, and I didn't want to scare him away.

Dr. Ross drew an X on my stomach with a marker. "X marks the spot," he said, smiling. He had such a charming smile that, for a few seconds, I almost forgot what he was about to do to me. Then he started explaining the procedure as he set up his equipment on a tray. "First I'm going to inject you with a local anesthetic to numb the area. Then I'll thread a catheter into that fluid pocket we found, and in a few minutes, you'll feel a little lighter and be breathing a lot easier."

"Should I stay in here, or-?" Nick asked uncertainly, shifting in his chair.

"You're welcome to stay if Howie here doesn't mind," said the doctor, glancing from him to me.

"I don't mind," I said quickly, smiling at Nick. "Don't you wanna see what it looks like? I bet it's gonna be gross."

Nick made a face, but no move to leave his seat. Whether it was genuine compassion for me or just morbid curiosity, something made him stay.

"I will need you to wear a surgical mask and gown if you're going to stay," Dr. Ross said to Nick. "We need to maintain a sterile field because once we put a hole in his belly, we don't want any germs getting in. An infection is the last thing he needs, especially with his immune system already suppressed."

“Yeah, no Nick Plague,” I joked, winking at Nick as I watched him put on a blue garment over his clothes and a mask that matched the one Dr. Ross was now wearing. The two of them made an attractive team.

“Dr. Carter, here to assist,” Nick announced. I couldn’t see his mouth anymore because of the mask, but I could tell by his eyes that he was wearing a mischievous grin underneath it.

“Dr. Carter, here to *observe*,” I corrected quickly.

That made Dr. Ross chuckle, his brown eyes crinkling at the corners. The warmth in them was reassuring. “I used to work with a Dr. Carter,” he said randomly, as he painted my skin with a brown antiseptic. Then he covered my stomach with a sterile drape. “You’re gonna feel a slight pinch as I inject the local.”

I nodded, looking away as he got the syringe ready. I focused on Nick’s face instead. The pale blue of the gown and mask brought out the beautiful color of his eyes. “Thanks for staying with me,” I whispered to him, wincing as I felt the needle go in.

Nick just nodded. He didn’t say anything until Dr. Ross raised a larger syringe filled with pale, yellow liquid that he’d sucked out of my stomach. “That looks like piss,” Nick declared, his nose wrinkling.

Dr. Ross laughed. “Indeed, it does. But that’s the color it should be - no signs of blood, which is good. I’ll send this sample to the lab to be tested for bacteria, just in case.”

“Is that it?” I asked.

“Oh no... now comes the fun part.” He took a length of tubing and hooked it up to a clear, glass bottle. As soon as he connected the other end to the catheter he’d put in my belly, I could see the same, yellow-colored fluid start running through it into the bottle.

“Dude... that is *disgusting*,” Nick said, his eyes wide as he watched the bottle fill so fast, there was actually foam on top.

“Now it looks more like the beer you were drinking the other night,” I added, laughing as Nick gagged and turned away. After all the gross practical jokes he’d played on me over the years, I got a sick sense of pleasure out of making him squeamish.

By the time he was done, Dr. Ross had drained two liters of fluid from my belly - which, according to him, was nowhere near a record. “I think the most I’ve taken out of a patient was ten liters,” he told me, as he took out the catheter and covered the hole with a band-aid. “You won’t believe how bad it can get. It’s a good thing you came in when you did.”

I felt slightly embarrassed, but physically better - less bloated and short of breath. My oxygen level had improved, so Dr. Ross took me off the supplemental oxygen. “I’m

going to get this to the lab and see if your other test results are in,” he said, holding up the sample of fluid he’d taken. “I’ll be back to check on you soon.”

Once he was gone, I glanced at Nick. He was still looking a little green. “See why I don’t want you to screw up your liver?” I said. “This sucks.”

“I believe you,” Nick replied, letting out a shaky sigh. “I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know if he was apologizing for his behavior at Kevin’s birthday dinner or just feeling sorry for me, but I decided it didn’t matter. If watching me go through this made Nick take his own health more seriously, then at least one good thing would come from it.

It was after three in the morning by the time Dr. Ross came back, accompanied by a woman in a white coat. “Well, Howie, after looking at your test results, I’ve got good news and bad,” he said. “The good news is that there are no signs of infection in your blood or abdominal fluid. The bad news is that you failed your liver function tests. Your labs indicate acute rejection of your liver graft, but you’ll need a biopsy to confirm it.”

I nodded, my heart sinking. The news wasn’t surprising. It was just as I’d feared.

“This is my colleague, Dr. Bond,” he went on to introduce the woman who was with him. “She’s a hepatologist who specializes in liver transplants. I’ve asked her to consult on your case.”

“Does that mean I’m going to need another transplant?” I asked hesitantly, almost afraid to hear the answer. I didn’t know if I could go through all that again.

“Not if I can help it,” answered the woman with a grim smile. She spoke with a British accent, and I got a kick out of the fact that her name tag said *J. Bond*.

Bond... James Bond, I thought. I was so tired by that point that random, stupid things like that struck me as funny, even though I didn’t feel much like laughing.

“Most cases of acute rejection are reversible,” Dr. Bond explained. “We’ll treat you with high-dose steroids, which should suppress the immune response to what your body sees as a foreign object. Unfortunately, you’ll need to be admitted to hospital for at least a few days so can we administer the drugs intravenously and see how you respond.”

“Is there any way I could fly back to L.A. first and be treated there?” I asked, thinking of Nick and the other guys, who were no doubt ready to go home. I didn’t know if they would leave Seattle once they found out I’d be hospitalized there the rest of the week.

“I don’t think it would be wise for you to delay treatment,” said Dr. Bond. “You’re already showing signs of liver failure, which means this isn’t just a mild case of rejection. The further we allow it to progress, the more difficult it will become to treat. I’ve left a message with your transplant surgeon in L.A. and will of course consult with

him on your treatment plan, but I think it would be best for you to stay in Seattle until your rejection is under control.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“We have a great program here,” Dr. Ross added. “My wife’s a transplant coordinator at this hospital, so I know you’ll be in good hands.” He gave me an encouraging smile. “I’ll get started on your admission paperwork, and someone should be in soon to take you to your room. Best of luck,” he said, shaking my hand before he left.

Once they were both gone, I looked over at Nick. He was bleary-eyed and disheveled from dozing in his chair while we waited. “Go back to the hotel, Nick,” I told him. “Get some sleep, and I’ll try to get some, too. God knows we both need it.”

“No, I’m okay,” Nick insisted. “I told you, I’m not leaving.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be stubborn. I don’t know if they’ll even let you stay once I’m in a regular room. I mean, it’s not like we’re married or anything. As far as they know, we’re just friends.” I winked, and Nick’s face reddened. “Besides, I don’t want you to get sick, too,” I added. “I know your CD4 count looked good at your last appointment, but you can’t be too careful. Who knows what kind of bugs you can pick up hanging around a hospital.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Seriously? They’re talking about knocking out your immune system, and you’re worried about mine? I’ll be fine.”

“So will I,” I said firmly. “Get out of here. You look like hell.”

He sighed. “You sure?”

“I’m not just sure. I’m HIV-positive,” I said, winking. See what I mean about stupid things seeming funny?

Nick snorted and shook his head. “You stole that from *South Park*.”

“Did I?” I wouldn’t know; I only watched that show when I was with Nick.

“Yeah, dude. Besides, it’s too soon. Way too soon.” He stood up, folding his arms and frowning at me.

For a second, I thought he was serious. “I’m sorry...” I started to apologize for my insensitivity, but Nick interrupted me.

“It’s only been a year. If you’re such a *South Park* fan, you should know that it takes 22.3 years for something tragic to become funny. That means we need to wait another 21.3 to joke about AIDS with each other.” He winked back. Then he put his hand up to the side of his mouth and stage-whispered, “That’s from *South Park*, too.”

I laughed. “I love you,” I said without hesitation, wondering if, under the circumstances, he would finally be able to say the words back to me.

But all Nick said was, “I know.”

“You stole that from *Star Wars*,” I said, as he started to walk away.

Stopping in the doorway, Nick flashed a tired version of his trademark smirk. “I know.”

Chapter 76

Nick

In the morning, after just a couple hours of sleep, I met Kevin, Brian, and AJ at Starbucks for a quick breakfast before heading back to the hospital to see Howie.

“How was he when you left last night?” Kevin wanted to know.

“He was tired, but he seemed okay. He was joking around, anyway.” I showed them the text Howie had sent me around four a.m. to tell me he was settling into his new room and was going to try to get some sleep. Then I looked around the table. “So what’s the plan? Are you guys going home or staying here?”

“I’m staying,” Kevin said, his brow furrowing as he frowned. “There’s no way I would leave Howie stuck in a hospital without his family or anyone else around.”

Brian nodded in agreement. “Leighanne and Baylee are already on their way to the airport, but I’m gonna stick around for a few more days, make sure Howie’s okay.”

AJ snorted. “My flight’s supposed to leave in, like, half an hour,” he said, checking his phone, “so... looks like I’m staying, too.” He grinned at the rest of us.

“You’re staying, right, Nick?” Brian asked.

“Of course,” I answered quickly, deciding not to tell them about Tennessee. It didn’t matter anymore; my plans had changed. Like the others, I couldn’t just fly off and leave Howie in Seattle all by himself. I had to make sure he was going to be all right first, and then... well, I would figure the rest out later.

When we got to the hospital, we followed the signs to Howie's private room on the third floor. We found him lying in bed, recovering from his early-morning biopsy. "Hey, guys," he said groggily when we came in.

Brian, Kevin, and AJ hung back, letting me be the first to approach Howie's bed. "Hey... how ya doin'?" I asked sympathetically, my heart twinging as I looked down at him. He was curled up on his right side in the fetal position, clutching his blankets so hard, his knuckles were white.

"Hanging in there," he murmured, slurring his words. I wondered if he was heavily medicated or just that exhausted.

"Are you in pain?"

"They gave me morphine... but yeah," he said slowly. "It was worse than the last one. My liver literally *hurts*."

"I'm sorry," I said, wishing there was something I could do to make him feel better.

"Do you need more pain meds?" Brian asked, joining me alongside his bed.

Howie shook his head. "I don't think they'll give me any more yet. Too hard on the liver... and in case you hadn't heard, mine's not doing so hot at the moment."

I saw the other guys exchange worried glances. "Did your doctor say anything about how the biopsy went?" Kevin asked. "Have you gotten the results yet?"

"No... not yet."

When Howie did get the results of the biopsy, it confirmed what he'd known or, at least, suspected all along.

"Unfortunately, the sample of liver tissue we took showed evidence of grade II acute cellular rejection - in other words, moderate rejection," explained the doctor who had done the procedure. "We're going to treat you with corticosteroids, which should reduce the inflammation in your liver and stop your immune system from attacking it. We'll start with a high dose, which you'll get through your IV for the next three days, then taper off to a lower dose over the course of thirty-one days."

“Thirty-one days?” Howie repeated, his eyes widening. “Does that mean I’ll be in the hospital for a *month*?”

I was wondering the same thing. My thoughts of escaping to Tennessee for some time to myself seemed more impractical than ever.

“No,” said the doctor, smiling. “Sorry, I should have specified - after the first three days, you’ll take the steroids orally, in pill form. We’ll do a repeat biopsy to look for signs of improvement, and if the steroids seem to be helping, you’ll be discharged to continue your treatment at home.”

Howie nodded, looking relieved. “Will I be able to fly back to Florida?” he asked.

The doctor frowned. “I thought you lived in Los Angeles?”

“Part time. I had my transplant there, but originally, I’m from the Orlando area,” Howie explained.

“I see. My recommendation would be that you either stay in Seattle or continue your treatment in L.A., under the medical supervision of your transplant physician,” said the doctor. “Seventy to eighty percent of episodes of acute rejection resolve after one course of steroids, but if yours doesn’t, you’ll need a second course. Unresolved acute rejection can progress to chronic rejection, which is much more difficult to treat. Too often, in cases of chronic rejection, a second transplant is required. That’s why you’ll want to follow up with your transplant team, so they can closely monitor you over the next month and make sure you’re responding to the treatment.”

Howie nodded again. He didn’t ask much more about what would happen after he got out of the hospital, and neither did anyone else. Instead, we stayed in town and took things one day at a time.

On Howie’s third day of treatment, I was sitting with him while he ate dinner, half-watching the evening news, when I heard something that made both Howie and me look up at the TV.

“In other news tonight, Nevada has become the latest state to legalize same-sex marriage, following the Supreme Court’s refusal Monday to rule on same-sex marriage bans in five other states. Hours after federal district court judge James C. Mahan issued an injunction against Nevada’s enforcement of its ban against same-sex marriage, state Senator Kelvin Atkinson and his partner Sherwood Howard became the first same-sex couple to...”

“What are we doing, Nick?” Howie asked suddenly, setting his fork down on his tray.

I turned my attention back to him, confused by the question. “Well, we ain’t going to Vegas to get married, if that’s what you’re asking,” I joked.

He smiled. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t proposing. I guess I’m just wondering where you do see us going with this.”

“With what?” I played dumb because I wasn’t sure how else to answer.

“Our *relationship*,” he said, looking at me like I really was stupid. “How serious is this to you? When you look down the road, do you see a real future for us? Or are we just having fun fooling around for now?”

I was quiet for a few seconds, considering what he was asking. He wanted to know where I thought the future would take us. All I knew was that, a week ago, I’d been planning to go back to Tennessee without him.

The news anchor on TV was still talking. “*With Nevada, same-sex marriage is now legal in over half the states - twenty-six, up from nineteen just a week ago. That number could climb to thirty-five in the coming weeks, as more states move to enforce federal court orders. West Virginia will likely be the next, having cleared the way for-*”

Letting out a huge sigh, I finally said, “I don’t know, Howie.”

“I know you don’t.” He looked at me sadly. “You’ve seemed so conflicted lately, like you don’t even know what you want. I love you, Nick - you know that - but you’ve never been able to say those words back to me, and I don’t know if it’s because you don’t feel the same way, or because you do and you’re afraid to admit it, or because you’re still hung up on Lauren.”

So that’s what this is about, I thought, annoyed. “Really? You’re gonna bring that up again?”

“I’m bringing it up again because it seems to be an issue for us, and we have to resolve it before we can move forward,” Howie said calmly. “Which brings me back to my original question: Is that what you want? Do you see us having a future together?”

“I don’t know,” I repeated, shifting my weight. I’d always been weird with commitment. It took me years to get to a point where I was ready to propose to Lauren, and even after

I'd bought the engagement ring, another two weeks passed before I worked up the courage to actually do it - thanks to Howie's pep talk, ironically. Now he was the one looking to me for some kind of commitment, and I was squirming in my seat, too afraid to tell him yes. So I turned the question back around on him and asked, "Do *you*?"

