



There is life, and there is death,
and for a moment in between,
there was...

The Market

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Part 1
As Long As Someone is Happy

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Nick wasn't sure where he was, or really even of where he was going, because he'd long ago thrown out the map. He had tossed it, along with his cell phone, out the window somewhere on his way through Ohio. It had made him smile, watching from the rearview mirror, at the tiny phone smashing into a million pieces all over the blacktop as the map fluttered to the ground beside it. And while it felt strange to not have the constant ringing as call after call came in from his Mom, brothers and sisters, friends and the guys, it also felt good for once in his life to just be anonymous.

Turning up the volume on the radio, he could get nothing but static, static, more static, and a station that had a farm report. Laughing at the seriousness in the reporter's voice as he discussed pigs, poultry, and grain, he reached for the glove box and pulled out two CDs.

Popping open the first CD, it was a demo of some of the songs he and the guys had been working on for the next Backstreet Boys CD. The cuts were rough and many acoustic, and Nick believed it was some of the best work they had ever done as a group. He especially liked the ones where the five of them did tight harmony, their voices almost meshing together like one incredible voice. It reminded him so much of the old days, before the fame and the first CD. Before anybody knew their names or faces. Before life seemed to get in the way of the music.

Humming along with the second cut, he smiled at the banter in the background while Howie sang his part. A.J. was going off with his "Yo mama" jokes on Brian, and Brian was actually playing along. The mood was light, and when Nick stepped up to the mic and joined his voice with Howie, you could hear Kevin laughing about the fact that Nick's fly was open.

Before Nick hit the road, there had been a final meeting with the band and management. For once, it had been pleasant and stress-free, and the guys had actually been open to Nick's suggestion of releasing some of the songs stripped down and raw. He wanted it to have the feel of their old Unplugged concert, and, miraculously, everyone had agreed.

Nick had given them all big bear hugs when he stood up to leave, making them promise that if they didn't see him again, they would stick to their word of releasing the CD complete with promotion and a tour. The whole nine yards.

They were optimistic that he would return and reluctant to go on with the CD if he didn't. But in the end, Nick had pushed hard for what he wanted and won.

And a promise was a promise.

Looking out towards the West, Nick noticed that the sun had begun to set. Turning off the radio, he pulled the car off to a rest stop by the side of the road and killed the engine. The sky was streaked in brilliant shades of gold and lavender. Colors Nick had long ago left in a crayon box in the bedroom that he had shared with his sister as a child.

God, it was so beautiful. He had missed too many sunsets in his life. They always seemed to occur while he was on a stage doing a sound check for a concert, or in the corner of some bar drinking with some buddies, or asleep on a tour bus whizzing through middle America. In his twenty-three years, he had never sat still long enough to watch the colors of day mesh into night.

Getting out of the convertible, he put the top up and locked both sides and then climbed back in the car, settling back in the soft leather seat. He decided that instead of spending the night in some hotel room, he wanted to spend the night here, parked at a rest stop off of some deserted stretch of road, in the middle of nowhere, with only the stars and moon for comfort and company.

Kara woke up with her alarm, trying to figure out if the Bon Jovi song on the radio was new or old? They all sounded the same to her.

Throwing back the covers, she grabbed at her head and winced. She'd had way too many drinks last night at her best friend's wild bachelorette party, half of which she didn't even remember. Let's see, there had been food and drinks and, at some point, a cheesy looking guy in a cop uniform walking into the room with a boombox in his hand...

Reaching for the water bottle by the side of the bed, she took two swigs and then poured the rest over her throbbing head.

"Oh my God," she moaned, a flashback of the evening filling her brain. "Did I actually dance with the guy on the coffee table?" Standing up, she dropped the empty plastic bottle to the bed and headed to the bathroom for a hot shower.

An hour later, she was showered and dressed, a cup of coffee in her hand as she slipped into her car and headed for The Farmers Market just outside of town. She had worked the Market every year from the time she was a child. Just her, her sister, her parents, and her grandparents, side by side in the blazing summer sun, selling the wonderful fruits and vegetables from her grandparents' farm.

Backing down the driveway, she flipped on the radio and sighed.

"Grandma, I just don't think I can do it." Kara held the phone tightly in her hand, her bottom lip trembling.

“Kara, we need you. And it would be good for us to be together as a family.”

“We’re not a family without Mom and Dad. It just won’t be the same.”

“They wouldn’t want you to stop doing the things you enjoy because they aren’t here to share them with you, Kara. You have to keep living.”

Her parents had been killed in a car crash only five months before, and she was still suffering. Which probably explained the drinking last night and the dancing and her reluctance to sell at the Market with her family this year. The phone call from her Grandma two weeks before had left her feeling sad and empty and missing her parents more than ever.

“Say you’ll come Kara. Say you’ll carry on their traditions.” Her grandmother’s voice shook with age and sorrow, and Kara found that she couldn’t say no.

“Fine, I’ll come.” Kara twisted the phone cord around her finger until it was turning blue. “I’ll come,” she repeated again, more to convince herself than her grandmother.

“You’ll come? Oh, Baby, it will make Grandpa and I so happy...”

“As long as someone is happy,” Kara said out loud, turning left onto the frontage road.

Nick woke up with a kink in his neck and a headache that couldn’t be cured with Tylenol. Rubbing his eyes, he tried to figure out where the hell he was and why he was so uncomfortable. As he shifted to the left, his arms getting tangled in the steering wheel of the car, he quickly figured out he was in his rented red Mustang convertible, parked at a rest stop, staring at nothing but land and sky.

Popping open the door of the car, he unfolded his long legs and climbed out, the smell of grass and horse manure assaulting his senses.

“Holy Jesus,” he groaned, grabbing at his stomach that rolled from the stench in the air and from no dinner the night before. Popping open the trunk, he rifled around, looking through the duffle bags he had packed, as well as the cooler. He had never taken a road trip before and had not been prepared for how hungry driving would make him. Looking through the cooler now, all he had left was a half-empty chocolate Chug and a bag of chips. Pulling out both, he swigged from the Chug and stuffed a handful of chips in his mouth to quiet his growling stomach.

Shutting the trunk of the car, he paused and looked around. He wondered, which way to town? Or if there was a town? He needed some food and gas for the car and maybe some conversation.

“Let me come with you.” Brian leaned against the table in the conference room, casual and in control like only Brian could be.

“Yeah, like Leighanne would let you come with me.” Nick laughed, picking up his folder with the current legal papers and contract they had just finished going over with management.

“She’s not the boss of me,” Brian said with a smirk on his face.

“Yes she is!” Nick laughed, the folder falling from his grip.

“I’ll get it.” Brian lunged forward, stooping to get the folder.

“You don’t have to treat me like that.”

Standing up, the folder in his hand, Brian handed it to Nick with a weak smile. “Like what?” Brian’s eyes shifted around the room before settling back on Nick.

“Like I’m already dead or something.”

Brian laughed, shrugging off Nick’s comment. “Nick, why don’t you just let me come with you? We’ll rent a car, stay in some funky motels. It’ll be fun.”

“Look, Bro, you got a wife and a new baby to take care of. And besides, I just want to be alone.”

Following Nick to the door, Brian slapped him lightly on the back. “Okay, that’s okay. We’ll just plan on doing something together when you get back.”

“Yeah,” Nick laughed a little, running a hand through his hair. “When I get back...”

Setting the chips and drink on the passenger seat, Nick unlatched the convertible top and pulled it back, pushing it into place, and then climbed back in the car. It was a beautiful summer day, and he was going to make the most of it, alone or not.

Turning on the radio, he hit the play button on the CD and pulled out onto the long, deserted road.

Part 2
He's a Really Cool Dog

Kara arrived at the Market shortly before 7:00 a.m. to the disapproving glare of her older sister Allie, who was hard at work lugging crates of fruit from the back of her grandfather's truck to the makeshift tent.

"You're late," Allie said, shooting her "the look" that she had inherited from their mother.

"I'm sorry. I was at Cammie's bachelorette party last night, and I didn't get home until after 3:00 a.m."

"So I heard."

Kara climbed from her car, coffee cup in hand, and walked over to the truck, leaning against the tailgate. "What did you hear?" she asked, trying to sound indifferent when she knew that Allie knew better.

"I heard that you drank yourself into a stupor and then danced with the stripper. Macy Allen said you left with him and ended up with your legs over your head in the backseat of his Gremlin in the driveway."

Spitting out her coffee, Kara gasped. "That is not true!"

Rolling her eyes, Allie grabbed another crate and headed in the direction of the tent.

"Kara!" Her grandmother came from the direction of the tent, arms open wide and a warm, inviting smile on her seventy-year-old face. She enveloped Kara in a close, familiar hug.

"I'm so glad you came. Your grandfather and I were getting worried that you might have changed your mind."

Kara squeezed her grandmother back, the sweet scent of jasmine filling her nostrils, reminding her of her mother. Her grandmother and mother had worn the same perfume for as long as Kara could remember, and it made her feel comforted to smell it now.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Gram."

"No need to ever apologize, sweetheart; we're just happy you're here now. Grab an apron and help your sister with the last of the crates. The market opens in five minutes, and we don't want to disappoint our customers."

Groups of people milled the field where the Market was set up, waiting for the signal that they could start buying. Kara lugged the last two crates beneath the tent, scanning the crowd for the familiar faces of her youth.

Nick wound up on a frontage road that was lined with cars and people all pointed in the same direction. Propping himself up in the seat, he slowed down.

“Excuse me!” he shouted to a young couple walking along the side of the road with two small children in strollers. “Can I ask you where you all are going?”

“The Farmers Market!” the woman called back to him, pointing in the direction of the crowd. “It just opened.” Nick smiled back with a small wave and sat back down in his seat.

It was 7:00 in the morning, and he didn’t have anything better to do. Pulling the convertible off of the road into a dirt field to his right, he parked alongside five or so dozen more cars. Grabbing his sunglasses from the glove box, he placed them on his head and stepped from the car, following the crowd.

Allie was pissed, Kara could tell. Every time her older sister moved past her to reach for an orange or some grapefruit for a customer, she would bump hard into Kara’s hip or step on her foot. And then shoot her the nastiest look, followed by a sarcastic “excuse you” that made Kara want to puke. It was so ridiculous that they could be twenty-six and twenty-four years old, respectively, and still act like they were in grade school.

They had never been the best of friends. Allie was studious, smart, and levelheaded. She had always taken the safe path carved out for her by their mother. High school, a college degree in business management, and a job at a bank that paid well and gave her things like insurance and a 401k. While Kara, on the other hand, was spontaneous, free-thinking, and fun, like their father.

She, too, had done the high school and college route, getting a degree in early childhood education, which allowed her to teach kindergarten at a local grade school. But her real ambition in life was her art and a burning desire to travel the world. And with the help of the inheritance she had received from her parents, she planned on doing just that once the summer was over.

“Excuse you.” Allie moved by Kara, elbowing her in the ribs and causing her to drop the dozen peaches she had pooled in her apron for Mrs. Klinger.

“Oh dear, I don’t want those now,” Mrs. Klinger said, as Kara stooped to retrieve the now bruised produce.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Klinger, I’ll get you some new ones; we’ll just throw these out.” *Or shove them up Allie’s ass*, is what she wanted to say.

Moving over to the crates with the peaches, Kara counted out a dozen more and placed them in the brown bag. Then, walking back to the front of the tent, she passed the bag to Mrs. Klinger, taking her money and giving her a big hug.

“Thank you, sweet girl.” Mrs. Klinger backed away, leaning on her cane for balance. “And, Kara, I was so sorry to hear about your mom and dad. They were such beautiful people.”

Kara nodded, blinking back tears as she patted Mrs. Klinger's gnarled hand. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Klinger. And I'll see you tomorrow morning, right?”

“Bright and early. Mr. Klinger and I will probably finish this whole bag of peaches on the way home in the car!”

Both of them laughed as Mrs. Klinger walked away and another customer filled in the space vacated by her.

“Kara, could you hurry up? We have a lot of people waiting, and we don't have time for you to just sit around and talk all day.” Allie moved up alongside of Kara, shoving her out of her way so she could get to the boxes of oranges.

“I've had enough. I don't need this shit from you, Allie.” Standing back, Kara stripped off her apron and threw it to the ground. “Grandma, I'm going on a break.”

Grabbing two apples, she stopped to kiss her grandmother on the cheek before storming out of the tent.

Nick walked down the row of tent after tent, his sunglasses now shading his eyes from the intense morning sun.

There were tents selling fruits, vegetables, and homemade beef jerky. There were also tents with people hocking mason jars filled with fresh, sweet-smelling salsa, dried herbs, and even one tent with dogs and cats in need of a home.

Stopping at the animal tent, he bent down to scratch the head of a lonely-looking mutt with black scraggly hair and smiled.

“Hey boy, you look like you could use a day at the spa,” he said with a laugh, as the dog wildly began licking his hand and arm. “What's his name?”

A kind-looking man sat in a metal folding chair beside the dog, holding his leash. “His name is Toby. Someone found him last week, wandering the highway. His owners must have dumped him out by the side of the road.”

“Man, that's sad,” Nick replied taking hold of the mutt's snout and giving him a big kiss.

“No Nick, we don’t have room for that dog in the car, let alone the money to feed him.”

“He can have my food, Mom.”

“Nicky, just tie him to that tree and get the hell back in the car. Somebody will come along and see him eventually, and they’ll give him a good home.”

Nick walked across the street, away from the beat up old Chevette that his parents had bought for \$200 from a neighbor, the dog in tow. He was so sick of moving from town to town with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the few necessities that they could fit in the car with three kids his parents and a dog. He would have gladly given up his He-Man doll and even one of his sisters so that there was room in the car for that little dog.

“I’m really sorry, boy,” he muttered, stooping down to scratch the scruffy black dog under the chin. “I tried to keep you, I really did.”

“Nick, get your ass moving; we don’t have all day.” Looking back to the car, Nick’s mom was waving at him to hurry from the driver side window, an irritated look on her face, while his father sat glassy-eyed in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead.

“Someone will give you a good home, boy, don’t worry.” As Nick looped the frayed rope around the tree, the dog looked up at him with sad eyes that said he understood and he forgave Nick for what he had to do.