Howie didn't answer at first. He turned his attention back to the TV. "*In a related story, the state of Florida has formally recognized the marriage of a same-sex couple for the first time,*" the newscaster was saying. "*Arlene Goldberg and Carol Goldwasser had been together for forty-seven years when Goldwasser passed away in March of this year. Although the couple had exchanged nuptials in New York in 2011, their marriage wasn't recognized in Florida, where the women resided, which meant that Goldberg was unable to qualify as Goldwasser's widow in order to collect her Social Security payments. Earlier this year, Goldberg became a plaintiff in a lawsuit filed against the state of Florida on behalf of eight other same-sex couples who were married in other states. In August, a district judge ruled that Florida's same-sex marriage ban was unconstitutional and ordered Goldwasser's death certificate to be amended to show she was a married woman at the time of her death. Yesterday, Goldberg received the new certificate, which names her as Goldwasser's wife.*"

The news then showed a clip from an interview with the Florida woman. "*It's hard to put into words how meaningful this is to me,*" she said, holding up her wife's death certificate. "*For forty-seven years, Carol and I made our lives together, all the while being treated like strangers in the eyes of the law in Florida. It's bittersweet that Carol isn't here to share this joy with me, but for the first time in forty-seven years, our marriage was respected. Our relationship and commitment to each other is finally recognized.*"

Howie looked over at me again. "I don't want to be alone the rest of my life," he said finally. "When I married Leigh, I thought we were going to be together forever. Maybe I didn't love her the way I was supposed to... but I did love her. She was my best friend. You're supposed to marry your best friend, right? I thought we could make it work. But it didn't... and now here I am, forty-one, divorced, and dealing with all these health issues..." He held up his left arm, which was hooked to an IV line. "...and it's made me realize how fragile life is. It can all fall apart in an instant. I need a partner who will be there to help me pick up the pieces. I don't know how much time I have left, but I know I can't afford to waste it on a relationship that's going nowhere. Life's too short for that. I don't want to die alone."

"Why are you talking about dying at all?" I demanded, glaring at him. "You're not dying, dude; didn't you hear what the doctor said? This is treatable. You're gonna be *fine*."

“This time, yes, but I’m talking down the road. I *am* going to die someday, and when I do, I want to be with someone who loves me. So what I’m trying to say is *yes*, Nick, I would love for us to have a future together, but only if that’s what you want, too.”

“Yeah, well, what if I die first?” I asked flippantly, trying to find a way out of answering. How had we gotten into such a heavy dinner conversation? Howie’s hospital room suddenly felt suffocating.

“You won’t,” said Howie, smiling at me. “Look at you... You’re still young, you’re in good shape, and you’re doing great, health-wise. You’re gonna outlive us all.”

I shook my head, doubting that. Maybe HIV wasn’t the death sentence it had once been, but I still felt like it was going to shorten my life, somehow.

“You’re the one with nine lives,” I countered. “The Indestructible Howie D.”

“I don’t know about that,” he laughed, gesturing to the IV again. But despite that, his color was better than it had been a few days ago, and the bloating in his stomach hadn’t come back. I took those both as signs that, so far, the treatment was working.

That made it easier to say what I needed to tell him. I took a deep breath, and then I said, “Going back to what we were talking about before: I *have* had fun fooling around with you... but honestly, I’m not sure I’m ready to be in another serious relationship right now.”

Howie nodded. “I know you’re not,” he said quietly. “I just needed to hear it from you.”

His reaction surprised me; I hadn’t expected him to be so understanding. Maybe I should have been honest and told him I wanted to go back to Tennessee a long time ago.

“That doesn’t mean I’ll never be... but I need more time,” I replied. “Before you got sick, I was actually thinking of spending some time by myself in Tennessee.”

“Then maybe you should,” said Howie. “I don’t want you to feel like you’re stuck with me just because I had a setback. You don’t have to stay here, and you sure don’t have to fly back to L.A. with me when I get out of here.”

I shook my head. “Somebody should be there to make sure you’re okay.”

“And that somebody doesn’t have to be you,” he said. “Kevin and AJ live there, too; I’m sure either of them would check up on me if I asked them to. I appreciate you being

here, Nicky, but I don't need you to be. Go to Tennessee. Take as much time as you need to figure out what you want. I'll wait."

I hesitated. "Are we breaking up?" I asked awkwardly. "Is that what this is?"

"How could we be breaking up when we've never even defined our relationship?" Howie replied. "Let's just call it a break, not a break-up."

"A break," I repeated, nodding. I liked the sound of that. That was exactly what I needed: a break. "Okay."

I waited until Howie was discharged from the hospital to leave Seattle. We actually went to the airport together, along with AJ, Kevin, and Brian. Brian was going back to Georgia to be with his family, of course. Kevin and AJ would accompany Howie to L.A., where they had agreed to check in with him and make sure he went to his weekly appointments with the liver doctor. That left me free to fly to Franklin, my home away from L.A., where I always went when I needed to clear my head.

"Take care of yourself," Howie said, hugging me goodbye before we headed off to two different terminals. "That means stay on your meds and stay away from alcohol."

"Yeah, yeah, I will," I promised, rolling my eyes as I pulled away. "Don't worry about me; I'll be fine. You just focus on getting better."

He smiled. "I will. Keep in touch this time, okay?"

Offering a guilty grin in return, I nodded. "Okay."

Then we went our separate ways.

Chapter 77

Howie

It had been six months since the last time I'd lived alone - and, before that, six years - so it was hard returning to the house in L.A. without Nick, without Leigh, without anyone.

Of course, I wasn't completely alone. Kevin and AJ took turns coming over to check on me every day the first week, then every other day, then a couple times a week after that. By the end of the month, they were just texting every few days to make sure I was alive. I didn't blame them; they had their own lives to worry about.

Meanwhile, my life was back to revolving around medications and doctor's appointments. I went to the transplant center at Cedars-Sinai once a week for lab work to make sure my liver was responding to the treatment. I had started going to weekly transplant support group meetings again, too, mostly just so I could get out of the house and have some human interaction. While my immune system was wiped out, I wasn't supposed to spend a lot of time out in public, but I felt so lonely and stir-crazy from being cooped up in the house, I looked forward to any opportunity to leave.

So when Nick called at the end of October to tell me he was flying in for a doctor's appointment and asked if I would come with him, of course I said yes. "Is everything okay?" I asked him. He and I had texted since he'd gone back to Tennessee, mostly just to hold each other accountable for taking our meds, but we hadn't really talked. I missed him like crazy, but I didn't want to seem clingy. He'd said he needed space, and I was trying to give him some.

"Yeah, everything's fine," Nick replied. "It's just time for my three-month follow-up, and I figured it made more sense to do it in L.A. than fly to Florida when you're not there."

It did make more sense, but what he wasn't saying was that he wanted me with him as a cover, in case he was spotted at the AIDS clinic again. He'd been cagey about it ever since that paparazzi photo was taken of us in the car outside the clinic. I was pretty sure he hadn't been back there since.

"Sure," I said. "When's your appointment?"

"Eight a.m. on the twelfth. That work for you?"

"Hang on, lemme double check." I put him on speaker phone as I pulled up my calendar app. I don't know why I even bothered looking - habit, I guess. Other than my Tuesday afternoon support group meetings and Thursday morning clinic visits, my schedule was clear. November twelfth was a Wednesday, I saw, so that none of that would conflict.

What struck me, though, wasn't my unusually empty calendar, but the current date. It was the twenty-sixth of October. It shouldn't have surprised me; I'd seen the memories

being shared on my social media, but until that moment, it hadn't really occurred to me that it was the anniversary of *that* night. On the cruise. One year ago.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. On one hand, it was the night I'd hooked up with Nick - which, for me, was mostly a happy memory, like a dream come true. On the other hand, it was also the night I'd infected him - and sucked him into my nightmare.

I wondered if Nick knew. He had to have realized it, too, right? Maybe that was the real reason he'd decided to call me on that particular day, more than two weeks ahead of his doctor's appointment.

"Howie? You still there?" I heard Nick ask.

"Yeah, sorry," I replied quickly, refocusing. "The twelfth works for me. When are you flying in?"

"Not till the day before."

"Want me to pick you up from the airport?" I offered.

"No, I can take a cab to my place."

"Oh... so you're not staying with me?" I tried to keep my voice light, even though my heart had sunk. I guess the hope that he and I would be able to go back to how we used to be after our "break" was wishful thinking on my part. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Nothing ever was when Nick was involved.

"Nah, I need to check on my condo, make sure it's being kept up now that Lauren's not living in it."

"Oh." That was news to me. Last I'd heard, he had left the place to her.

"Yeah, so I'll see you in a couple weeks, okay?"

"Okay," I said. "Hey, Nick?"

"Yeah?"

I hesitated, opening my mouth and then closing it again. I wanted to say something to acknowledge the anniversary, but I wasn't sure what. "Never mind. See you soon."

It was a huge relief to hear Nick honk his horn outside my gate promptly at seven-fifteen on the morning of his appointment. There was a small part of me that had been worried he wouldn't show up. Even though he had sworn he was staying sober and taking his medication every time I'd talked to him, I couldn't help but remember what happened the last time Nick had gone off to Tennessee by himself.

But this time, spending a month away from everyone seemed to have done wonders for Nick's mental health. When I opened the passenger-side door of his car and climbed in, he leaned over and kissed me. "Morning," he said, smirking. "Miss me?"

What a flirt, I thought, coughing into my fist. Of course I had missed him and that crooked grin of his. "Maybe just a little," I lied, winking as I smiled back. The taste of his peppermint toothpaste lingered in my mouth. "You're actually on time. I'm impressed."

He laughed. "You should be. I've got my shit together, dude. You wouldn't believe how responsible I've been. I've taken my meds on time, I haven't had a drop of alcohol to drink, and I even made this doctor's appointment all by myself."

"What a big boy," I teased him, winking again. "Actually, I do believe it. You look really good, Nick... really healthy. I'm proud of you."

Maybe it was just because I hadn't seen him in a month, but to me, he looked better than ever. His face was tanned from being outside, his eyes were clear, and his clothes were clean. He had even showered that morning, I could tell; his hair was still slightly damp and smelled like shampoo. I fought the urge to run my fingers through it, to turn his face toward mine and kiss him again. As much as I would have loved to make out in the car for a few minutes before we left, I didn't want to make him late.

"Thanks," Nick said, grinning again as he shifted the car into drive. "You're looking good, too."

He said it almost as an afterthought, and I knew he didn't really mean it. I may have looked better than the last time he'd seen me, but that wasn't saying much. The jaundice had gone away as my liver function improved, but my skin was paler than usual from spending so much time inside, and my face was puffy from the steroids I'd been prescribed. Judging by my reflection in the mirror, I was still looking pretty sickly.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, when I didn't reply.

“Not bad,” I said. “My liver panels have been looking better, and my last biopsy showed less inflammation. I finished my first course of steroids on Friday, and I go back for a check-up at the transplant clinic tomorrow to make sure I don’t need to start a second one.”

“Hopefully not,” said Nick. As he pulled out of my neighborhood, he looked at me and smiled. “The Indestructible Howie D... I knew nothing could keep you down for long.”

I tried to disguise my cough as a chuckle. Clearing my throat, I said, “I dunno, I’ve been taking it pretty easy for the past month. I may need you to come whip me back into shape again.” I had been trying to keep working out when I felt like it, but lately, I could barely walk a mile on the treadmill without feeling winded. I couldn’t blame the shortness of breath on fluid accumulation this time; I was just out of shape. Spending a week in the hospital had been a huge setback. I had to build up my stamina again.

“Well, maybe we could go to the gym after my appointment,” Nick suggested, glancing at me before returning his eyes to the road.

“I’ve been avoiding the actual gym - too many germs,” I replied. “My CD4 count is really low right now because of the rejection treatment, so I’m not supposed to be around big crowds of people. But we could go back to my place and swim or something, if you want to.”

“We’ll see,” Nick said noncommittally. Then he looked over at me again, his forehead creased with concern. “How low?” he asked.

I shook my head, stifling another cough. “Don’t worry about it. My doctor said this was to be expected, since the whole point was to suppress my immune system so it couldn’t keep attacking my liver. It’ll go back up now that I’m off the steroids.”

“Whatever you say,” Nick replied. He let it drop, but I could tell by how quiet he got afterwards that he was worried and didn’t want to admit it.

“I’m fine, Nick,” I said after a few minutes of silence, resting my hand on top of his. “I’m the Indestructible Howie D, remember?”

He chuckled. “You got that right.”

When we pulled into the parking lot in front of the clinic, Nick opened his glove compartment and took out two baseball caps. “Here,” he said, handing me one. “Put this on.”

I laughed. “Is this my disguise? Do you have any of those funny glasses with the big nose and mustache to go with it?” Looking down at the camo trucker hat he’d given me, I made a face. “Actually, some hillbilly teeth and a mullet might be more appropriate...”

“Shut up and wear it,” said Nick, jamming a black Bucs cap onto his head. Then he flipped down his visor and examined his reflection in the mirror for a few seconds. “This doesn’t make me look too much like Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia*, does it?” he asked, turning toward me.

“What? No.” I shook my head. “I don’t know why we need to bother wearing hats at all. The public knows I’m HIV-positive, so no one will think it’s weird if you’re seen walking into an AIDS clinic with me. I thought that was the whole reason you wanted me to come with you.”

He shrugged. “I just don’t wanna give people more to speculate about.”

I sighed. “Nick, they’re always gonna speculate about something. The only way to get them to stop is to tell them everything. Then they’ll have nothing left to wonder about.”

“Not gonna happen,” Nick said, shaking his head. “Come on, let’s just get inside.” He kept the cap on, and grudgingly, I put on the camo hat as I climbed out of his car. It was way too big for my head, and I’m sure I looked ridiculous in it, but as long as it made Nick happy, I didn’t really care.

We walked into the clinic, where I was relieved to see that the waiting room wasn’t too crowded. I found a couple of seats for us while Nick went up to the receptionist’s counter to check in. As I looked around the room, a rack of magazines caught my eye. I could see the March issue of *People* with my face on the cover - nine months old now - peeking out from the bottom shelf, where it had been wedged in crookedly with more recent issues. Awkward.

As much as I wanted to pretend I was totally comfortable with everyone knowing my status, I was relieved when Nick said, “You can come back with me if you want to. That way you don’t have to sit out here by yourself the whole time.”

“You sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure,” he replied, shrugging. “Nothing you haven’t seen before.”

That was true. When Nick was called back, I went along and watched him go through the same routine I’d been through countless times before. The nurse weighed him, checked his vitals, asked him a million questions, and drew his blood. With as much as I’d been poked and prodded in the last month, there was a part of me that was secretly glad it was him this time and not me. But as soon as that thought had crossed my mind, I felt guilty. It was *because* of me that Nick was going through this. I would happily have my blood drawn every day if it would somehow reverse what I had done to him.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, as Nick sat holding a cotton ball to the crook of his arm, waiting for the doctor to come in.

He looked over at me with surprise. “For what?”

“For this. For all of this.” I made a sweeping gesture across the room. “For being the reason you’re here.”

Nick shook his head. “Dude, don’t start that again. What’s done is done, alright? You don’t need to feel bad about it anymore.”

“But I do,” I said. “I hate that you have to come here and go through all this because of me.”

“Stop it,” Nick replied, his voice rising. “This is *not* your fault. I made the same mistakes you did. And, honestly, taking a few pills a day and having my blood drawn every three months doesn’t seem like such a big deal compared to what you’ve been going through lately. So stop fucking apologizing, okay? I’m *fine*.”

I wanted to tell him I deserved every ounce of physical pain I’d felt over the past year, that it was nothing compared to the emotional pain of hurting him and my family, but I started coughing instead. Eyes streaming, I could only nod.

Nick frowned as my coughing fit subsided. “How long have you had that cough?” he asked.

“I dunno, a few days?” I answered hoarsely. I hadn’t thought much of it, but now that Nick had mentioned it, I realized I had been coughing a lot lately.

“Have you called your doctor?”

I shook my head. "It's probably just a side effect of the steroids," I said casually, knowing it could also be a sign that I was coming down with something. With my immune system so weakened, the last thing I wanted was an infection of any kind. "I'll mention it at my appointment tomorrow."

"I'll go with you," Nick offered.

I smiled at him. "Thanks, but you don't have to do that. It's just a check-up."

"So's this, and you came with me," he pointed out. "Let me return the favor."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself."

At that point, there was a knock on the door, and Nick's doctor came into the exam room. "Hi, Nick. Long time no see," she said with a wry smile.

Nick smiled back sheepishly, ducking his head like a little boy who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Yeah, I know, it's been awhile. I was out of town, sorting out some... personal issues."

"I see," said the doctor. "Well, I'm glad you're back. And you've brought someone new with you?" She smiled pleasantly at me.

Nick cleared his throat. "Um, yeah. Dr. Usako, this is my friend Howie."

"Nice to meet you," said Dr. Usako, shaking my hand. Then she turned her attention back to Nick. "Would you like Howie to step out while I examine you, or-?"

"No, he can stay," Nick interrupted.

Dr. Usako nodded. "Okay. Take off your shirt, please."

I couldn't help admiring Nick's physique as he pulled his shirt over his head. He had clearly kept up his workout regimen while in Tennessee; his upper body was looking ripped with lean muscle. Dr. Usako listened to his chest, looked in his eyes and mouth, and felt around from his neck to his naval, asking him all kinds of questions throughout the exam. Had he been taking all his medications on time? Was he experiencing any unpleasant side effects? Yes, Nick said, he was sticking to his medication schedule. No, he hadn't had any new side effects.

When she was finished, Dr. Usako said, “Everything seems fine, Nick. If you don’t mind waiting awhile longer, I’ll see if your blood work is back from the lab yet.”

Nick said he would wait, so the doctor left us alone. As Nick was putting his shirt back on, I said, “You’ve been lifting weights, haven’t you?”

His face split into a wide grin. “You can tell?”

“Well, yeah... look at those guns!”

Nick flexed his biceps, looking pleased with himself. “I’ve been working on my arms and legs,” he admitted. “When I first started taking the HIV meds, I read about this side effect, lipo-something-or-the-other, where you lose fat in your face and limbs and gain it other places, and I’ve been, like, paranoid about it ever since.” He let out a little, nervous laugh. “I have enough body-image issues without looking like Humpty Dumpty.”

“You’re not the one who looks like Humpty Dumpty,” I said, gesturing to my swollen face. “I hate steroids. But seriously, Nick, you don’t have anything to worry about. Your body’s never looked better.”

“Thanks,” said Nick, smiling self-consciously.

Dr. Usako was gone for quite awhile, but just when I was starting to worry that something was wrong with Nick’s blood work, she came back and said, “I have great news for you, Nick. All your labs look good. Your CD4 count is in the normal range, and your viral load is undetectable.”

Nick’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Dr. Usako smiled. “Really. Now, just so we’re clear, this doesn’t mean you don’t have HIV anymore. What it means is that the antiretroviral drugs are working. There were so few virus particles in the sample of blood we tested that they didn’t even register. That means your risk of transmitting the virus right now is very low. I’m sure Lauren will be happy to hear that.”

Nick’s face reddened, and he shook his head. “Actually, Lauren and I aren’t together anymore.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” said Dr. Usako, looking embarrassed. She recovered quickly and added, “Well, even though the risk is minimal, you should still take

precautions with any other sexual partners, and continue taking your medications as directed. Do you have any questions?”

Nick shook his head.

“Then I’ll see you back here in three months,” said Dr. Usako with a smile.

As we walked out of the clinic, I looked over at Nick. “Well, you couldn’t have gotten much better news than that,” I said, squeezing his shoulder. “I’m so happy for you.”

He shook my hand off his shoulder. “Not here,” he muttered, hurrying ahead of me. Rolling my eyes, I followed him to the parking lot.

“We should celebrate,” I added, once we were in the privacy of his car.

“I thought you couldn’t be around big crowds,” Nick replied, turning on the ignition.

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t talking about hitting the clubs or having some huge party. I thought *you and I* could celebrate,” I said, annoyed by his lack of enthusiasm. I’d expected him to be happier about how his appointment had gone - or, at the very least, relieved. Instead, Nick was acting like the news that he was undetectable was no big deal.

“Celebrate how?” he asked, as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“Why don’t you come back to my house for awhile?” I suggested. “I’ll cook us something for lunch, and we can have a few drinks by the pool - virgins, of course.”

Nick was quiet for a few seconds, considering the offer. “Yeah, okay,” he said finally.

Well, don’t let me force you or anything, I wanted to say, but I bit back my retort, knowing better than to start another argument. I had hoped our “break” would help mend the cracks in our relationship, but Nick was back to playing me hot and cold. One minute he was flirting with me, kissing me in the car, suggesting we go to the gym together, and the next, he was acting like he wanted nothing to do with me. I had no idea what was going on in his head, but his moodiness must have been contagious. By the time he drove through my front gate, the good feeling I’d had when we left the clinic was gone.

“Look, if you don’t want to hang around here, you don’t have to,” I told Nick, as he pulled up in front of my house. “I was just trying to think of something low-key we

could do to celebrate. But if there's somewhere else you'd rather be, just drop me off and go do your thing."

Nick put the car in park and looked over at me. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, frowning. "I said I would stay for awhile. Do you not want me to now?"

"What do *you* want?" I asked him directly. It was a question that carried a lot of weight. "You've had a whole month to figure out the answer to this question, so I'll ask you again: What do you want?"

He licked his lips and pressed them together tightly, as if he was afraid of what would come out if he opened his mouth. I thought I knew what he was trying to avoid saying. *He's about to break up with me*, I thought, my heart sinking. *Then he'll be free to go back to Lauren*. He didn't have to worry so much about infecting her anymore; the doctor had said his risk of transmitting the virus was "very low" now that he was undetectable. This was the news Nick had been waiting for, I realized. In that moment, his sudden shift in mood made sense.

I was bracing myself for the words that would break my heart when Nick suddenly leaned over, wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and kissed me. "I want *you*," he whispered, his warm breath making my skin tingle as his lips brushed against mine.

As my mouth dropped open in disbelief, he slid his tongue inside, taking the kiss deeper. Recovering from my shock, I kissed him back eagerly. My arms found their way around him, and my fingers fumbled blindly up the back of his neck, knocking off his baseball cap as they raked through his hair. Nick didn't seem to notice; his hands were busy groping my back as his mouth moved hungrily over mine.

"I missed you," I heard him say, and I felt my t-shirt pull tight as he grabbed a fistful of the fabric.

"I missed you, too," I murmured back breathlessly. I felt like laughing with relief. "I thought you were going to break up with me."

He suddenly pulled back, shaking his head. "I don't wanna be alone either, Howie," he said, looking at me seriously. "I needed some time to myself to figure that out... but now I know. It's lonely without you. We need each other."

It made me so happy to hear him admit that. "I told you, Nicky," I said, smiling at him. "You and me... we're in this together."

The trail of clothes leading from the front door to the pool told the story of what happened next. Lunch was forgotten, as Nick and I went straight into the water.

It felt just like last summer again, when our relationship was fresh and new, except Nick was much more forward now, not so nervous and hesitant. He lead, and I followed, letting him pull me through the water and press me up against the wall of the pool. I planted my feet on the bottom and leaned my head back, enjoying the contrast of the cool water with his warm hands moving over my body.

“I bet you missed this,” I said, closing my eyes against the bright sunshine that was beating down on us. In spite of the heat, my skin broke out in goosebumps as Nick’s fingers slipped beneath the surface of the water and below my waistline, stroking my inner thigh. My breath caught in my throat as I felt his fist close around me, and I began to cough in surprise. When I opened my eyes, he was wearing a wicked grin on his face.

“I did.”

“I meant the water and the warm weather,” I managed to say, coughing and laughing at the same time. “It probably gets cold in Tennessee this time of year, doesn’t it?”

“Oh,” he said, laughing as he let go of me. “Sometimes, but it’s been in the sixties there. Not as nice as here, though. I did miss the heat.”

“So did I,” I gasped, as he grabbed me again. “It’s a whole lot hotter when you’re here.” I winked, and Nick snickered.

“Never fear, Nicky’s here - bringin’ da heat,” Nick teased, as he tugged and squeezed, working me to the point of release. I felt my body go limp as I leaned back against the side of the pool, breathing hard, but utterly relaxed. Nick pressed himself against me and kissed my lips. “Be right back,” he whispered. Then he hoisted himself out of the water, sending big waves splashing over me.

“Don’t get my hardwood floors all wet!” I called, as he headed toward the house. He gave me a careless wave in return. Rolling my eyes, I sucked in a deep breath and held it as I slid below the surface to sit on the bottom of the pool. It was only a few seconds before I came back up, coughing and sputtering for air.

“You okay?” Nick asked when he came back out.

“Yeah,” I said, wiping the water from my eyes. I hoped he couldn’t hear me wheezing; I didn’t want him to notice how out of breath I was. “You know, if you needed to pee, you could have just gone in one of my planters.”

He laughed. “Why would I bother getting all the way out of the pool for that when there’s all this nice, chlorinated water I could be warming up?”

“Sick, Nick,” I said, shaking my head. “Don’t you dare pee in my pool.”

“What if I already did?” he asked, grinning.

“Ugh!” I pretended to spit pool water out of my mouth. “You’re disgusting.”

“Yeah, but you love me.” Smirking, Nick sat on the edge in front of me and stuck his legs in the water. When he set something down beside him, I realized why he’d gone inside. My heart began to race with anticipation as I recognized the much-needed supplies I kept in my bedside table. “My turn,” Nick whispered and wrapped his long legs around my waist, using them like a lasso to slowly reel me in.

I kissed his chest, tasting the chlorine on his skin as I fondled one of his nipples with my tongue and felt it harden against my lips. My mouth moved lower, leaving a trail of kisses along his torso as I made my way toward the length between his legs. Then I went to work on him, teasing and squeezing, prepping him for what we both knew was to come.

When he was primed and ready, Nick slipped back into the pool. He wrapped his arms around me from behind, and I leaned back against his broad chest, enjoying the sensation of our wet bodies sliding over one another. I could feel his ribcage expand and contract against my back and tried to match my heavy breathing to his, but the effort made me cough more.

I leaned forward and lowered my head, hanging on to the sides of the pool. Nick moved his hands to my hips, gripping them tightly as he slid inside me. I braced myself and held my breath, letting the air out of my lungs a little at a time as I winced with pain. Meanwhile, Nick grunted with pleasure as he gradually worked his way deeper. He thrust his pelvis against me, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until the force of him made me start coughing again. This time, I couldn’t stop.

“Are you okay?” I heard Nick ask again, and all I could do was shake my head. I couldn’t speak. I could barely even breathe. My chest felt constricted, and I couldn’t stop coughing long enough to take a breath. My eyes watered as my lungs burned,

straining for fresh oxygen. I felt Nick pull out of me and start patting my back, but it didn't help. I continued to cough and choke, gagging on what felt like phlegm in my throat. Then I looked down and saw a drop of red diffusing in the water.

Heart racing, I covered my mouth with my hand and coughed into it. When I pulled it back and looked, I saw that my palm was speckled with little flecks of bright red blood.

Whatever was wrong with me this time, it was bad. Really bad.

Chapter 78

Nick

I had never felt more helpless than I did standing naked in waist-deep water, watching Howie cough himself half to death. I didn't know what to do. I tried slapping his back, but it didn't seem to help. I kept waiting for the coughing fit to subside, but it went on and on. Howie was hacking so hard, he could barely breathe. His face was bright red.

I was about to go get him some water when it occurred to me that if Howie passed out in the pool while I was in the house, he would probably drown. I had to get him out first. He couldn't stop coughing long enough to climb out himself, so I hooked my arms under his from behind and pulled him backwards to the shallow end. As I dragged him up the gradual incline from pool to patio, I could feel his heart hammering frantically against my hands. His chest was heaving.

"Hold on, Howie, I'm gonna get you some water," I said, as I let go of him. I left him lying on the patio just long enough to run inside and grab a bottle of water. When I came back, he was crouching on his hands and knees with his head down, his whole body wracked with spasms as he continued to cough uncontrollably. "Here," I said, twisting off the cap and thrusting the bottle toward him.

With a shaking hand, Howie reached up to take the bottle from me. Water sloshed onto the pavement as he tipped it clumsily toward his mouth, but he managed to swallow some before he started coughing again and spewed it back out. He raised the bottle to his lips a second time, and this time, the water stayed down. It seemed to help some; his coughing started to taper off to the point where he could talk again. "Thanks," he rasped, setting the bottle down.

That was when I saw the blood. The rim and side of the bottle were streaked with red. My first thought was that Howie had hurt himself somehow, bit his tongue or clipped his chin on the edge of the pool during his coughing fit. “Hey, you’re bleeding. Look here,” I said, taking his face in my hands and gently tilting it up toward me. There were beads of blood and spit at the corners of his mouth, but I couldn’t see any cuts or abrasions. And then I realized: Howie had been coughing up blood.

“I don’t think you should wait till tomorrow to see a doctor,” I said shakily. Whether it was the sight of blood making me squeamish or the implication behind it, I don’t know, but suddenly, I felt sick to my stomach.

Howie nodded, not even bothering to argue with me. “Can you drive me to the hospital?” he asked hoarsely. As he looked up at me, I was startled to see that his eyes were filled with tears. I wasn’t sure if they were just watering from all the coughing, or if he was actually crying. Either way, he looked as miserable as he must have felt.

“Of course.” I helped him to his feet and wrapped my arm around him as we walked into the house, where we picked up the piles of clothing we’d left all over the floor and got dressed in a hurry.

As we climbed into my car and set off for Cedars-Sinai, I was struck with a sense of déjà vu, remembering how Lauren and I had rushed Howie to that same hospital on New Year’s Eve. I had sat in the back seat with his head in my lap while Lauren drove. This time, I was in the driver’s seat, and I didn’t know what I would do if Howie suddenly stopped breathing like he had before. I could hear him coughing and wheezing in the passenger seat, and when I looked over at him, I saw that his whole upper body was working hard for every labored breath he took. His shoulders were heaving up and down, his chest and stomach expanding and contracting rapidly as the air rattled in and out of his lungs. He had buckled his seatbelt, but kept pulling it away from his body like it was too tight.

“Hang in there, Howie,” I said anxiously, as I accelerated through a yellow light. “We’ll be there soon.”

“I know. Sorry about... all this,” Howie apologized, still panting heavily.

“No, *I’m* sorry,” I said, swerving around a slower car. “I didn’t mean for my sexy body to literally take your breath away.”

He started laughing, which led to another coughing fit. “Don’t... make me... laugh,” he gasped, gulping down some more water.

“Sorry,” I said again, giving him a nervous glance. “I’ll shut up now. Just keep breathing, okay? We’re almost there.”

Howie nodded, leaning his head against the window glass. His face had gone from red to gray. I drove even faster, knowing I needed to get him help soon. How had he gotten this sick so quickly? I wondered, as I sped down the highway, dodging traffic. His cough had concerned me, but Howie had insisted he felt fine. Now he could barely breathe. I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d been straight with me about his health, or if there was something he was hiding.