With a kiss on the top of the old dog’s head, Nick turned and ran back across the street to the idling car. Climbing in the backseat where his sisters lay curled up sleeping, he wiped a stray tear from his cheek as they pulled away.

“He’s a really cool dog. Reminds me of one I had as a kid,” Nick said to the guy, giving the dog another kiss on the head.

Kara walked along the row of tents, her mouth turned down in a semi-frown, her eyes blazing with anger. *Screw Allie*, she thought, taking a bite from the apple in her hand. Who needed her and her holier-than-thou attitude anyway? She would put up with it for the summer for the sake of her grandparents, but after that they could go their separate ways, and Kara wouldn’t care if she ever saw her sister again.

Making her way towards the tent set up to help the shelter animals find a home, she was anxious to see if the scraggly black mutt she had found on the highway the week before had found any takers.

She spotted the dog right away, sitting back on his haunches, enjoying some kisses and hugs from a blonde guy in a sleeveless black shirt, tan shorts and a pair of Tevas. Walking up behind the guy, Kara smiled at the man in the chair and pointed to the dog.

“So has Toby found a home yet?” she asked, taking another bite from her apple.

The man shook his head. “Not yet, Kara, but it’s only been an hour. We still got all summer to find the little guy a home.”

Nick stood up, wiping his hands on his shorts, and turned to face the girl. “Hey, are you the one who found this little guy?” he asked, pulling his sunglasses up onto his head and flashing her a sweet, goofy grin.

Part 3

The Mystery of Roy

Kara smiled back at the guy, brushing back the long, dark whips of hair that had escaped from her ponytail. “Yes, I’m the one who found him. Are you interested in giving this little guy a home?”

Nick laughed, raking a hand through his hair, a nervous habit he’d picked up years ago. “I wish I could, but I can’t.”

Kara’s mouth turned down in a disappointed frown, as she stooped to give Toby a hello pat, Nick squatting down beside her. Before she could say another word to try and convince Blondie to give Toby a home, a voice behind her made her stomach lurch.

“Long time no see.”

Standing up, Kara groaned.

A guy was standing there with a bushy, blonde mustache, shoulder-length hair parted in the middle and feathered down the sides, and way too tight jeans. Nick looked up at him, thinking the guy looked like an extra from some low budget 70s horror movie.

“Hey there, Kara.” It was the stripper from the bachelorette party. How the hell had he found her here?

“Oh, hi.” Kara looked surprised and a little embarrassed that the guy was talking to her, despite the fact that, to Nick, they obviously seemed to know one another.

“I tried to call you this morning, but you weren’t home. Your roommate said you might be here. You forgot something last night.” Sticking out his hand, he twirled a pale pink, lacey bra around his index finger.

“Jesus,” Nick said under his breath, laughing into his hand.

“Oh my God.” Kara grabbed at the bra, pulling it from his finger and hiding it behind her back, while making a mental note to kill her roommate when she got home.

“I was wondering if maybe you wanted to get together again sometime?” The guy cocked his head and winked at her, making Nick laugh even harder. “Did you say something kid?” Shooting Nick an irritated glance, the guy raised his eyebrows at him, waiting for a response.

“Nope, I was just clearing my throat. I had a little tickle in there.” Nick gave him a wide, innocent grin as he went back to scratching Toby under the chin.

“So whadda you say?” The guy turned his attention back on Kara, who was horrified by the whole exchange. “Maybe this time I can buy you a little dinner before we do it?”

“Why don’t you just kill me now!” Kara mumbled, feeling Nick’s gaze on her from where he was crouched on the ground below.

“Hey there...” She couldn’t even remember the guy’s name?

“Roy,” he jumped in, helping her out.

“Yes, Roy. I knew that, I knew that. Anyway, Roy, how about we just leave things the way they are for right now. You know, the mystery and all that. I wouldn’t want to tarnish what we had.”

Her sarcasm was lost on the dumbass as he pointed a finger at her and gave her a cheesy wink. “You aren’t the first girl who has said that to Roy, and you definitely won’t be the last, baby. All the girls love the mystery of a one night stand with Roy.” Backing up, he licked his lips and winked for about the twentieth time in the short span of their conversation. “You have my number if you ever want to give me call.”

Kara nodded at Roy. Nick nodded at Roy. Hell, even Toby nodded at Roy.

“I’ll see you around, baby.”

“I hope to hell not,” Kara muttered under her breath, spinning on her heel and walking as far and as fast away from the “Mystery of Roy” as she could get.

Nick gave Toby a final scratch under the chin and stood up, following the girl who had stormed off in a huff.

Damn, that was the best laugh he had had in months. When that guy pulled out her bra and twirled it around his finger, he thought he would wet his pants. He walked quickly to catch up to her as she weaved off towards a garbage can and discreetly lifted the lid, dropping her bra inside.

“Hey what did you do that for?” Nick asked, stopping when she spun around, a wicked look in her eyes. “No need to throw away a perfectly good bra.”

“Oh, quit following me!” she said, hands on hips. “As if that wasn’t embarrassing enough without you following me around reminding me of it!”

Nick put his hands up with a grin. “Hey, I’m not the one who put on my tight, sexy jeans and twirled your bra around for everybody to see! If you’re going to be pissed, be pissed at The Mystery of Roy, not at me.”

Kara stood for a second, biting her bottom lip to keep from laughing. But when she looked up into the dancing, blue eyes of the dog lover, who was trying to keep from laughing himself, she had to smile.

“You’re an idiot,” she said with a grin.

“That’s what everybody is always saying,” he replied, his nose wrinkling slightly when he smiled. “And since I’ve seen your bra, you might as well tell me your name.”

“I’m Kara,” she said, sticking out a hand.

“I’m Nick,” Nick answered back, grabbing her hand and pumping it up and down in a light, friendly shake.

Nick and Kara walked along the tents side by side, Kara munching on her apple.

“Do you want one?” she asked, pulling the extra apple from her pocket. Nick nodded, holding out a hand as she tossed the apple to him.

“I’ve never been much of a fruit fanatic,” he said sinking his teeth into the ripe, red skin. “It just always seems easier to get fast food.” In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he had even had any fruit. That was unless you counted Fruity Pebbles in the morning drenched in chocolate milk as a fruit?

“Wow, I can’t even imagine. When I was little, we lived with my grandparents on their farm, so if it wasn’t fresh, it wasn’t allowed in the house.”

“Yeah, well, when I was little, if it wasn’t stale and or in the ninety-nine cent bin at the Quick Mart, it wasn’t allowed in our house,” Nick said, rolling the apple over to start in on the other side.

“Ewwww, that’s icky.” Kara laughed. A light, sweet laugh. The kind of laugh Nick hadn’t heard in a long time. Most of the girls he met laughed with loud, annoying cackles from too much alcohol or too much sex or something in between.

“Hey, I want to go and check out those pictures.” Tugging on the hem of Nick’s shirt, Kara weaved across his path, walking in the direction of one of the smaller tents that had a dozen or so watercolor paintings on display.

“Hey Kara,” Nick began, as she paused in front of a beautiful painting of a sunset. A sunset almost identical to the one he had witnessed the night before.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?” she asked, noticing Nick staring intensely at his memory brought to life on the canvas before him.

He nodded silently, reaching out to touch the incredible colors.

“Hey, were you going to say something?” Kara finished her apple, tossing the core into a trashcan beside her.

“What?” Nick looked up, his fingertips just short of connecting with the swirling firestorm of oranges and pinks.

“A second ago you said, ‘Hey Kara.’”

Nick backed away from the painting, his hand moving again to the comfort zone of his hair, tugging at the short tips as he looked around.

“Well... I was going to ask if you really slept with that guy cheesy guy? But I changed my mind. I don’t want to ask now.”

“Too late, you already asked,” she said, moving away from the watercolor tent. “And if you must know if I really slept with Roy or not, the truth is, I don’t know?”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? How can you not know if you slept with somebody?” he asked as they continued walking along in tandem steps, bumping hips.

“Well, let’s see. Bachelorette party.” She put one hand out. “Lots of alcohol.” She put the other hand out, and then she put both hands together. “Viola!”

Nick winced. “It’s just that... well... you don’t seem like that type of girl.” As he said the words, he let his eyes travel over her, from head to toe. She had beautiful, chestnut-colored hair and piercing green eyes. He liked the shape of her slightly up-turned nose, smattered with light freckles, as well as her long, lean limbs, clad in a modest blue-and-white-striped tank top and cut-off shorts.

Kara laughed, slugging Nick in the arm and making him drop his apple

“I’m not that kind of girl!” At least she didn’t think she was, but losing one’s parents did strange things to an otherwise sane young woman.

“Hey, you made me drop my apple. You owe me another one!” he whined, turning his mouth down in a frown that hadn’t even worked when he was three years old, let alone twenty-three.

Stooping to retrieve it, Kara shoved him playfully from behind. “Oh quit your pouting, Blondie. There’s plenty more where that came from,” she said, hooking her arm in his. “Follow me.”

Kara zipped quickly in and out of the crowd in the direction of her grandparents’ fruit stand. Once close to the stand, she ducked down behind the crowd of people vying for the best positions to shout out their requests for the ripest produce. Popping her head

up once to make sure that her grandparents and sister were busy filling the orders, she grabbed hold of Nick's hand and made her way between the two tents to where her grandfather's truck was parked.

Nick followed close on her heels, enjoying the feeling that he was on some sort of Mission: Impossible, with the way Kara kept swinging her head around to check over her shoulder. He wondered for an instant if they were going to hotwire the old blue pickup truck and go for a joyride when Kara stopped short, Nick bumping into the back of her with a dull thud.

Leaning over the tailgate of the truck, Kara grabbed two apples, tossing them to Nick, and then she grabbed two more and signaled him to follow her as she ran in the direction of a large, vacant field to their right.

Once hidden by the tall grass, Kara stopped running and tumbled to the ground, laughing as she sunk her teeth into one of the apples in her hands. Nick rolled to the ground beside her, gasping for breath.

"Did we just steal?" he asked, polishing the apple on his t-shirt.

Kara kept laughing as she pointed at Nick a wonderful twinkle in her eye. "You should have seen your face!"

"What about my face?"

"You had this look on your face like if we got caught taking some apples we were going to end up in jail!"

"Wait a minute." Nick held the apple up, inspecting it from all angles. "This is from your grandparents' farm. They sell fruit here, don't they?"

Kara nodded with a loud snort that made Nick snort back.

And suddenly, he felt like he was eight again, running and playing make believe with a childhood friend.

"Okay, Nicky, let's play cops and robbers. I'll be the cop, and you be the robber." The little girl was as new as he was in the neighborhood, so neither one of them had any friends.

"But I'm always the robber." Nick sighed, tugging on one of the little girl's ponytails with a grin. They had formed a close bond in the two months they had known each other. And together, they had done a pretty good job of warding off the neighborhood bullies who liked to zero in on the new kids and make their lives hell.

“But you’re a good robber, Nicky. You can run real fast like a good robber.” She grinned at him poking her tongue through the missing space of her two front teeth, a trick that always made Nick laugh.

“Okay, okay you win. Let’s pretend that I stole some fruit from a market and I happen to pass by you while I’m running from the guy who owns the store?”

The little girl nodded, always in awe of Nick’s crazy imagination.

There used to be a time when Nick could make anybody believe anything if he really put his mind to it... even himself.

But a few months ago, that all changed.

“What are you thinking about?”

Shaken from his childhood, Nick turned to see Kara staring at him with questioning eyes.

“Cops and robbers,” he said with a smile

Part 4
You Don't Even Know Me Now

“Are you running from the cops or something?” Kara said, eyes widening, body suddenly stiff.

“No, no.” Nick reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, laughing at the serious look in her emerald eyes. “Not those kind of cops and robbers. I meant the game cops and robbers, like you play when you’re a kid.”

He noticed her body relax at the quick realization that he wasn’t some crazy serial killer on the loose. “I loved playing cops and robbers when I was a little girl,” she said, lying back in the rough grass. “I always had to be the robber, though, because my older sister wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Nick lay down beside her, their heads touching. “Older siblings can be a pain, huh?” he said.

“You’re an older sibling, aren’t you?” She knocked her elbow into his arm. “I can tell because you’re a big pain.” Their dialogue flowed like old friends, simple and sarcastic.

“If it makes you feel any better, I always had to be the robber, too.” Nick raised his arms up, pointing his fingers at the clouds in the sky, thinking that one looked an awful lot like A.J. falling off of the stage.

“You know what the funniest thing was?” Kara raised her arms, too, tracing her fingertips around the outline of a cloud that reminded her of a rabbit. “I didn’t even mind being the robber when my sister and I played because being the robber meant that I would get to throw a punch at her at some point in the game, and I knew she couldn’t tattle on me.”

“Did you throw a lot of punches when you and your sister played?” Nick spotted a cloud that reminded him of a wave.

“You bet! Hey, if you can’t throw punches in cops and robbers, then where can you throw a punch. Besides, she punched me enough when we weren’t playing, so I had to get her back somehow.”

“What was your favorite game when you were little?” Nick was enjoying being the one asking the questions for once. He had spent the better part of his life answering so many questions about himself – favorite color, favorite movie, favorite TV show, favorite actress... the list went on and on – that he had gotten to the point where he didn’t have to have a real favorite anything anymore; the magazines took care of all of it for him.

“Hmmmmmm..... I think I liked playing make believe the best. Just me and my imagination.” Pulling her eyes slowly across the sky, she wondered if maybe that was what she had been doing for the last five months? Playing some sort of game of make

believe that she hoped would take her away from the grief and sadness of losing her parents?

“You never cry.”

“I cry.”

“No you don’t, Kara, you’re a cold bitch.”

Kara and Allie sat across from each other in the lobby of the funeral home, waiting for the mourners to arrive. It had been six long days since the news of their parents’ death, six days that seemed like six years.

“What do you want me to do, Allie? Do you want me to break down sobbing? Would that make you feel better?”

“You act like they aren’t even dead, Kara. You act like they are going to come walking through that door any minute, shouting ‘Surprise!’ This isn’t one of your stupid games of make believe. Mom and Dad are dead...”

“Kara, I wish I would have known you when we were kids.” It was a spontaneous statement that spilled sweetly from Nick’s mouth into the summer air. They both turned to look at each other, their foreheads lightly brushing as Kara cupped Nick’s face gently in her hands and sighed.