I wished I’d been there for him these last few weeks, instead of in Tennessee. Having time to myself had been nice at first, but then it had just gotten boring and lonely. As much as I hated to admit it to myself, I *had* missed Howie. I’d missed his companionship, and, of course, I’d missed the sex. Now I worried I’d waited too long to come back to him, to tell him how I felt. What if he was really sick? What if he was dying? I didn’t even want to consider that possibility, but it was hard not to when he was sitting in my passenger seat, struggling to breathe.

When we got to the hospital, I handed my keys off to the valet so I could go inside with Howie. As we walked into the emergency room, I was hit with the strong smell of antiseptic and another wave of *déjà vu*. At least this time, Howie was conscious and standing on his own two feet.

The triage nurse who checked him in took his vitals and decided his condition was serious enough to be seen right away. Although it was a relief to not have to wait, it gave me even more reason to worry.

A nurse named Ashley arrived with a wheelchair to take Howie to an exam room. I walked alongside her as she wheeled Howie down the hallway, helping to answer her questions about his medical history. “He’s HIV-positive,” I told her, “and he had a liver transplant this past January. He was just in the hospital like a month ago for rejection, but he’s been doing better since then.”

“Thanks, Nicky,” Howie whispered, reaching out to grab my hand.

“No problem. I got you, buddy,” I replied, squeezing his hand back.

When we got to the room, we were met by another nurse and a doctor. “Hi, I’m Dr. Robinson,” the doctor introduced herself, as the two nurses helped Howie out of the wheelchair and onto the bed.

“This is Howie Dorough, forty-one, presenting with dyspnea and hemoptysis,” said the first nurse, Ashley, rattling off his vital signs. “Heart rate is tachy at 120, resps 30 and shallow, B.P. 140 over 90, temp 99.5.”

“Let’s get him on a monitor,” said Dr. Robinson, as the nurse continued to fill her in on Howie’s medical history.

“Mr. Dorough is HIV-positive, with a history of liver disease. He underwent a transplant ten months ago and was recently treated for an episode of acute rejection.”

“Can you tell me what medications you’re currently taking, sir?” the doctor asked Howie, as the other nurse hooked him up to the monitoring equipment. She had taken his shirt off and was attaching electrodes to his chest.

Howie reached carefully around the wires to the back pocket of his pants and removed his wallet. “Here,” he said, taking out a piece of paper and handing it to the doctor. “That has everything on it.”

I shook my head as I caught a glimpse of the long list of medications and dosages he’d written out. Leave it to Howie to be prepared like that. I wouldn’t have had a clue.

“That’s very helpful, thank you,” said the doctor, scanning the list. “What was the diagnosis that led to your need for a liver transplant?”

“Acute liver failure,” answered Howie, still breathing heavily. “Because of an overdose.”

“Drugs or alcohol?”

Howie closed his eyes. “Both.”

“Are you on anything now, besides your prescribed medications?”

“No.”

“Any history of heart or lung problems?” Dr. Robinson asked, reaching for her stethoscope.

Howie shook his head. “No.”

“Okay. Let’s take a listen,” said the doctor, slipping the stethoscope into her ears. She pressed the end to Howie’s chest, paused to listen for a few seconds, then moved it to a different position. “When did you first start having trouble breathing?” she asked.

“I dunno... half an hour ago?” Howie said uncertainly, glancing up at me. I shrugged helplessly. I had no idea what time it was.

Dr. Robinson moved the stethoscope to Howie’s back. “What were you doing when the shortness of breath occurred?”

I felt my face redden and saw Howie’s eyes widen. “We were swimming,” I said quickly, before he could answer with anything more specific than that. Howie winked at me, the corners of his mouth curving into a tiny smile.

“Could you have accidentally inhaled any water?”

“I don’t think so,” said Howie, his voice cutting off as he started to cough again.

“He said he’s had that cough for a few days,” I told the doctor. “He started coughing like that when we were in the pool and couldn’t catch his breath. He was coughing up blood.”

“Doctor, his sats are dropping,” one of the nurses said suddenly. “Down to 88 on room air.”

Dr. Robinson looked up at the monitor over Howie’s head. “Let’s start him on supplemental O₂, five liters per minute by mask,” she said, then turned to me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Nick. I’m Howie’s... friend,” I said awkwardly, glancing over at Howie. Even with an oxygen mask strapped to his face, the look he gave me was clear enough to communicate what he was thinking: *Friends don’t fuck friends in pools*. Clearing my throat, I asked, “What do you think is causing this?”

“It could be an infection,” she answered. “We won’t know until we run some tests.” Turning to the two nurses, she added, “Ashley, order a portable chest X-ray. Deanna, start a peripheral line so we can get a blood sample to send to the lab. I want to collect urine and sputum samples, too.”

I stood in the corner of the room, trying to stay out of the way as the women worked on Howie. After a while, a technician brought in an X-ray machine, and I was asked to step out for a few minutes.

I wandered down the hallway until I found a small waiting area and collapsed into a chair, dropping my head into my hands. After all the excitement of the last hour, I felt emotionally drained. It didn't seem possible that I had been sitting at the AIDS clinic as a patient earlier that same day, getting my good news. That felt so long ago, even though it had only been a couple of hours. Now here I was at the hospital with Howie, and this time, he was the patient. Somehow, I knew he wasn't going to get the same sort of prognosis.

"How ya doin'?" I asked Howie when I went back into the room.

He just nodded and gave me a thumbs up. Maybe it was hard for him to talk with the oxygen mask over his face, but it worried me that he was no longer saying, "Nick, I'm fine." Obviously, he *wasn't* fine and hadn't been fine the whole time he'd been telling me he was, but it still made me feel better to hear him say the words. If Howie believed he was going to be fine, then I could believe it, too. This time, I wasn't so sure.

The uneasiness must have shown on my face, because one of the nurses noticed. "He's just tired from working so hard to breathe," she assured me, as she adjusted the IV line that was hooked into the back of Howie's left hand. "But his sats are better, look." She pointed out the number 92 on the monitor over Howie's head. "That's the percentage of oxygen in his blood."

"What's it supposed to be?" I asked, wondering if 92% was high enough to get an "A."

"Normal is 95 and above, but anything in the nineties is acceptable. We just don't want to see it drop below 90 again."

I nodded. So Howie was getting a "B" in breathing. Not bad.

"Here's why he's been short of breath," said Dr. Robinson, stepping back so I could see the X-ray film that was hanging on the wall. The bright light behind it illuminated the black and white image of Howie's chest. "The black spaces here and here are his lungs, and this solid white shape in the middle is his heart," she explained, pointing out the different parts of the X-ray. "But you see these cloudy white patches? That's fluid that has infiltrated the air sacs in his lungs, making it harder for him to breathe."

I frowned as my eyes followed her finger over the wispy white spots on the X-ray. “What caused that?”

The doctor shook her head. “It’s still looking like it could be an infection, but we won’t know for sure until we get the lab results back. Even then, we may need to run more tests to rule out other conditions.”

What other conditions? I wondered, but I didn’t ask, deciding I might be better off not knowing what else it could be. An infection sounded bad enough, with Howie’s immune system being suppressed. I didn’t even want to consider the worse-case scenario.

Turning to Howie, Dr. Robinson said, “I need to check on my other patients now, but I’ll be back soon. Let one of the nurses know if you need anything.”

Once she was gone, I went to sit in one of the chairs on the side of the room.

“Sorry, Nick,” I heard Howie say, his voice muffled by the mask.

“What are you sorry for?” I asked, shaking my head. “This isn’t your fault.”

“Yeah, but... we were supposed to be... celebrating.” Even with the extra oxygen, he had to pause every few words to take a breath. “Don’t feel like... you have to stay here.” He was still fighting for every one, his chest and shoulders heaving each time he inhaled. No wonder he was tired.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, frowning at him. “Of course I’m staying.”

“Just saying... you don’t *have* to.”

I rolled my eyes. “What, you think I would go home and leave you here? Fuck that. You said it yourself earlier: We’re in this together. That means you’re stuck with me, so shut your mouth and stop being such a fucking martyr.”

That made Howie smile.

Over an hour passed before Dr. Robinson came back, accompanied by another doctor. By then, Howie was having an easier time breathing. With the help of the supplemental oxygen, his sats were up to 94%.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Dorough?” asked Dr. Robinson, as she listened to his lungs with her stethoscope.

“A little better,” answered Howie. “Just tired.”

“I’ll bet,” she said sympathetically. “How about we try taking off that mask and switching to a nasal cannula? That may make you more comfortable.”

Howie nodded. As soon as she slipped the oxygen mask off his face, I saw the number on the monitor start to fall, as Howie’s breathing became labored again. But once she’d put the cannula into his nose and connected it to the oxygen supply, the number began to climb again.

“There,” she said, as she taped the thin tubing in place behind Howie’s ears. “I bet that feels better. How’s your breathing?”

Howie took a few breaths before replying, his chest rising and falling as he inhaled and slowly exhaled. “Okay,” he answered finally.

“Good,” said Dr. Robinson, sounding satisfied. “I want to introduce you to a colleague of mine, Dr. Scott. She’s an infectious disease specialist. I’ve asked her to consult on your case.”

When I heard the words “infectious disease,” I instantly thought of Ebola. It had been in the news a lot in the last month, ever since those two nurses in Texas became infected. Could Howie have somehow contracted it, too? Was that why he’d coughed up blood? My heart started to race as I remembered what we had been doing when that happened. If Howie had come down with something contagious, I could be at risk too, I realized. It didn’t occur to me that HIV is considered an infectious disease.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Dorough,” said the specialist, stepping forward to shake Howie’s hand as I sat in the background, silently freaking out about Ebola.

“Nick,” I said, when she turned to shake mine next.

“Nice to meet you both.” Turning her attention back to Howie, Dr. Scott cleared her throat and said, “We did get some of your test results back from the lab, and Dr. Robinson and I would like to go over them with you. Would you like Nick to step out or stay with you?”

“He can stay,” Howie replied quickly, glancing over at me. I pasted a fake smile on my face and gave him an encouraging nod, hoping for good news and silently praying I was just being paranoid about the whole Ebola thing.

“Okay. Well, your blood work does indicate a bacterial or fungal infection of some kind,” Dr. Scott began. “Unfortunately, we won’t know exactly what we’re dealing with for at least a few more days, until the cultures from the blood and sputum samples we took have time to grow. Based on your symptoms and history, however, I have my suspicions.”

I watched her face as she talked, trying to read the expression on it. How bad was this? I wondered. Ebola bad? The specialist wasn’t smiling, but maybe she was just used to being straight-faced. She did work with infectious diseases, after all. I bet she was good at playing poker, too.

“What do you think it is?” Howie asked hoarsely. Hearing the tremor of apprehension in his voice, I glanced over at him. He had wadded up a section of the bedsheet beneath him and was gripping it tightly, balling it up in his fist. I wanted to reach out and take his hand, but my own anxiety held me back. I kept my hands in my lap, nervously twisting them together as I waited to hear the doctor’s answer.

“Your CD4 count has fallen to 150, which opens you up to all kinds of opportunistic infections that don’t typically affect people with healthy immune systems. One that commonly affects people who are immunocompromised is a type of pneumonia called pneumocystis.”

Before I had even processed what she was saying, I saw the blood drain from Howie’s face. “That’s what Holden had,” he said softly. “My son... That’s how we found out about the HIV.”

My heart skipped a beat as I remembered how this whole nightmare situation had started one year ago, with Howie rushing home from Germany when Holden was hospitalized. Less than two weeks later, he came out to California to tell me to get tested. Neither of our lives had been the same since, and now here we were, dealing with the same diagnosis. In a weird way, it was like we had come full circle.

The doctor nodded. “It is one of the most common opportunistic infections in people with advanced HIV,” she acknowledged. “It’s also-”

“-an AIDS-defining illness,” whispered Howie. It’s hard to describe the look that was in his big, brown eyes, but the word that comes closest is “devastated.” It was a look of pure devastation.

Seeing it there made my own heart sink, along with the hope that he was going to get good news. That was when I realized what Howie had known all along: This was bad. This was really bad.

Chapter 79

Howie

When Holden was diagnosed with AIDS, my whole world fell apart. In a matter of days, the decisions I’d made destroyed everything that mattered to me: my family, my best friend, my health, my career. It had taken me months to rebuild, but after almost a full year, I finally felt like my life was back together. I had managed to maintain my friendship with Leigh and make sure Holden and James were well taken care of. I had not only repaired my relationship with Nick, but redefined it. I had survived a suicide attempt, recovered from my transplant, and completed a successful tour with the Boys. Then my health had started to fail, and suddenly, my carefully reconstructed life seemed on the verge of collapse again.

All it took were a few words to wobble the already-precarious Jenga tower again. Hearing the doctor’s diagnosis was like watching that first wooden block fall. Pneumocystis pneumonia. I knew what that meant for me. It was an “AIDS-defining illness.”

“Technically speaking, yes, HIV-positive patients who present with PCP are considered to have AIDS,” said Dr. Scott, “but your case is complicated by the fact that you’ve also had an organ transplant and recently been treated for rejection. High-dose steroids also suppress the immune system, making you more susceptible to opportunistic infections. We don’t know if the drop in your CD4 count was caused by the virus or the steroids. We don’t know if the pneumonia is an HIV-related infection or a transplant-related one. We don’t even know for sure that that’s what this infection is.” She suddenly leaned forward and looked me straight in the eye. “For now, consider it a preliminary diagnosis, and don’t worry about whether or not it’s ‘AIDS-defining.’ That’s just a label we doctors like to use to make sure we’re using the same criteria to diagnose patients,” she added, offering me a reassuring smile.

That made me feel a little bit better about my situation. I took a deep breath, stifled a cough, and said, “Okay... so what happens now?”

“For now, we’re going to presume that you do have PCP and treat you accordingly. That means you’ll be admitted and put on IV antibiotics. Your cultures should confirm the diagnosis in a few days. Do you have any questions?”

I shook my head. I dreaded the thought of another hospitalization, especially so soon after the week I’d spent in Seattle, but I knew it was necessary. Without the supplemental oxygen, I could barely breathe, and without the antibiotics, I would only get worse before I got better.

“If you think of any, don’t hesitate to ask,” said Dr. Scott. “In the meantime, someone should be here soon to start your admission paperwork. I’ll check in on you later.”

“Good luck, Mr. Dorough,” added Dr. Robinson, shaking my hand before she and Dr. Scott left the room.

Once we were alone, I looked over at Nick, who had been unnaturally quiet through the whole conversation. He was hunched in his chair with his head down, running his hand over his hair. It was a nervous habit that I had always found sexy, like licking his lips, but now it made me feel sick to my stomach to see him struggling to hold himself together because of me.

I wanted to get up and go over to him, give him a hug, and tell him it was going to be okay, but the tubes and wires that were attached to me made it hard to move around much. I only got as far as swinging my legs over the side of the bed before the heart monitor started beeping faster, making Nick look up.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked, jumping to his feet to help me. “You need to take a shit or something?”