“But Nick, you don’t even know me now.” Her voice sounded sad when she said the words, making Nick feel tongue-tied and awkward by the shared intimate moment.

God, he so sucked at being intimate. Every girl he had ever been really close to had told him so. When the moment called for warm embraces and declarations of love, Nick resorted to noogies and knock-knock jokes. When the girl longed for roses and lingerie, he showed up with a six pack of beer and nachos from Taco Bell.

It wasn’t like he screwed up on purpose. Nobody in their right mind enjoyed getting beamed in the head by a flying beer can or having nachos smeared in their face by a girl screaming, “YOU SUCK, CARTER!” on her way out of his life. But that was just the way things always seemed to go for him. He wanted to be a different kind of man, he wanted his life to be different, but there never seemed to be enough time to change things. And now it looked like there never would be.

They stayed that way, his face in her hands, foreheads touching, for a brief moment before Nick slowly rolled away.

“Listen Kara,” he began, “I’m really sorry, but I can’t get involved with anybody right now. It just wouldn’t be fair.”

She pushed herself up to a sitting position, amusement tugging at her features until she couldn’t hide it anymore, and she burst out in laughter. “Nick, what in the hell are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?” she mimicked him. “Look, I think you’re a nice guy and all, but I’m not looking to get involved with anybody either. And just because I slept with Roy doesn’t mean I sleep with every guy I see!”

“No, that’s not what I... well, I guess... I... I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about.” Suddenly, Nick was laughing, too, as he slapped his palm into his forehead. “You know what, let’s pretend I didn’t say that, okay? Let’s rewind that part.”

“Okay.” She lay back in the grass, looking up at the sky, patting the ground for him to lie beside her. “I’ll start over.”

“But Nick.” She tried to keep from laughing as she repeated the words again like she was reading a script. “You don’t even know me now.”

“You’re right, I don’t know you, Kara,” he replied, propping himself up on one elbow, his hand fisting in his hair. “So what do you say we spend the day changing that? We’ll spend the day getting to know each other; we’ll spend the day becoming friends.”

“Okay.” Her mouth turned up into a warm smile. “You got yourself a deal.” She stood up, wiping her hands on her shorts. “So what are you doing the rest of the afternoon, Nick?”

“I dunno. I thought that maybe I’d drive into town, check things out. Maybe we could go and get some lunch?”

“Wrong.” Kara extended her hands to Nick, dragging him to his feet.

“Wrong?”

“Yes, wrong. You are going to get me out of hot water with my family for hanging out with you and taking such a long break. You’re going to help us out selling at the fruit stand.” Turning, she marched back across the field in the direction of the blue pickup truck they had pinched the apples from, Nick tripping on her heels like a little puppy.

“You’re making a huge mistake,” he said, as she walked to the back of the truck, plucking an apron from a box with a huge grin. “I don’t know anything about selling fruit. Besides, now that I’ve tasted fruit and know what I’ve been missing all of these years, I’ll probably eat more than I can sell.”

Walking back to him, ignoring his lame excuses, she tied the apron around his waist and stood back to admire him. "Perfect!" Grabbing his hand, she pulled him through the flap in the back of the tent.

"Okay, okay, wait." Nick tugged her backwards, bumping her off of his chest as he rested a hand on her shoulder.

"What?"

"If I do this for you, then what's in it for me?" he said, looking out into the sea of patient and impatient customers waiting for their turn to order.

Kara noticed Allie staring at them as she loaded some apples into a brown paper bag. She could tell that Allie was wondering who the hell this tall, blonde stranger dressed in an apron, standing in their grandparents' fruit stand was, and Kara could have cared less.

"I guess you'll just have to wait and see," she replied, smiling at the disgusted look that Allie now had on her face.

"Allie, Grandma, Grandpa." Kara raised her voice over the din of the crowd. "This is my new pal Nick, and he's going to be helping us sell at The Market today."

Nick quickly came to the conclusion that he was a born salesman as he spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon hocking fruit in the blistering hot summer sun.

"I feel like freaking Donald Trump here!" he shouted over his shoulder to Kara, as he packed up another crate of grapefruit for a customer who had originally only come to the stand for a few pears, but, after some smooth-talking and a flash of his smile, was instead leaving with two crates of grapefruit and a whole sack of pears.

"They like you," Kara said, enjoying Nick's enthusiasm. "You're a natural for sure."

"And you're beautiful!" Nick called back, taking another customer's order for a bag of oranges.

"What?" Kara stopped loading her crate and stared at him, wide-eyed.

"I said you're beautiful." He tossed a few more oranges into the bag before wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

Kara's grandmother stood off to the side, chatting with a longtime customer, glancing back at Nick with a smile.

Allie stood beside Nick, plucking up three oranges for her customer.

“And you’re not so bad yourself, Allie,” he said, waggling his eyebrows at her as Kara stood behind him, trying to keep from laughing.

“Eat shit,” Allie hissed, shoving him out of her way as she grabbed for another orange. “You make me want to puke.”

“If I only had a dime for every girl that told me that,” he returned, as Allie heaved out a disgusted sigh and walked back across the tent.

“Oh my God, that was too classic.” Kara came up alongside Nick, pushing her face into his arm to disguise her laughter. He hooked an arm around her, pressing his nose into her hair.

“Did you see her face? Man, I thought she was going to spit on me!”

Kara’s grandmother broke away from her friend and walked over to the two kids. “Okay you two, you’ve had enough fun at Allie’s expense. Let’s get selling, and if you two can behave for the next two hours, I promise you a home-cooked meal you’ll never forget.”

“Deal.” Nick shoved Kara away from him, laughing, visions of food dancing in his head as he smiled brightly at her grandma. “You make me a home-cooked meal, and I’ll sell fruit for you for the rest of my life!”

Part 5

A Little Bit of Both

As the enthusiasm of morning wore into the slow, tired pace of late afternoon, the various vendors finished loading up their trucks and pulling down the tents, as the first Farmers Market of the season closed down for the day.

Kara's grandma and grandpa gave each one of the kids big hugs for their hard work, her sweet grandmother making sure to whisper the menu for the dinner she would be preparing for Nick in his ear, his knees going weak at the incredible-sounding dishes as he vowed to marry her right then and there if she would have him.

Then, after loading the last box of fruit into the back of her, grandfather's truck, Kara watched Allie walk to her car, not saying goodbye to anybody before speeding off in a cloud of dust.

"What is her problem?" she muttered under her breath, as Nick walked up beside her, patting her on her head.

"Hey, how about helping me find my car?"

"I swear to God, Kara, it's around here somewhere?"

The two had walked down the long frontage road for almost half a mile, scanning the fields where people usually parked for the Market.

"I was driving along this road and saw all the people and cars, so I pulled into one of these fields to park."

Kara shook her head, laughing to herself at the completely oblivious tone of his voice.

"Hmmm." Curling his upper lip, he scratched his head as he scanned the fields of cars to his left and right, looking for the little convertible. "Do you see it anywhere?"

"Hey, ding dong." Kara stood up on her tiptoes to knock on his head with her knuckles. "I don't even know what kind of car you drive, so how would I possibly know if I see it or not?"