I shook my head. “Took care of that before our swim,” I said, smirking at him. That made him blush. I patted a spot beside me on the bed. “Come sit with me for a sec.” The bed creaked beneath our weight as Nick perched awkwardly on the edge. Our ill-fated tryst in the pool felt like it had taken place an eternity ago, but I could still smell the chlorine coming off his skin. “You okay?” I asked, putting my arm around him.

He snorted. “You’ve been coughing up blood, you can barely breathe, and you’re asking me if *I’m* okay?”

I smiled. "I know this is scary, but Nick, I'm gonna be okay too," I assured him. "If my baby boy can beat this, then so can I. Even if I do have AIDS, it's not a death sentence anymore. Holden's been living with it for a year, and he's fine. You saw how well he was doing this summer; you would never even know he was sick. So I don't want you to worry about me, okay? I'll get through this like I have everything else."

Nick nodded. "Sure you will," he said shakily. "You're the Indestructible Howie D, remember?"

"That's right, and don't you ever forget it," I replied, winking at him. He smiled, and for a second, I felt better. We both just had to stay positive, I decided.

But the second passed, and Nick's smile faded. He let out a heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping again. "Dude... Howie, this *sucks*."

I took a deep breath through my nose and let it out slowly, trying not to cough. "I know."

"It's not fair," Nick went on, shaking his head. "I find out I'm undetectable, and you get diagnosed with AIDS on the same fucking day? How does that even happen?"

When he put it like that, it did seem pretty unfair. It was hard to believe it had only been a few hours since we'd sat in his doctor's office, our roles reversed. And then I realized: Nick felt guilty - guilty for getting such good news when mine was so bad.

"I dunno... but Nick, you know I'm not, like, jealous or angry about that, right?" I asked, looking over at him.

He shrugged. "Maybe you should be."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, frowning.

"I'm just saying..." Nick sighed and shook his head. "You don't deserve this, Howie. You've done everything right, everything you're supposed to do. You take your meds on time, you don't drink, you work out, you eat healthy... This shouldn't be happening to you. So yeah, maybe you *should* be angry."

I could hear the bitterness in his voice, but I knew there was more than just guilt or anger behind it. There was also fear. He was afraid... not just of what was happening to me now, but of what might happen to him in the future. Even if he did everything

“right” himself, his own health would decline someday. That was just the nature of the disease.

“But I didn’t do everything right,” I replied softly. “I messed up, too; I made mistakes. Did you forget how I almost drank myself to death on New Year’s Eve? How I overdosed on my meds and made my liver fail? I’m not saying I deserve it, but Nick, I did this to myself.”

He just shook his head again.

“I wish I wasn’t sick,” I went on, “but it makes me feel better to know you’re doing so well.” I gave his shoulders a squeeze. “I couldn’t be happier for you, so don’t you dare feel bad about it.”

“Thanks,” he said flatly. Then, cracking a smile, he added, “I guess it could always be worse. At least you don’t have Ebola.”

The seemingly random comment struck me as funny. “Well, yes, at least there’s that,” I replied, chuckling. “Way to look on the bright side there, Nicky.”

But Nick sounded serious when he said, “When that doctor said she was an infectious disease specialist, you wouldn’t believe what was going through my head.”

“Well, HIV is... Wait, you really thought it might be Ebola?” I burst out laughing, which made me start coughing. “God, I love you,” I said hoarsely, resting my head on his shoulder. I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing, sucking fresh oxygen from the cannula in my nose until my lungs cleared.

I felt Nick’s hand stroke the side of my face and heard him whisper, “I love you, too.”

My eyes flew open in surprise as I lifted my head to look at him. They were the words I’d been waiting months to hear out of him, but at that moment, they didn’t make me any happier. “You don’t have to do that that,” I said, as Nick’s hand dropped back down into his lap. “Don’t treat me like I’m dying.”

“Who said anything about dying?” he asked, sounding genuinely confused. “All I said was I love you. Isn’t that what you want?”

I smiled at him sadly. “If you really do love me, I want you to say it when I get out of here. Take me on a date and tell me you love me then, and maybe I’ll believe you. Deal?”

Smiling back, Nick nodded. “Deal.”

It didn't seem like we would be going on that date any time soon. Over the next few days, my symptoms got worse instead of better, despite the strong antibiotics I'd been on since my admission.

On my fourth day in the hospital, I woke up with a headache and a tight, heavy feeling in my chest. It was like there was a weight sitting on it, making it hard to breathe. When Dr. Scott came to see me on her morning rounds, she took one look at the monitor that was mounted over my bed and reached for her stethoscope. As she pressed the cold metal piece to my chest and listened to my lungs, I saw her frown.

“I don't like what I'm hearing,” she said, shaking her head. “We should be seeing signs of improvement by now, but you still have crackles in both lungs, and your sats are low even with an increase in the flow of supplemental oxygen you're receiving.”

“So what does that mean?” I asked.

“For some reason, the treatment doesn't seem to be working. Either you've got a drug-resistant strain of pneumocystis, or it's something else entirely. We're still waiting on your initial blood and sputum cultures to come back from the lab, but in the meantime, I'd like to run some more tests.”

I spent the rest of the morning being poked and prodded by various members of the hospital staff. They drew more blood, sent me for a CT scan and echocardiogram, and did a bronchoscopy to collect samples from my lungs. By the time they brought me back to my room after the last procedure, I was feeling pretty bad. I hadn't been allowed to eat breakfast before the bronchoscopy, and afterwards, I wasn't hungry. My throat hurt, my body ached, and the sedative they'd given me had made me groggy. All I wanted to do was sleep.

It wasn't a surprise to find Nick waiting in my room when I got back. He had dutifully shown up at the hospital every day around ten a.m., when visiting hours started, and stayed there until they ended at nine p.m. As soon as he saw me being wheeled in on a gurney, he jumped up out of his chair. “Hey, there you are!” he said, his voice slightly higher-pitched than normal. “Dude, I was starting to get worried.”

“Didn’t anyone tell you where I was?” I grunted with discomfort as the orderly helped me slide off the gurney and onto my bed.

“Well, the nurse said you were having tests done, but she wasn’t sure how long they’d take. What’s going on?” Nick asked, looking me over anxiously. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, inhaling a few breaths of oxygen through the cannula in my nose before I filled him in. It was pretty pathetic that the mere effort of moving my body back into bed had made me short of breath. No wonder Nick’s forehead was creased with concern the whole time I was talking, hoarse-voiced and breathing hard. I must have sounded pretty bad.

“How do you feel now?” he asked me, after I’d finished describing the bronchoscopy.

“Honestly? Tired,” I replied. “I just wanna take a nap.”

“Take a nap then,” Nick said. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Doesn’t matter to me. Don’t feel like you have to sit there and watch me sleep all day, but I won’t mind if you stay. We both know I can sleep through anything.”

Nick smiled. “That’s so true.”

So Nick stayed, and I slept. I dozed off while he was watching TV and didn’t even notice when Kevin and AJ came by to visit in the afternoon. By that evening, I felt a little better - more awake, anyway - but my breathing hadn’t improved at all. If anything, it had gotten worse.

The next time my nurse, Jodi, came in to check my vitals, she was concerned enough to call Dr. Scott in to examine me. The doctor listened to my lungs with her stethoscope again and looked at the latest set of vitals Jodi had noted on my chart. Then she pulled a chair up alongside my bed, where Nick was sitting, and sat down next to him. Looking at me seriously, she said, “Your sats have dropped to a dangerous level, Mr. Dorrough.”

“You can call me Howie,” I said hoarsely. I could hear myself wheezing with every breath I took. “So how bad are they?”

“You’re already hypoxic, which means your tissues aren’t getting an adequate supply of oxygen. If your oxygen saturation level gets any lower, you’ll be at risk of organ damage,” Dr. Scott explained. “We’ve reached a point where you may have some hard decisions to make, Howie.”

My sore throat suddenly felt very dry. I swallowed with difficulty, as I waited for her to elaborate.

“The supplemental oxygen you’ve been getting through your nasal cannula isn’t enough at this point. We can try a higher concentration of oxygen through a different device called a BiPAP machine, but if that doesn’t work, we would have to put a breathing tube down your throat. Intubation is a last resort for patients with suppressed immune systems, since it puts them at increased risk of infection, but if your breathing gets worse, it may be our only option. I’m not trying to scare you, but I do want to prepare you for that possibility. Do you understand what I’ve told you so far?”

I nodded. Then I glanced at Nick. He had his head down, staring determinedly at his lap. That was what Nick tended to do in tough situations, just sort of shut down.

“Your condition is serious enough that we’re going to move you to the Intensive Care Unit, where they have more specialized equipment and can monitor you around the clock,” Dr. Scott continued. “My hope is that you won’t have to stay there long, but in case there are any complications, I want you to consider what your wishes are should your condition worsen to the point where you were incapable of making medical decisions for yourself. Do you have an advance directive? A living will?”

My breath caught in my throat as I realized what she was asking me. I remembered having a similar conversation after my suicide attempt, when I was in the ICU with a failing liver. Until Nick had talked me into the transplant, I hadn’t wanted any “heroic measures” to save my life, but I’d gotten too sick too quickly to formally declare my wishes on any kind of legal document. “No,” I whispered.

Dr. Scott nodded. “Then I highly recommend you choose a power of attorney - someone you trust to make medical decisions for you if you can’t make them yourself. If we have to intubate you, you’ll be sedated and unable to speak, so you’ll need someone who knows your wishes and can speak for you. It’s a fairly simple process to create one; I can have a member of our legal team bring you the paperwork to fill out if you’d like.”

“Okay,” I agreed. Then a question occurred to me. “Does it have to be a family member? Because my wife and I are divorced... and the rest of my family live in Florida.”

“No,” said Dr. Scott, shaking her head. “It can be a close friend, a significant other, or anyone you want to take on that responsibility.”

Instinctively, I looked at Nick at the same time he looked up. He had been silent the whole time, but now he spoke. "I'm his partner," he said quietly. "I can do it - if Howie trusts me to." Glancing my way, he gave me a crooked smile.

There were so many jokes I could have made about counting on Nick Carter to make medical decisions for me, but I couldn't find the words. I just stared at his face for a few seconds, my heart thumping heavily in my chest, smiling in spite of my discomfort. It was the first time he had introduced himself as anything other than my "friend," and in that moment, it meant the world to me.

Partner. It really was the most appropriate word for what Nick and I were to each other. We'd known each other for twenty-two years. In that time, we had worked together, played together, travelled together, made beautiful music together. We'd shared moments of great happiness... and moments of horrible grief. We'd seen each other through first loves and bad breakups, sold-out tours and cancelled shows. We'd supported each other's side projects, solo tours, and self-improvement efforts. We had helped each other through lawsuits and losses, arrests and illnesses. We'd been there for each other during good times, bad times, and everything in between. We were friends, brothers, bandmates, and lovers. We were partners - not just in business, but in life.

Looking at Nick, I finally found my voice. "Of course," I replied, reaching out my hand to him. He took it, and I gave his hand a squeeze. "Thanks, Nicky."

"No problem, Howie," he said softly. Then he let out a nervous laugh. "Let's just hope it doesn't get to the point where I actually have to make any decisions for you. We both know I've made some pretty bad ones before."

Leave it to Nick to make the self-deprecating jokes. I smiled and shook my head. "I'm not worried about that. That was the old Nick. You're not that person anymore. I would trust the new Nick with my life."

Nick smiled back, his eyes bright with tears.

"Actually... I *am* trusting you with my life," I added with a wink, "so you better not screw this up."

I'd spent eight days in the ICU when my liver was failing, so I knew what to expect, but that didn't make it any easier to go back.

ICU was a scary place with no privacy and so much noisy, cumbersome equipment, it was nearly impossible to get a good night's sleep there. The nurses woke me up every two hours to check on me, and the monitors and my new BiPAP mask made it hard to fall asleep again. If I tried to toss and turn, the wires would get in the way, and the mask was so big and bulky, I could only lie on my back with it on. It was loud, too. All night, I had to listen to the hiss of oxygen flowing through the hose and filling my lungs. It seemed to magnify the sound of my breathing.

"Dude, you sound like Darth Vader with that thing on," said Nick, as he shifted in the recliner next to my bed, trying to get comfortable. The one nice thing about ICU was that they allowed all-night visitors. It wasn't so nice for Nick, though, who had insisted on staying and was probably regretting it now.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "You should just go home, Nick. At least then maybe one of us could get some sleep."

"Nah, I'm fine," he muttered, flopping onto his side. He buried his head in the pillow a nurse had brought him, trying to block out the sounds. I felt bad for making him feel like he had to stay. It hadn't been my idea, but I think our conversation about the advance directive had freaked him out. He was afraid to leave.

With his help, I'd filled out the necessary paperwork to make Nick my power of attorney. Now all we needed were two witnesses who weren't hospital staff to sign it with us. "We can get Kevin and AJ to come do it in the morning," Nick had said. "I think we should call Brian, too."

I hated to bother Brian when he was back in Georgia, but I knew Nick was right. Brian would want to know what was going on. So I had Nick give him a call while I texted my family to fill them in. It was too hard for me to talk and be heard over the phone; besides, I didn't want my mother to hear how bad I sounded. It would only worry her more.

I left Leigh out of it, but I thought about her as I lay in bed that night, listening to the steady sound of my own breathing and not sleeping. The whole situation reminded me of the sleepless nights she and I had spent worrying about Holden while he was in intensive care. It had been almost exactly a year since then. Now I was the one in ICU, fighting the same infection. The fact that Holden had recovered from it gave me hope.

By morning, my oxygen levels looked better. The BiPAP machine made it easier to breathe by pushing pressurized air into my lungs every time I inhaled, so I didn't have to work as hard. I was feeling okay when Kevin and AJ came to visit.

"You sure about this, Howie?" Kevin asked, when I showed them the advance directive I had drafted the night before. "You want *Nick* to be in charge of making medical decisions for you? This Nick? Nick Carter?"

"Shut up," said Nick, who was sitting right there next to my bed. He rolled his eyes as I laughed. "Howie said he trusts me with his life - right, Howie?"

"Well, that's what this document says, too, which is why I'm asking him: are you *sure*?"

I knew Kevin was only kidding, but Nick seemed annoyed. "What the fuck, Kevin? Why are you acting like I'm an idiot?" he exploded. "I can follow his fucking directions, you know; they're right there in the fucking document we want you to sign!"

"Watch your mouth," Kevin snapped back at him. "We're in a *hospital*. You can't curse like that here."

"Says who?" Nick retorted, sounding like a child. He suddenly reminded me of James when he would get overly tired and start lashing out at people.

"Actually, I think Kevin's saying *Howie* is an idiot," AJ put in, snickering. "Did the lack of oxygen give you brain damage, D? You don't really want Prick here deciding whether or not to pull the plug, do you?"

"As long as he waits till I'm brain dead," I replied, trying to play along. But it was hard to make jokes about life support when I was lying there with a breathing mask strapped to my face, one step away from being on a ventilator. Kevin and AJ were just trying to lighten the mood and make me laugh, but they had no idea how bad things had been the night before. In spite of giving Nick such a hard time, they agreed to be our witnesses so Nick and I could sign the advance directive.

Brian seemed to be taking my situation more seriously than the other two, or maybe Nick had just told him more details when they'd talked on the phone the night before. He surprised me by showing up later that day, my fifth in the hospital.

"Hey, the gang's all together!" he announced, as he walked in with my nurse, Charlene. "How's it goin', man?" he asked, gripping my hand.

I smiled, feeling self-conscious with the mask on. “I’m okay,” I said.

But I wasn’t okay. “Your blood pressure and oxygen sats are a little low,” Charlene observed, looking at my monitor. She listened to my lungs with her stethoscope and shook her head. “I’m going to get the doctor. I’ll be right back.”

She left and returned a few minute later with the resident on call. “I’m Dr. Mikael,” the young doctor introduced herself. “How are you doing, Mr. Dorough? Any pain?”

“My chest hurts,” I admitted. There had been a dull ache in my chest all along, but the pain was getting sharper, radiating to my shoulder. When I realized this, I started to panic. I heard the monitor beep faster, as my heart began to race. “Am I having a heart attack?”

The doctor didn’t answer right away. She listened intently to my chest, moving her stethoscope around to different places. “I don’t think it’s a heart attack,” she said finally, “but I am hearing some decreased breath sounds.” She turned to the nurse. “Charlene, let’s get an AGB and order a portable chest X-ray.” Then she looked at me again. “Part of your lung may have collapsed, Mr. Dorough. We’re going to need to take you off BiPAP and put a breathing tube down your throat.”

“I won’t be able to talk with the tube in, right?” I asked, wheezing.

“No, you won’t.”

“Then can you wait a few minutes so I can call my family first? Please?” Despite the pain in my chest and my difficulty breathing, I didn’t want to be intubated without talking to them one last time... just in case.

Dr. Mikael hesitated, then nodded. “Okay, but only for a few minutes. Charlene’s going to go ahead and get a blood sample from the artery in your wrist so we can measure your blood gases, and I’ll be back in just a little bit.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully. Then I looked at the guys. “Will one of you call Leigh?”

“I’m on it,” Kevin volunteered, standing up to pull his phone out of his back pocket. He turned around as he put the phone to his ear, walking a few steps away from my bed.

At the same time, the nurse sat down next to it and picked up my right arm. She pressed her gloved fingers against the inside of my wrist, feeling for a pulse. “Make a fist for me, please,” she instructed. “Good, now open it. Great.”

In the background, I could hear Kevin talking quietly to Leigh in his usual, calm manner. Of all the guys, I was glad he was the one who'd offered to call her. Nick, Brian, and AJ were all looking a little freaked out as they stood around my bed, watching Charlene draw my blood.

"You're gonna feel a little poke here," she said. I winced as the needle went in. "Doing good, Howie. Almost done." Finally, she slid the needle out and held up a small syringe full of my blood, flicking it with her middle finger to get rid of the air bubbles. Then she pressed a piece of gauze to my wrist and held it there, while another nurse came to collect the sample. "I'm gonna put some pressure on this for five minutes or so, until the bleeding stops," said Charlene. "Just lie back and try to relax."

I nodded, but it was impossible to relax when it was getting harder and harder to breathe. My heart was pounding, the pain in my chest increasing every time I inhaled, and in the back of my mind lurked the possibility that this might be the last time I was able to talk to the people I loved.

"Kev, can I talk to her?" I called. But the BiPAP machine was so loud and my voice so weak, he couldn't hear me. Brian went and got the phone for me. I fumbled with it for a few seconds, trying not to pull at the IV in the back of my hand or knock the pulse ox monitor off my finger, until Brian noticed my lack of free hands and took pity on me.

"Here," he said, holding it up to my ear himself.

"Howie?" I heard Leigh ask.

"Hey," I croaked, struggling to be heard above the hiss of the BiPAP. "I'm here."

"Hi, honey." Her voice cracked. "Kevin said you're not doing so hot."

"I'll be okay... once they get me breathing better." I took a breath, letting the machine inflate my lungs. "I just wanted to tell you..." I almost said "I love you," but thought better of it. "I just wanted to tell you what was going on."

"Thanks for filling me in. Have the guys keep me posted while you're out of commission, okay?"

"Okay." I took another breath, in and out. "Can I talk to the boys?"

There was a moment's pause before Leigh said, "Of course. Hang on a second." I could hear her whispering in the background as I waited.

Brian, still holding the phone, gave me a questioning look. "She's getting them," I said. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on breathing.

Almost a full minute passed before I heard a familiar little voice say, "Daddy?"

My eyes popped open, and I smiled, in spite of the pain. "Hey, James!" I tried to make my voice sound bright and energetic, so he wouldn't be scared. "It's good to hear your voice, buddy."

"Hi, Dad."

Unexpected tears sprang to my eyes as James said my name. "You're starting to sound so grown up, James. I can't believe what a big boy you are," I said. "I'm so proud of you."

"Hey, guess what?"

"What, chicken butt?" I replied.

He giggled. "Guess what, turkey butt? I made you something at school."

Kindergarten. My oldest son was in kindergarten. It made me sad to think of all the milestones I was missing, being so far away from Holden and him. "You did? I can't wait to see it."

"When?" he wanted to know.

"I'm not sure, buddy," I had to tell him. I wasn't sure how much Leigh had been able to explain before she'd put him on the phone, so I didn't mention anything about being sick or in the hospital. "Soon, I hope." The lump that had risen in my throat made it even harder to breathe.

"I miss you," James whined.

The tears were starting to trickle from my eyes. "I miss you, too." I knew I couldn't stay on much longer, and I still wanted to talk to Holden. "I love you, James. I just wanted to call and tell you that."

“Love you too, Dad,” he echoed.

I took a couple of shaky breaths, trying to keep my composure. Then I asked, “Is Holden in the room with you? Can you put me on speakerphone so he can hear me?”

“Yeah... just a minute.” I heard him fumbling around for a few seconds, and then he said, “Okay.” I could tell by the sound of his voice that the speaker setting was on.

“Hi, Holden!” I said. “It’s Dada!”

I heard James repeating me - “It’s Dada, Holden! It’s Dada!” - and pictured him dancing around hyperly in front of Holden, who giggled in the background. It made my heart feel much lighter to hear my baby boy laughing, sounding happy and healthy. I tried to draw strength from that.

I knew I wouldn’t get much conversation out of a toddler and didn’t have the time to try, so all I said was, “Dada loves you, Holden. I love you both so much. Keep on being my brave boys, okay?”

“You be brave too, Daddy.” I could hear Leigh’s voice, loud and clear in my ear, and pictured her sitting on the couch between the boys, holding the phone in her lap. “We love you.”

Tears were streaming down my face now, dripping from the mask. “His sats are dropping,” I heard Charlene say, and I knew my time was almost up.

“I’ve gotta get off the phone now, guys,” I said reluctantly. “I’ll try to talk to you soon.”

“Bye, Daddy!” I heard James shout, just before Brian ended the call. There were tears in his eyes, too.

“We can’t wait any longer to intubate, Mr. Dorough.” Dr. Mikael was back. She stood at the foot of my bed, looking grim as she stared up at the monitor over my head. “Your oxygen saturation level is dangerously low, and your blood gases don’t look any better.”

I nodded, knowing there was no point in trying to delay the inevitable.

“We’re going to put you to sleep while we insert the breathing tube into your windpipe. When you wake up, you’ll be on a ventilator. We’ll keep you sedated so you can relax and let the machine breathe for you until you’re ready to be extubated,” the doctor explained. “Do you have any questions?”

I shook my head.

Dr. Mikael looked around the room at the others. “It’s getting pretty crowded in here, guys. We need some room to work, so I’m gonna need you to wait in the hall while we intubate him. When we’re done, you can come back in, two at a time.”

Brian bent down and gave me the best hug he could with all the tubes and wires in the way. “Hang in there, Howie,” he said, and then he backed away.

AJ stepped forward and gripped my shoulder. “Love ya, man... well, maybe not in the same way Nick does, but... you know what I mean.” He grinned, and I winked, knowing he exactly what he meant.

Kevin took my hand and held it tightly. “Stay strong, bro,” he said, giving it a squeeze before he let go.

That left just Nick. He’d been standing down at the foot of the bed all by himself, waiting his turn to say goodbye. “Come here, Nicky,” I said, beckoning him to the head.

I had always been able to read Nick like a book, and right then, he was just as scared as I was. I could see the fear in his eyes and the worry written all over his face. And even though I was the one in the hospital bed, I felt compelled to comfort him somehow. Maybe it was because Nick was still a kid when I’d met him or because he’d made so many bad decisions as a young adult, but I’d always tried to take care of him, help him through hard times. This time was no different.

“Gimme your hand,” I said, holding out my arm. He put his hand in mine, and I gave it a squeeze. “Whatever happens... it’s gonna be okay.”

Nick nodded, wiping his nose with the back of his free hand. His eyes were red and watery, and his chin quivered with the effort of trying not to cry.

“Things may look bad right now,” I continued, pausing to catch my breath, “but you know what? My heart’s still beating.” I took his hand and moved it to the left side of my chest, pressing his palm flat against the place where I knew he’d be able to feel my heart pumping through the thin fabric of my hospital gown. “You feel it?”

He nodded again, tears falling now.

“I promise you... as long as my heart’s beating, I’m gonna do everything in my power to get better and get off this breathing machine, okay?”

“I know,” he said hoarsely. “You’re the Indestructible Howie D. You got this, dude.”

I smiled up at him. “Damn straight.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dorough, but we need to do this now,” said Dr. Mikael, lowering the head of my bed as Charlene loosened the straps securing the BiPAP mask to my face. When she lifted off the mask, Nick leaned over and kissed my lips, in full view of the doctor, the nurse, and anyone else who was in the room.

“I love you,” he whispered, giving my hand one last squeeze before he let go.

I winked at him. “I know.”

“Howie, I’m going to inject some medicine into your IV to make you sleep,” I heard Charlene say.

I locked eyes with Nick. “Please don’t take embarrassing pictures of me while I’m out, okay?” I mumbled, already feeling the effects of the sedative.

Nick let out a guttural noise that sounded like half a laugh and half a sob. “I make no promises,” he said, smiling at me through his tears as I faded away. His face was the last thing I saw before my eyelids fell shut and the last thing I remembered before I lost consciousness.

Chapter 80

Nick

Howie’s condition continued to worsen over the next couple of days. His mother, brother, and sisters flew in from Florida to be with him as he drifted in and out of consciousness in the ICU. Sometimes his eyes would open, but he was so heavily sedated, I don’t think he was aware of anything that was happening to him. It was hard for me to see him like that, but I knew it had to be easier on him.

He had been in the hospital for a full week when Dr. Scott called a meeting with Howie's family and me. She sat us down in a private conference room and delivered the worst possible news.

"Howie is deteriorating. He's showing signs of severe sepsis, which is the body's response to massive infection. We're still running tests to look for the source of the infection, but the results have been inconclusive so far, and I'm worried we may be running out of time. The pneumonia is taking over Howie's lungs, and his other organs are starting to fail. His latest labs indicate a decrease in liver and kidney function, and the CT scan and spinal tap we did earlier today show evidence of swelling in his brain. We've given him the strongest antibiotics available, as well as steroids to help with the inflammation, but so far he hasn't responded to the treatment. We're going to continue doing everything we can for him, but there may come a point when that will just mean controlling his pain and keeping him comfortable while nature takes its course."

It was a lot to absorb. We all just sat there at first, trying to process the information we'd just been presented with, and for a few seconds, no one spoke. Then, in a shaky voice, Howie's brother John asked the doctor the question that must have been on all of our minds.

"Are you saying he's going to die?"

"I don't know that for sure," said Dr. Scott. "I just want to prepare you for that possibility. If we don't see any signs of improvement in the next day or so, he's probably not going to get better."

It was a pretty grim prognosis. I felt sick to my stomach as I followed Howie's family out of the room. Pollyanna and Angie were walking on either side of Mama D, their arms around her. All three women were crying, while John was more stoic. I turned to him in the hall outside the conference room and asked, "What can I do?"

John just shrugged and shook his head. "Man, I wish I knew," he said with a heavy sigh. "Just keep doing what you're doing, I guess. Be with him... and pray."

I hadn't prayed in a long time - Brian was a lot better about that stuff than me - but I did some serious pleading as I sat by Howie's bedside that night.

"Dude, Howie, you need to start getting better so we can go on that date I promised you," I said, rubbing the back of his hand. "We could do dinner and a movie, or maybe some mini-golf? I'll even let you pick the place. But you gotta get better first. Please. *Please get better.*"

I watched his face as I talked to him, looking for any indication that he could hear me. His eyes were closed, and except for the steady rise and fall of his chest as the ventilator breathed for him, his body was completely still. Both of his wrists were tied to the bed rails to prevent him from pulling out any of his tubes in his semi-conscious state, and boy, were there a lot of tubes - IV lines, catheters, the breathing tube, a feeding tube. Howie looked about as bad as he had the last time he'd lain in this ICU, right before his liver transplant.

But he got better, I told myself, trying to be hopeful. *He made it through that. He can make it through this.*

He'd had an advantage then, though. The doctors had known exactly what was wrong with him and how to help; it was just a matter of waiting for a donor organ. But now, they didn't even seem to be sure of the diagnosis, let alone the course of treatment.

So I prayed for God to guide the doctors, to help them help Howie. Lord knew he needed all the help he could get.

Personally, I'd never been a big believer in the power of prayer, but the answer to mine came the very next day, when Dr. Scott sat us all down again to share some positive news.

"We finally got some conclusive results from the blood and sputum cultures we've been waiting on," she said. "The samples show Howie has a rare type of fungal infection - not pneumocystis, as we initially suspected, but cryptococcosis, which is caused by a kind of *cryptococcus* fungi."

"Fungi?" repeated Pollyanna, wrinkling her nose. "How on earth did he get that?"

"He must have inhaled the spores at some point, probably more than a month ago. When his immune system was suppressed, they started colonizing in his lungs, eventually causing the pneumonia," Dr. Scott explained. "Unlike pneumocystis, *cryptococcus* doesn't respond to antibiotics, which is why the treatments we've tried haven't worked. We're going to switch Howie to a regimen of antifungal drugs that have been proven effective at controlling cryptococcal infection."

"So... he's going to be okay?" I asked, my heart lifting.

The doctor hesitated. “I can’t promise you that. His condition is still very serious. He has disseminated disease, which means the infection has spread through his bloodstream to other parts of his body. Cryptococcosis is a life-threatening illness for people with weakened immune systems, but now that we know what we’re dealing with and can treat it appropriately, he has a fighting chance.”

While that wasn’t exactly what I’d wanted to hear, it was enough to give me hope.

“Hang in there, Howie,” I told him, squeezing his hand. “They finally figured out what’s going on with you, and they’ve got you on some good drugs. Give it a few days, and you’re gonna be fine. Just keep fighting, okay?”

There was still no response from Howie. He didn’t look any different than he had the day before - no better, but no worse either. I prayed that we would start to see some signs of improvement soon. The next few days were critical.

Since the ICU allowed visitors at all hours, the guys and I worked out a schedule with Howie’s family to ensure someone would always be with him. We didn’t want him to wake up alone. Howie’s mom and siblings stayed at the hospital during the day, and we took over at night. AJ would head there after he’d put Ava to bed and sit with Howie until around eleven p.m. Since Brian’s family wasn’t in L.A. with him, he and I shared the overnight shift, keeping each other awake until Kevin came to relieve us at dawn.