Following his gaze to the left, she figured with his kooky personality, he probably drove some little beater car from the 80s. Something that had been painted twelve different shades of something nasty over its lifetime and had its carburetor dragging on the ground.

“Is that it?” She pointed to an old Gremlin with a bashed-in back panel and a white racing stripe running through the lime green and primer exterior.

“Nope.” He shook his head with a smile.

“Well, it has to be around here somewhere.”

“Hey, I see it!” He pointed to a clunky Suburban that was pulling forward to reveal the most gorgeous red Mustang convertible Kara had ever seen in her life.

“That... is your car?” she said in surprise, as he pulled the keys from his pocket, dangling them from his index finger.

“Yup, that is my car.”

Nick took off in a gallop, Kara on his heels. He reached the car first, pulling open the door and sliding comfortably into the driver’s seat with a sigh.

“So, what’s the deal? Do you want me to drive you back to your car, and then I can follow you back to your grandparents’ farm?”

Hanging over the back of the car, Kara inhaled the scent of the fine leather interior.

“Hell no.” She walked around to the passenger side of the car and climbed in. “There is no way that I’m going to drive my crappy little Neon while you get to drive around in this thing!” Slamming the door shut behind her, she threw her arms up in the air and let out a squeal.

“Well, what about your car?” Nick said, revving the engine, much to Kara’s delight.

“Who cares!” she screamed, her head whipping back as Nick pushed the pedal to the metal and roared through the field, up onto the road.

As they sped along the open road, Nick dropped his sunglasses over his eyes and flipped up the knob on the radio. Ironically, it was the same Bon Jovi song Kara had heard this morning on the way to The Market.

“I like Bon Jovi,” Nick said matter-of-factly over the roar of the car, as he fished around in the console between the seats, coming up with a bottle of prescription medication that he tossed to Kara. “Can you pull me out two of those pills, please?” he asked, reaching his arm over the backseat for a water bottle.

“Sure.” Kara twisted the bottle around in her hand, looking at the label. His name was Nickolas Gene Carter, and the pills appeared to be for severe migraines. Shaking out two of the pale blue horse pills, she placed them in his outstretched hand and put the bottle back in the console between the seats.

“So you get migraines?” she asked, settling back in the soft buttery leather, the aches and pains from her first day at The Market creeping into her bones.

“Among other things,” he answered, flipping a left, on Kara’s instruction, at the crossroads that would lead them to Main Street.

“Do the pills help?”

“Not really. Not anymore.”

“Do you get the migraines often?”

“Hey, is that a gas station?” Quickly changing the subject, Nick popped the pills in his mouth, taking a swig of water, before turning into the ancient old gas station.

The place was complete with a little general store and a spunky kid in overalls and a crisp, white cap who smiled brightly at them as he dragged the gas pump around to the tank side of the car and asked Nick if he wanted him to “fill her up.”

Kara waited outside while Nick went into the general store and picked up some essential snacks to store in the trunk of his car for the next leg of his journey. Simple things like boxes of Ike and Mikes, some packs of Red Vines, two large bags of Doritos, some bottles of Gatorade, and, of course, an extra large bag of Pork Rinds.

On every tour, Brian and Nick had made a habit out of each of them getting a big bag of Pork Rinds at various gas stations across the country so that they could race each other to see who could down their bag first. The whole thing had started on one of their first “tours.” Way back before it could be called a tour. When it was the five of them and sweaty Lou Pearlman stuffed in the back of a wood-paneled camper van.

They had pulled into some rundown gas station so that Lou could go to the john. The guys had all gone into the gas station for snacks when Nick spotted two big, dusty bags of Pork Rinds sitting on the shelf. A.J. had gone off, the way only A.J. could do, making a huge production about how sick and wrong pork rinds were and how only a true psycho would eat those things. Well, that was all Nick and Brian needed to hear as each one scooped up a dusty bag, tore it open, and began to crunch the tasteless wonders down one by one, much to A.J.’s disgust.

Setting the bag on the counter now, along with his other things, Nick found it funny that, over time, he had actually developed a taste for the things. He even set a record on the last tour for the fastest time eating a whole bag. Three minutes, forty two seconds. His bag was gone before they even pulled away from the gas station.

Paying for his items, the woman behind the counter smiled brightly at Nick, telling him to enjoy his stay in town as she handed him his change. Smiling back at her, he figured that his fancy car must have given him away as a tourist.

Walking back towards the car, Nick noticed Kara was sitting in the driver's seat, talking and laughing with the kid who had pumped the gas. His first instinct was that jealous feeling in your gut, the one that started out like butterflies and then turned into something really nasty like bad heartburn. He realized that he wanted to knock that stupid white cap right off of the kid's head. But when he reached the car and the kid stuck out his hand to shake Nick's hand, welcoming him to town, all his jealousy faded away.

"How the hell does everybody know I'm not from around here?" Nick asked, motioning for Kara to scoot over, despite her obvious desire to drive his car.

"Well, number one, nobody around here drives a car like this," the kid said, pushing the driver's side door shut once Nick was safely inside the car.

"And second?" Nick motioned for Kara to put on her seatbelt, ignoring her outstretched hand as she tried to get his keys from him.

"Second is that you don't let Kara have everything she wants." The kid grinned widely, as Kara rolled her eyes and dropped her outstretched hand. "Guys from around here would bend over backwards to make Kara Clark happy, and everybody knows it."

Nick raised his eyebrows at Kara as if to say, "Is that true?" But she gave nothing away, as she casually flipped her ponytail and stuck her nose in the air with a smile. Nick slowly pulled out of the station as the kid waved goodbye.

"So guys would do anything for you, huh? Even Roy?" Nick stole a glance at Kara as she adjusted her side mirror with a smile.

"I don't want to talk about me now, and I *definitely* don't want to talk about Roy. Let's talk about you," she said, pointing to the right.

Nick followed her directions, turning down a tree lined street. Glancing around, he noticed that every house seemed to have a white picket fence and a dog in the yard. "Okay, what do you want to know?"

"Well, for starters, are you here on business or pleasure or both?"

"I don't really know."

Kara noticed the way his expression changed to something sad and contemplative as he said the words.

"What do you mean you don't really know?"

"Nick, I need to know where you are planning on going."

Nick stood in the foyer of his Florida home, engaged in another battle royale with his Mother.

“What the hell difference does it make to you where I go?” His arms were folded across his chest in a defiant way that would have signaled to a sane, rational person to back the hell off. But he had never considered his mother to be sane or rational.

“I need to know where you will be in case something happens to you.” She pushed at her bleached blonde hair as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other in obvious irritation.

“Since when do you give a fuck what happens to me, Mom?”

“Knock it off, Nicky. You are treading on thin ice with that attitude of yours, and I won’t put up with it.”

Nick snorted out a sarcastic laugh, his mother’s eyes narrowing as her lips disappeared into a thin line of irritation. “I’m not stupid, Mom. You only care if something happens to me because you want to make sure you get what I leave behind.” She raised a hand to slap him, but Nick stood his ground, squaring up his jaw, his eyes blue steel. “Go ahead and hit me, Mom. It won’t be the first time, but it might be the last.”

His mother dropped her hand, her fists clenching at her sides. “Nick, you know that I... that I... love you.” She stumbled over the word “love” like it was poison on her tongue.

Nick dropped his head and sighed. “If something happens to me, you can play the poor grieving mother, you can tell everybody how much you loved me and how much you’ll miss me, I really don’t care. But you’re not getting my money or my things. I worked my ass off for all of this-” He spread his arms wide. “-and I decide where it goes.”

Grabbing up the old, black duffel bag at his feet, he turned and walked towards the door, tossing his final goodbye to his mother over his shoulder on his way out the door. “Everything has been taken care of. My lawyers will know what to do.” Turning, he twitched his mouth up in a mischievous half-smile that had always worked so well at pissing his mother off in the past.

“See you around, Mom.”

“Well, business or pleasure?”

Kara leaned into Nick’s face, batting her big green eyes at him, making him laugh. And after careful consideration of her question, Nick finally answered her.

“Let’s just say it’s a little bit of both.”

Part 6

My Life Isn't What It Seems

Nick's mother had beaten him often in his twenty-three years, more times than he cared to remember. He always told himself that once he was older, he would be able to fight back, to put her in her place with one swift punch to the face that would rock her back on her heels and onto her ass. A punch so fierce she would look up at him with tears in her eyes and swear to God that she would never lay a hand on him again.

But that day had never come. He could never bring himself to do that to the woman who had given birth to him, at least not in this lifetime. So, for almost two decades, he'd taken the beatings through clenched teeth and closed eyes, one of the most severe being the one last year before his solo album had hit the stores.

Jane was angry over his refusal to pay her mortgage on the ridiculous home she and Bob had purchased in Malibu with Nick's money. She'd called Nick stupid and lazy before knocking him, closed-fisted, three times against the jaw, her diamond rings digging into his flesh. When he turned to leave, she came at him strong, hitting him in the back of the head twice with a large marble statue of a bird, the one he'd given her for her birthday.

The pain had been excruciating, leveling him to the ground as blood seeped slowly from his ears and mouth. As his sight faded in and out and his body began to shake, Nick cried out to his mother, begging her to call an ambulance, but she refused, instead covering him with a blanket as he lay on the floor and offering him a few aspirin and a sip of her Vodka before he finally passed out from the pain.

It had taken a week for the bruises along his jawline to begin to fade, but the headaches from the blow to his head had just begun.

Was that single incident the cause of the fate he was now doomed to? He couldn't be sure... but he knew one thing for certain: it had not helped.

"Turn here," Kara said, patting his hand. He looked up to the hand-painted sign on the wooden post proclaiming it to be "THE END OF THE ROAD" and turned left, heading up the long gravel road.

It sat perched on a slight rise at the top of a hill, the most incredible farmhouse Nick had ever seen. It was painted a pale yellow with crisp, white trim and framed by thick, green-leafed trees that were perfect for climbing. As they drew nearer to the magnificent home, Nick could see that it boasted a wonderful wraparound porch with scattered pieces of wicker furniture here and there and buckets of richly colored flowers that tumbled over the sides like waterfalls.

“You grew up here?” Nick asked Kara in amazement, as he pulled the car around the front of the house and slid the gear into park.

“Yes, I lived here until I was ten. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she answered, just as her grandmother came through the creaky wooden screen door onto the porch, one hand up to shield her eyes from the late afternoon sun, the other hand tucked neatly in the pocket of her frilly white apron.

Nick smiled at Kara’s grandmother, overwhelmed by a warm feeling of happiness, as if her grandmother was standing there waiting just for him. He had visions of himself as a young boy running up the steps to wrap his arms around the woman’s waist as she enveloped him in a big bear hug ruffling his hair.

The vision made him smile.

“This is like a dream,” he said, climbing from the car as Kara walked around to meet him.

“Isn’t life just one big dream anyway?” she said, hooking an arm around his waist as they walked towards the porch.

Nick glanced down at Kara, wondering what she meant when she said, “Isn’t life just one big dream, anyway?” But he didn’t have time to think about it, as her grandmother caught him up in a big hug, reaching up to rub his spiky hair.

“Welcome home, Nicky,” she said with a light in her eyes.

And for once in his life, he felt like he was home.

The three sat on the wicker furniture on the porch, laughing as dinner cooked on the stove inside. After awhile, Kara’s grandfather joined them, all rosy cheeks and dancing eyes, telling them wonderful stories that had them all doubled over with laughter.

“Do you wanna know the line that I used to pick up your grandmother when I first met her?” Kara’s grandfather placed a warm, loving hand on his wife’s shoulder. Both Nick and Kara nodded like two small children. “I said, if you come back to my house, I’ll show you the world’s biggest grapefruit.”

Both Kara and Nick paused for a second before bursting out in fits of laughter at the crazy pickup line that obviously must have worked, since the couple had been married almost fifty years.

“Wow, that’s a pretty corny line. I always try to come up with some over-the-top, clever line to hook them,” Nick said, reaching for the glass of lemonade at his feet.

“Do you have a girlfriend now?” her grandfather asked Nick.

“Nah, not right now. But I’ve had my fair share of ladies in the past.”

“Okay, Slick, give me one of your over-the-top clever lines.” Her grandfather wiped at his brow with a red handkerchief, egging Nick on.

“Okay, you want my best line?”

“Yes.”

Cracking his knuckles, Nick sat up straight, all eyes on him.

“Okay, here it goes... Hey, baby-” Kara started giggling as Nick began. “Wait, wait, she’s screwing me up,” he said, as Kara’s grandfather motioned for her to be silent.

“Give the boy a minute; I’d really like to hear this.” They were all laughing at Nick, and he knew it, but it didn’t make him mad the way it usually did when he could tell people were laughing at him because he knew that these people didn’t mean him any harm.

“Okay, here it goes... Hey, baby, you know I’ve only got twenty four hours to live, and my last wish is to spend every minute of it with you.”

Kara’s jaw dropped at the insanely stupid line that Nick delivered in a fake, deep voice. “Oh my Lord!” she gasped. “And women actually fall for that crap? They must be blondes, right?”

“Hey.” He pointed at his spiky, blonde-tipped hair. “We blondes take offense to that remark.”

Rising from his seat, Kara’s grandfather shook his head, a smirk on his heavily-lined face. “All I can say, son, is with lines like that, it’s no wonder you’re still single!”

“Okay, kids.” Kara’s grandmother looked up to the darkening sky as the incredible smells of dinner drifted through the open porch screen door. “It’s time to eat.”

Nick stood up, following Kara’s grandmother and grandfather into the house, with Kara bringing up the rear.

Walking into the house for the first time since the afternoon of her parents’ funeral, Kara suddenly felt her pace quicken and her breathing become shallow, as the memories of her mother and father came flooding back to her.

Putting a hand up to her throat, she felt as if she were suffocating as she backed out the front hall and onto the porch, unnoticed by Nick and her grandparents.

She could smell her mother's perfume.

She could hear her father's laughter echoing from the fields.

She could hear them both calling her to come to dinner.

She could feel her sanity slipping away from her, and it was painful.

Her grandmother came through the door and onto the porch, letting the screen shut behind her.

"Kara, sweetheart, what is it, what's the matter?" she asked, as Kara sat down on one of the wicker chairs, dropping her head between her legs, trying to breathe.