By Howie’s tenth day in the hospital, I had adjusted to this routine as best I could. I was exhausted, but it wasn’t that hard to stay up all night and attempt to sleep during the day, considering I’d barely been able to sleep for the better part of a week anyway. It was always hard to leave Howie in the morning, but it helped knowing one of us would be there if something happened.

For the first two days after Howie was started on the new treatment, nothing changed. His labs didn’t look any better, the doctor told us; his electrolytes were all out of whack. His fever was high, and his blood pressure was low. There was still some inflammation in his brain, and without the ventilator, he wouldn’t be able to breathe.

But when Brian and I arrived on that third night, AJ met us in the hallway with a big grin on his face. “Hey, guys! Great news,” he announced. “Howie’s fever broke! His nurse said it’s been normal for the last few hours. That’s gotta be a good sign, right?”

“Thank God,” said Brian, as I nodded in agreement. It sure sounded like a good sign. If Howie no longer had a fever, that meant he was fighting off the infection.

As we said goodbye to AJ and headed to Howie’s room, I couldn’t help but notice the Thanksgiving decorations adorning the hall - fall leaves hanging from the ceiling, turkey decals stuck to the windows of each patient cubicle, and a festive cornucopia sitting on the counter of the nurse’s station. With everything that had been happening to Howie, I hadn’t realized the holiday was just around the corner.

“Do you think there’s any chance he’ll be out of here by Thanksgiving?” I asked Brian, as we settled into our usual seats by Howie’s bed.

“I don’t know if he’ll be out of the hospital by then, but hopefully ICU,” said Brian, taking a long look at Howie. He was still unconscious and hooked up to all kinds of equipment. I watched the slow, steady drip of his IV, as the heart monitor beeped softly in the background. “Thanksgiving’s in, what, five days?”

“Yeah, I think so.” It was hard to keep track of what day it was, especially with our circadian rhythms so disrupted. You could never tell if it was day or night in the ICU, where there were no windows to the outside world and the lights were always on. “What are you gonna do for Thanksgiving?”

Brian shrugged. “I guess it depends on what’s going on with Howie, but Kev and I are supposed to be heading home to Kentucky.”

“Littrell Family Thanksgiving,” I said, smiling.

“Yeah... you’re welcome to come with us, if you want to. You know you have an open invitation.” He smiled back at me.

“Thanks.” I had taken him up on his offer before, in years when I was estranged from my own family and didn’t have a significant other to spend the holiday with, but I hadn’t been to a Littrell family Thanksgiving in a long time. I’d celebrated the last six Thanksgivings with Lauren’s family. It would be weird not seeing them that year. “I’ll have to wait and see how he’s doing before I decide anything.”

Brian nodded. “I understand. No pressure, either way.”

“Thanks, Bri,” I said again, before turning my attention to Howie. If he hadn’t been released from the hospital by Thursday, there was no way I was going to Kentucky. I

would spend Thanksgiving in the ICU with him if I had to. I wondered if I could smuggle in a turkey somehow.

That reminded me of something. “Hey, did you see this?” I asked Brian, pulling up a text from Leigh on my phone. She had sent me a photo of an art project James had made at school. *Please show this to Howie when you can, she’d written. He told James he couldn’t wait to see it.*

“No, what is it?”

I handed the phone to Brian so he could see. “Aww,” he said, smiling, as he looked at the picture. It was a Thanksgiving card with a painted turkey made from James’s handprint and a poem:

*This isn’t just a turkey, as anyone can see.
I made it with my little hand, which is a part of me.
It comes with lots of love, especially to say,
I hope you have a very happy Thanksgiving Day!*

Under that, James had written, *I miss you Dad! Love, James*, in his lopsided, little kid printing.

“Howie, man, you should wake up and see what your son made you,” I said, squeezing his shoulder. I had hoped maybe he would be more alert now that his fever was gone, but he showed no signs of even knowing we were there. He must have still been sedated because of the breathing tube, I told myself, but I couldn’t help but worry that the swelling in his brain had caused some kind of damage. What if Howie never woke up? What if he just stayed that way, like a vegetable, kept alive by machines?

I knew what the answer to that was. Howie had made it abundantly clear as we’d filled out the paperwork to make me his power of attorney. If there was no hope of a meaningful recovery, I was to pull the plug - take him off life support and let him die peacefully. I just prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

But no sooner had the thought crossed my mind than an alarm of some sort went off on Howie’s monitor. Startled, Brian and I both looked up to see a set of numbers flashing on the screen. “His blood pressure’s dropping,” Brian said, decoding what the numbers meant before I did. “Did you bump something?”

“I don’t think so,” I said uncertainly, standing up.

Brian got up, too. “I’m gonna go get somebody. Stay with him.”

My heart lodged in my throat as Brian ran out of the room. I looked down at Howie. His chest was still rising and falling steadily along with the mechanical hiss of the ventilator. Nothing appeared to have changed. I glanced back up at the monitor, watching the thin green line that measured Howie’s heartbeat spiking across the black screen, and I remembered what he’d told me: *“I promise you... as long as my heart’s beating, I’m gonna do everything in my power to get better.”*

“Hang in there, Howie,” I whispered in his ear, like I had every day he’d been unconscious.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Brian came back with one of Howie’s regular nurses, Ange. She had worked several of the night shifts we’d spent with Howie that week, and she seemed like someone who knew her stuff. Whatever was making his blood pressure fall, she would figure it out and fix it.

“Howie?” Ange said loudly, leaning over him. But before she could even finish examining him, the monitor suddenly went haywire. The green line looked like a child’s scribble, going up and down in random peaks and valleys. “He’s coding,” she said, silencing the alarm on the monitor. “Could one of you please hit that blue button on the wall? I need to start CPR.”

My knees buckled. I grabbed the back of my chair to steady myself, as Brian smacked the button that said “Code.” Ange lowered the head of the bed so that Howie was lying flat, disconnected the ventilator hose from his breathing tube, and began giving him compressions. It took probably less than twenty seconds for people to start rushing into the room, but it felt like an eternity that I stood there watching as she pumped Howie’s chest.

“Come on, Nick,” I heard Brian’s voice murmur in my ear and felt his hand on my back. “We need to move out of the way.” He nudged me toward an empty corner.

The room was swarming with medical staff and equipment by now. They surrounded Howie’s bed, barking out information and orders. Someone had gotten a stool for Ange so that she stood a head above everyone else, throwing her whole body weight into her compressions. Another nurse stood behind Howie’s head, squeezing a bag that was now connected to his breathing tube, while a third person wheeled over what I quickly realized was a crash cart. I watched as he pulled back Howie’s hospital gown and applied two large pads to his bare chest.

“Charge to two hundred,” said a woman in a white coat, who was standing at the foot of the bed. I recognized her as the resident who had intubated Howie a few days ago, Dr. Mikael. “Everyone clear.”

I saw several sets of gloved hands go in the air, as Howie’s body jerked with the jolt of electricity from the defibrillator. Beside me, I heard Brian draw in a sharp breath. I gripped his shoulder as we both stood back and watched, waiting for some sign that the shock had worked to restart Howie’s heart.

“Does he have a pulse?” asked Dr. Mikael.

“No pulse,” replied one of the nurses, holding Howie’s wrist.

“What’s his rhythm?”

“He’s still in V-fib.”

“Resume CPR, and give him one milligram of epinephrine.”

Ange swapped places with another nurse, who took over pumping Howie’s chest. It was painful to see his limp body flopping around with the force of the compressions. My own chest felt tight, like there was an invisible hand squeezing my heart, making it hard to breathe.

“It might be best if you two stepped out for awhile,” said Ange, coming over to the corner where Brian and I were huddled, our arms around each other.

“No, please, let us stay,” I begged. “We wanna be here with him if he-” But I couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

“You’re looking a little pale,” Ange said, studying my face. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

I felt nauseous, but I nodded, knowing I had to be strong for Howie.

“He’s okay,” Brian replied quickly, rubbing my back. “We’re both just worried about Howie.”

“I understand,” said the nurse with a sympathetic smile. “Let me fill you in on what’s happening: We’re not sure exactly why yet, but Howie’s heart stopped beating. Right now it’s in an abnormal rhythm called ventricular fibrillation, which is really just a series of random twitches that aren’t strong or coordinated enough to sustain life. We’re

trying to revert his heart back to a healthy rhythm with shocks from the defibrillator and drugs to raise his heart rate and blood pressure, and in the meantime, we're doing CPR to keep oxygenated blood circulating through his body."

I licked my lips and swallowed hard, my throat feeling uncomfortably dry. "*As long as my heart's beating, I'm gonna do everything in my power to get better,*" Howie had promised. But his heart was no longer beating.

"Can he recover from this?" I croaked, trying not to cry.

Ange pressed her lips together tightly. "I don't want to give you false hope. He's in cardiac arrest, and his chances right now aren't good. But as long as he has a shockable rhythm, we won't give up on trying to resuscitate him unless you want us to stop."

"No!" I replied, shaking my head. "Please, do whatever you can to help him. Don't stop."

"We're doing everything we can," Ange promised, patting my arm before she returned to Howie's bedside, where the rest of the medical team were still huddled around. Brian and I stood in the background, watching them work on Howie. They injected more medication into his IV and continued CPR, stopping only to shock his heart again

"Come on, Howie," I heard Brian whisper once or twice. "Come back to us, bro." His hands were clasped tightly together under his chin, like he was praying. But nothing, not even prayer, seemed to help this time.

"Hold compressions," ordered Dr. Mikael after the third shock. "Does anyone feel a pulse?"

One of the nurses shook her head. "Still no pulse."

"He's in asystole," Ange said, looking at the heart monitor. Following her gaze, I saw that where there had once been a faint squiggle, there was now nothing but a flat line. It blurred before my eyes, as they filled with tears. I felt like throwing up.

"Let's try another round of epi. Continue compressions."

The male nurse was now in charge of the compressions. His biceps bulged beneath the sleeves of his scrubs as he pushed vigorously on Howie's chest, making the line on the heart monitor leap to the top of the screen. But whenever he paused, the line would fall flat again.

As this was going on, Dr. Mikael walked over to where Brian and I were standing. “It’s not looking good, guys,” she said quietly. “We’ve done everything in our power to get Howie’s heart beating again, but nothing has helped. He’s been without a pulse too long. At this point, I don’t think we’re going to get him back.”

“No... no, please don’t give up,” I begged, as the tears started to pour down my cheeks. “Shock him again. *Please.*”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but it doesn’t work that way. Defibrillation stops the heart from fibrillating. It doesn’t restart the heart. Howie’s heart has no rhythm to shock, no electrical activity whatsoever. He’s clinically dead.”

I felt Brian’s arm come around me again, but I shook it off, not ready to be consoled. “No!” I cried, refusing to accept what the doctor was telling us. Howie was like a cat with nine lives; he couldn’t be dead. In the last year, he’d survived a suicide attempt, a liver transplant, an episode of rejection, and an AIDS diagnosis. He was indestructible. There was no way he would let this infection take him out now. “Can you please, *please* just keep trying? I know he can come back from this... I know he can. Just give him that chance.”

For a few seconds, the doctor just looked at me with pity, pursing her lips together. Then, finally, she said, “We’ll give him one more dose of adrenaline to try to get his heart going again, but if that doesn’t work, I’m going to have to call it. Do you understand?”

I forced myself to nod. “Thank you,” I whispered, wiping the tears from my eyes.

“You can come closer, if you’d like. Touch him... Talk to him. I don’t know if it will help, but it definitely won’t hurt.”

“Go ahead, Nick,” Brian said, nudging me forward.

I swallowed hard as I nervously approached Howie’s bed. The nurses who were not involved in CPR stepped back to make room for me, as the remaining two continued giving compressions and oxygen. There was an unsettling rhythm to their resuscitation efforts: the whoosh of air being forced through the tube in Howie’s throat every few seconds, the rattle of the metal bed frame vibrating as his body was repeatedly slammed against it at the rate of one hundred beats per minute.

I have to admit, it was creepy being up close to witness what they were doing to Howie. I felt horrible for him; these people were trying to save his life, but it was almost like

they were torturing him. What they were putting him through seemed so harsh, painful, and artificial. It was hard to watch, and I wanted it to stop... but I wasn't ready to give up on him yet.

"Hold on, Howie," I begged him. "Think about your kids. Think about James. Think about Holden. They need you. *I* need you." My voice cracked. "Please... stay with us."

"Last round of epi's in," Ange said, as she injected another dose of the drug into Howie's IV.

"Let's continue CPR for two more minutes and give it a chance to work," said Dr. Mikael. "Watch for any signs of return of spontaneous circulation."

"Come on, man, you got this," I tried to encourage Howie. "It's time to prove you're really indestructible and get that heart of yours going again. You hear me?"

But it seemed like Howie was beyond hearing.

"Hold compressions," said Dr. Mikael when the two minutes were up. All eyes turned to the heart monitor, hoping to see a spike... but the green line stayed flat.

"Still asystole," Ange said sadly.

The male nurse looked at Dr. Mikael. "Should I start compressions again?"

"Yes!" I shouted, before the doctor could answer otherwise. "I'm power of attorney, and I say we keep trying until-"

"Until what?" I heard Brian ask behind me, his voice cracking. He had been so quiet for the last few minutes, I'd almost forgotten he was still in the room, but now I whirled around to face him.

"Until his heart starts beating again!" I cried incredulously.

Brian looked at me sadly. "And what if that doesn't happen? How long are you gonna let this go on, Nick?"

I felt a rush of anger at his sudden betrayal. "What the fuck, Brian?! Where's your faith in God? What happened to believing in miracles, huh?"

Brian's blue eyes were bright with tears. "I *do* believe in miracles," he began, "but maybe this-

"They brought *you* back, when *your* heart stopped!" I shouted over him. "What makes you think that won't happen to him?"

He shook his head, the tears spilling down his cheeks. "My heart stopped for like thirty seconds. Howie's been down for more than thirty minutes. There's a big difference."

I didn't realize it had been that long. Turning my back to Brian, I looked at Howie's body, lying limp on the bed. He had been through so much already. I could barely see his face behind the bag being squeezed over his mouth, but I could see the scar from his liver transplant fanning out from the center of his chest, where a pair of hands was pushing down repeatedly. Acting on my request, the nurses had resumed CPR, though their efforts didn't seem quite as urgent as before. Either they were getting tired, or they were just going through the motions until someone told them to stop.

I picked Howie's hand up off the bed and held it in mine. His fingers felt cold. I curled my own fingers around them and squeezed as tightly as I could, wanting him to feel my presence. "You're not gonna die alone, Howie," I whispered. "I'm here." I brought his fingertips to my lips and kissed them gently. "I love you." Then I slowly lowered his hand back down to his side and let go.

"You can stop," I said quietly, looking across the bed at the nurse who was still leaning over Howie's body with beads of sweat running down his arms as he continued to do compressions. "Brian's right. He's not coming back."

With a solemn nod, the nurse took his hands off Howie's chest. His partner stopped bagging. We all looked at the heart monitor one more time, wanting to make sure. When it flatlined, Dr. Mikael stepped forward with her stethoscope. She listened for a few seconds, then looked up at the clock on the wall. "Time of death, 23:45."

For just a moment, it felt like my heart had stopped, too.

Epilogue

Twelve days, four hours, twenty minutes.

That was how long it had been since Howie's spirit left the earth. His body had been laid to rest one week ago. But as I sat in my rental car by the side of the road, listening to the radio, I felt his presence with me.

It was early in the morning, and the sun had just come up over the horizon, casting an orange glow on the clouds in the west. Across the water, I could see a bright burst of flame flicker to life on the launchpad. The voice on the radio was counting down: *"Five... four... three... two..."*

Once the doctor had pronounced Howie's death, Brian came up and put his arms around me. I practically collapsed against him, burying my face in his neck. I could feel his body shaking, but he stayed strong as I broke down in his arms, rubbing my back while I cried on his shoulder.

The nurse, Ange, pulled Howie's bedcovers up over his body, folding them back just under his chin so we could still see his face. She tucked the edges of the blanket neatly around him, hiding most of the tubes and electrodes and other pieces of medical equipment. Except for the breathing tube still protruding from his open mouth, he looked like he could be sleeping peacefully.

"You can stay with him as long as you like," said Ange. "Is there anyone you want us to call?"

I lifted my head and looked at Brian. "We should call his family."

He nodded. "Do you wanna do it, or you want me to?"

I hesitated, swallowing hard. Of course I didn't want to be the one to have to give the Dorroughs that kind of news, but I was the closest to Howie and had spent the most time with them over the past week. I knew it would probably sound better coming from me. "I can call them," I said.

"Okay." He sighed. "I'll call Kev and AJ."

Wiping the tears from our faces, we walked off in opposite directions with our phones in hand, each of us looking for a private spot to place the hardest call we'd ever had to make.

We spent the next six hours at the hospital with Howie's family, waiting for someone from the funeral home to come and pick up his body. They wanted him flown back to Florida for burial. I thought that was what Howie would have wanted, too, but it sure wasn't how any of us had envisioned him going home.

The sky was already starting to lighten when we finally left, but my whole world was in darkness.

"You sure you don't want me to stay?" Brian offered, when he dropped me off outside my condo.

I shook my head. "Thanks... but no," I replied, reaching for the door handle. "I just need to be alone right now."

"Alright," Brian reluctantly agreed. "Call me if you need anything. And try to get some sleep, okay?"

I nodded as I climbed out of his car and trudged tiredly up the driveway to the front door, dreading the days to come.

When I got inside, I went straight to bed, pulling the covers over my head and curling up into a ball underneath them. I was beyond exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Howie, looking like he had in the hospital, with his face all swollen and his body surrounded by medical equipment. That wasn't the way I wanted to remember him, but I couldn't get the image out of my head. I kept reliving the last hour of his life, the frantic and ultimately failed attempt to resuscitate him after his heart had stopped. Picturing the nurse repeatedly pumping his chest made my own chest hurt and my stomach churn with nausea. Suddenly, I felt like I was going to puke.

I stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom, where I fell to my knees in front of the toilet and emptied the contents of my stomach into it. There wasn't much in there to throw up; I hadn't eaten since dinner the day before, and I definitely wasn't hungry now. I took one of my Compazine tablets with two Tylenol PMs and went back to bed, waiting for the sleeping pills to work their magic.

I woke up two hours later to the sound of my alarm, reminding me to take my morning meds. Groggy and disoriented, I rolled over to turn off the alarm on my phone. As I sat up in bed, I felt this heavy sense of dread that I didn't understand at first. It took me a few seconds to remember what had happened the night before, and when I finally did, it felt like a bad dream. But there was no waking up from this nightmare.

“Howie’s dead.” I had to hear myself say the words out loud to make them seem real.

With a heavy sigh, I forced myself to get out of bed. I plodded into the kitchen, filled a glass with water, and got out my weekly pill organizer, only to find that it was empty. I usually refilled each of the fourteen compartments for the upcoming week before I went to bed on Saturday night or first thing Sunday morning. What had once seemed so overwhelming to me had gotten much easier as I’d adjusted to my medication schedule. By that point, I’d memorized what each prescription looked like, how much of it to take and when, and I could refill the whole container in less than five minutes. But with everything that had been going on with Howie, I had simply forgotten.

I was so tired, I wanted to say “Fuck it” and go back to bed without taking anything, but I knew I needed to stick to the schedule if I was to stay undetectable. That was what Howie would want me to do, I told myself, as I went into my bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. The top shelf was full of prescription bottles with my name on them. I took them all down and lined them up across the countertop, like I did every weekend. But something was different that day.

As I looked at each of the medication labels, many of them with names I could barely pronounce, it occurred to me that this was it. This was my life. I would be taking these drugs twice a day, every day, for as long as I lived, or at least as long as I could tolerate them. And when I couldn’t, or when they stopped working, I would have to take different drugs. I had seen what would happen if I stopped, how sick I would get. But there was no one left to make sure I kept taking them. I was on my own now.

I leaned on the counter, the weight of that realization heavy on my shoulders, and looked into the mirror. My reflection stared back at me, haunted blue eyes that were bloodshot and swollen from so much crying and not enough sleep. I missed Howie so much it hurt... but at the same time, I was mad at him. How dare he infect me with this virus, then die and leave me to deal with it by myself for the rest of my life? “*We’re in this together,*” he had told me, but that wasn’t true anymore. Howie was gone, and I knew there would never be anyone else to take his place. I was alone. Totally alone.

In that moment, I understood how Howie had felt on New Year’s Eve, the night he’d taken all those drugs and tried to drink himself to death. Looking down at the spread of heavy-duty meds in front of me, I thought about how easy it would be to swallow them all and go back to sleep, knowing I’d never have to wake up. Then I wouldn’t have to deal with this anymore. I wouldn’t have to feel fear or pain or grief ever again. I wouldn’t have to feel anything. I would be numb. No... I would just be gone.

As these dark thoughts played out in my head, I suddenly heard someone knocking on the front door. It was probably Brian, stopping by to check on me on his way to church or something. He had to be tired and emotionally drained, too, but knowing him, he'd want to go pray for Howie's soul. Being at church would make him feel better. But not me. I didn't answer the door, hoping he would assume I was still asleep and go away.

And sure enough, after a few more seconds, the knocking stopped. But then I heard a key fumbling in the lock, which clicked as the doorknob turned. My heart lodged in my throat, beating a million times a minute. I held my breath as the front door opened. At first, I thought someone must have broken in - who else but me still had a key to the condo? Then I heard her voice.

"Nick? Hey, Nick, are you here?"

I let out my breath in a rush of air, my shoulders sagging with relief. I left the bathroom, rounding the corner just as she walked into our bedroom.

"There you are," she gasped, her hand going to her heart. I must have startled her. "I just heard... about Howie." Her eyes were full of tears, her face lined with grief. "God, Nick, I'm so sorry."

I didn't want to cry anymore, but against my will, I felt hot tears spring to my eyes. My throat closed up so that I couldn't even speak.

Looking at me with sympathy, Lauren came and wrapped her arms around me. I was stiff at first from the effort of trying to hold myself together, but in a matter of seconds, I felt my body go limp, as I melted into her warm embrace. That was when the tears started to fall. She hugged me tightly, holding me close to her chest. I could smell the familiar scent of her perfume clinging to her clothes.

"I'm so sorry," she said again softly, stroking my hair as I sobbed uncontrollably in her arms.

"...one... and lift off!"

My breath caught in my throat as the ball of flame began to rise off the ground.

"...the dawn of Orion and a new era of American space exploration," the radio announcer was saying.

“Wow,” came a whisper from my companion, as we watched the rocket make its way steadily into the sky. It was a Delta IV, one of the same family of rockets Howie and I had watched launch back in May.

“I know - pretty cool, right?” I replied, giving her a casual glance.

Lauren was smiling. “Yeah, it really is.”

The rocket was soaring higher and higher. When it reached the low clouds, it broke through in a burst of light and was suddenly gone from our sight.

“Is that it?” she asked, sounding slightly disappointed.

“I guess so. It was more impressive at night, when it wasn’t so cloudy,” I said apologetically, remember how awed I had been when Howie had brought me here.

“I can only imagine. That’s okay, though. I’m glad I got to see it.” We both stared out the windshield, waiting to see if the rocket would reappear. “So what was the guy on the radio talking about when he said it was a new era of space exploration?”

“Well, this rocket’s carrying a brand new spacecraft called Orion into orbit for its first test flight,” I explained. “If all goes well, it’s meant to be used for the first manned mission to Mars sometime in the future.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yeah.” I actually got goosebumps just thinking about being around to witness that one day, the way my parents’ generation had watched the first moon landing. “I can’t wait for that.”

Lauren gave my arm a squeeze, smiling again. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that.”

“Huh?”

“It’s just good to see you looking forward to something... anything...” She was still smiling, but there was sadness in her eyes.

Suddenly, I understood. This may have been a big deal for all space nerds like myself, but for me, it was huge. I hadn’t had much to get excited about in the last two weeks.

Maybe the fact that I could think of the future and feel hopeful instead of sad was a sign that I was starting to heal.

I don't know if Lauren fully realized what a bad place I was in when she'd walked in on me the day after Howie died, but I think she had a pretty good idea of what I was going through. She had been an invaluable support to me over the last twelve days, as I dealt with the death of my best friend and partner.

She'd flown with me to Florida for Howie's funeral, sitting with the wives as the boys and I served as pallbearers. I can't even describe how hard it was - not physically, but emotionally - for Brian, AJ, Kevin, and I to help Howie's real brother and brother-in-law carry his casket. Lauren, Leighanne, Rochelle, and Kristin took care of Leigh, who was inconsolable. But the hardest part for me was seeing Howie's kids. James, the spitting image of him, was old enough to understand that his dad was dead, but Holden, not quite two, seemed to think Howie was just hiding from him. "Where Dada?" he would ask whenever he saw me. I never knew quite how to answer.

Brian would have said Howie was in Heaven, and if there was such a place, he was probably right. Howie hadn't been perfect; he'd made mistakes, but he was still a good person, maybe the best I'd ever known. I wasn't sure about the whole Heaven thing, but as I looked at the sky, I couldn't help but imagine him being somewhere beyond the clouds. Wherever he was, I hoped it was a better place - not just a box in the ground.

We'd buried him on Black Friday, a day after the most depressing Thanksgiving dinner I had ever attended. Howie's poor mother had invited everyone to her house, where we'd picked at a huge, catered feast as we shared stories and happy memories of Howie.

The other guys and their wives had flown home after the funeral, but Lauren and I had stayed another week to help Howie's family clean out his condo. He'd left the place to Leigh, but she didn't want it - too many memories, she said. She was planning to put it on the market and go back to New Jersey, where her parents lived. Meanwhile, we were flying back to L.A. that afternoon. And after that...?

"Yeah... I guess," I said to Lauren. She may have thought I was starting to get over my grief, but I didn't see how I could just carry on with my life as if nothing had happened. I had already started to dread facing the drama-loving paparazzi at LAX on my way home to my own lonely condo, where Howie had stayed for a month. I'd been so angry at Lauren for volunteering to take in Howie after his transplant, but now I was grateful for that time we'd had together. Without it, we may never have healed our relationship, and I would have had to live with a lot more regrets. Looking over at her, I added, "This is random, but I realized I never thanked you for having Howie live with us last winter. I

know that couldn't have been easy for you, and it was hard on me at the time, but it was what I needed to get over everything that happened. So... thanks for that."

She raised her eyebrows. "You're welcome... although, if I'd known you were going to leave me for him, I would've kept my damn mouth shut."

I laughed. "You know I really didn't leave you to be with him, right? That just sort of... happened."

She nodded. "So you've said." I could hear the bitterness in her voice. We fell into an awkward silence for a few seconds after that. But just when I was about to turn on the ignition so we could leave, she looked over at me again and said, "You really loved him, huh?"

My chest tightened, as a hard lump rose in my throat. "Yeah," I whispered, staring straight out the windshield. "I did."

"Do you regret it?"

I turned to look at Lauren. "Regret what? Loving him?"

"Yeah," she said. "If you had known he was going to get sick and die, would you have stayed with him? Or would you have tried to distance yourself, so you wouldn't get hurt?"

I frowned as I considered her question. It only took me a few seconds to figure out my answer. "No... I mean, yes, I would have stayed. Of course I wouldn't have left him, if I'd known what was going to happen."

"Why?" she asked.

"*Why?*" I repeated. "Because I loved him! Because he was my best friend. Jesus, Lauren, what's with the sudden inquisition? Why do you even care?"

She gave me an exasperated look. "Really, Nick? You don't see the connection?"

"What connection? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about *us!*" she cried. "You just said you wouldn't have left Howie even if you'd known he was going to die the way he did, and yet you left me just so I wouldn't

have to live through your death someday. You didn't even give me a choice in the matter. You didn't ask me what *I* would do. You just *left*."

"I just didn't want you to get hurt," I said, swallowing hard.

"No, you thought I couldn't handle the pain," she argued. "Well, guess what, Nick? I'm a strong woman, and I could have survived anything you put me through: HIV... AIDS... you hooking up with another man..." With a cynical laugh, she shook her head. "You just didn't give me the chance to show you."

"I know you're strong, Lo," I said softly, "but just because I knew you *could* have survived the pain doesn't mean I wanted to put you through it. You don't know what it was like, watching him die." My eyes filled with tears, as the memory of Howie's final moments replayed in my mind. "You have no idea how much this hurts."

"No, I don't," she admitted. "But, Nick, if we all lived in fear of watching the people we love die someday, we wouldn't be able to love anyone. Is that what you want? To be alone for the rest of your life so you won't get hurt again? For me to live the rest of my life without love so I'll never know the pain you're going through?"

When she put it that way, it sounded ridiculous. "No, that's not what I'm saying," I argued. "I *do* want you to find love again someday. All I've ever wanted is for you to be happy."

"You know what would make me happy?" she asked, looking at me with her eyebrows raised.

I sighed, knowing what she was going to say even before I asked. "What?"

"*You*," she whispered. When I looked at her again, her eyes were shining with tears, too. "If you would only give us another chance, Nick... I don't mean right now, when you're in mourning, but... maybe someday, when you're ready to get back into another relationship?" She sniffled. "That's what would make me happy. I knew the moment you proposed to me that being your wife would make me the happiest woman alive."

My tears started to fall as I remembered dropping to one knee in front of her with the ring in my hand. Howie was the one who had talked me into doing it... but once I was on that island with her, I knew it was the right decision. I'd never been more sure of anything in my life, never felt more happiness or hope for the future than I had then. But my HIV diagnosis had changed everything.

It had been almost exactly one year since I'd found out I had tested positive. In fact, tomorrow was the anniversary. I didn't plan on celebrating. But, I realized, there was still a reason to have hope. My latest blood test had shown the virus was undetectable in my system. As long as I kept taking my medication and kept it in check, my prognosis wasn't bad. Whether I wanted to or not, I knew I could live a long time like this. Maybe, with the risk of infecting someone else so low, I could even love again, too.

I looked over at Lauren, about to change the subject and tell her about my test results, but she spoke again before I could.

"Will you at least consider it?" she asked, placing her hand on the center console, palm up.

I took a deep breath and looked out the window, licking my lips. Across the water, the launchpad was empty now. The clouds overhead were starting to clear as the sun rose higher in the sky, but there was no sign of the rocket. It was long gone by now, too high up in the heavens to be seen.

Letting my breath out a little at a time, I turned back to Lauren, the woman I had loved through the happiest six years of my life - and some of the hardest. Her stormy blue eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she gave me a hopeful smile.

Slowly, I put my hand in hers.

The End