"I feel them, Grandma," she said, between shallow breaths.

Nick poked his head through the screen door, his stomach growling loudly with hunger.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, realizing quickly that it wasn't.

"Nick, sweetheart, will you sit with Kara while I go and get her some water?" Kara's grandmother stood up and walked quickly back in the house, as Nick ventured outside, kneeling down on the porch beside Kara.

"Are you okay?" he asked, running a hand down her cold and clammy arm. She shook her head.

"I thought I was," she said, gasping for air. "I really thought I was, but I can't do this. I can't." Standing on wobbly legs, she made her way down the steps and across the lawn.

"Kara." Her grandmother had returned to the porch, a glass of water in her hands, as she called out to her youngest granddaughter.

"What's the matter with her?" Nick asked, watching Kara weave across the lawn into the orchards to the west.

"She's suffering, sweetheart." Kara's grandmother stroked a hand over Nick's slumped shoulder, a tear in her eye. "She's suffering, and she won't let anybody help her."

Kara made her way through the orchard, feeling the eyes of Nick and her grandmother on her as she tried to find a place to hide. She had been working so hard to stay strong, to keep her feelings hidden away. And she thought that she was doing an okay job of it. She guessed that she should have realized that quitting her job and buying a plane ticket for Europe on a whim was the first sign that she wasn't okay. Drinking herself into a stupor and sleeping with Roy must have been the second sign. And she now knew that

this feeling of sheer terror and loneliness that rattled around in her now was the third sign.

Dropping to her knees, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m here, Kara.” Nick knelt beside her, rubbing a hand along the small of her back in comforting circles.

“You don’t understand, Nick. My life isn’t what it seems,” she said, lowering herself to the ground, her face pressed into the cold dirt.

“I understand more than you know,” he replied, lying beside her as the sunset ebbed and then faded below the horizon.

Part 7

Can You Hear That?

Nick walked Kara back towards the car, a protective arm pulled around her shoulder, her head tucked tightly into his chest. Her grandmother and grandfather stood on the front porch, watching in silence with sad eyes, understanding that their granddaughter needed more at this moment than either one of them was able to provide her.

Nick helped Kara into the passenger side of the car, making sure she was safely inside before closing the door. Walking around to the driver's side, he tossed up a wave to her grandparents to let them know she was in good hands before he climbed in the car and slowly backed down the gravel drive.

Once down to the end of the drive, Nick pulled the car off to the side of the road, putting it in park and killing the lights. He ran a hand through his hair as Kara sniffled loudly in the seat beside him.

"I'm really sorry about your parents," Nick said, his eyes focused straight ahead. "Your grandmother told me what happened."

Kara nodded to herself, swiping the back of her hand across her tear-stained face like a small child.

"This is so stupid," she said in an angry voice, shivering. "I told myself I was going to be strong and that I wasn't going to cry."

Nick reached over into the backseat, dragging a faded red hooded sweatshirt back into his lap. "What is so bad about crying?" he asked, turning the sweatshirt right side out and shaking it out before leaning over and tucking it gently around Kara's body.

"Crying is for people who are weak, crying is for people who don't have any control, and I am neither of those kinds of people." Kara sat up straight, taking a deep breath. "I'm not doing this, Nick. I have kept it together for this long, I'm not going to fall apart now."

Nick glanced over at her before speaking again. "Maybe you're afraid if you let go and cry, that will mean your parents are really gone?"

She looked over at him as he spoke, a stern look of doubt etched on her face as she started to protest but was suddenly cut off.

"If you don't cry, then eventually a part of you will die." Nick knew firsthand what he spoke of. The years of physical and mental abuse suffered at the hands of his mother had long ago hardened him from shedding any tears. "The truth is, crying doesn't make you weak or less of a person, it makes you human."

“You have two wonderful people who loved you with all their hearts that will be there to watch over you for the rest of your life. No matter what you do or where you go, they will be up there, guiding you along. Crying will just let them go, Kara, so that your heart will open up-” He thumped on his chest. “-and they can come back to you.” Taking a deep breath, Nick nodded to himself, believing the words that he had said as he settled back in the seat.

And suddenly, Kara knew that Nick was right. She had been trying desperately to hold onto her parents when, in reality, they were already gone. All this time, they had been trying to come back to her, but she kept shutting them out, and in Nick, she finally found the strength she needed to just let them go.

“It’s okay to cry, Kara. It just means you miss them.”

“I do, Nick. I really do.” Tears began to spill down her face, and she could feel her heart beginning to open up. “I have wanted to cry for such a long time,” she said as Nick reached over, patting her leg, his gaze turning forward to the darkening sky.

“Then you go ahead and cry, Kara. We’ve got all the time in the world.

Kara wasn’t sure how long they sat there with her sobbing and Nick patting her leg, but she knew that it felt so good to let it all out.

Suddenly, a set of headlights flashed in their eyes as a shiny silver Jetta turned onto her grandparents’ road, stopping beside Nick’s car.

“Shit, it’s Allie,” Kara said, looking in the opposite direction as she wiped at her eyes with the hood of Nick’s sweatshirt.

Allie rolled down her window, sizing up the situation before barking, “What the hell is going on?”

“Go away, Allie,” Kara mumbled loudly, not looking at her sister.

“Oh my God, Kara, are you having sex with him too? You are such a slut. Can’t you have some respect for yourself and our grandparents and at least take him to the park or the baseball field if you’re going to get it on?”

Ignoring Allie, Nick fired up the car and peeled out, leaving her eating their dust as he turned out onto the road and headed towards town.

They drove down the road leading out onto Main Street, where things seemed alive with the Saturday night locals looking for a good time. Nick enjoyed the feeling of small town

life, as people strolled casually in and out of the local diner, window shopping as they all seemed to be headed in the direction of The GiddyUp Bar, a place that he would soon learn was a popular hangout for the twenty-one and over crowd.

Swinging the car into a spot just vacated by a small pickup truck, Nick got out and walked around to Kara's side, opening the door and taking her by the hand. She looked up at him with tearful, bloodshot eyes, waiting for him to give her some more words of wisdom.

"Kara," he said, with mischief in his eyes, "let's get drunk."

Kara twirled around the dance floor, and Nick held court at a corner table, surrounded by girls with big hair and bold-colored lipstick asking him his name and offering to pay for his beers.

"You're not from around here, are you?" one of the girls shouted over the music, running her hand up his thigh.

He shook his head before tipping back another beer, enjoying the colorful swirling lights and twangy music coming at him from all sides. "Nope."

He smiled at another girl who made her way to his table with a glass of something in her hand. "Here, I brought this for you," she said, squeezing her way in beside the blonde to his right.

"I'm not from around here, but I'm seriously considering making it my new home," he replied in a slurred voice, as he grabbed for the drink and pounded it back, the girls giggling all around him.

Kara spun right and then left and then right again as Garth Brooks boomed out over the sound system of the club. Never much one for country music, she found herself loving the craziness of the people in the club in their oversized hats and too-tights jeans. Kids she had known since childhood that had suddenly turned into adults.

Spinning right again, she bumped hard into a familiar figure.

"Hey baby," he said, grasping his hands around her hips as she flipped her head around finally settling on him with blurry eyes.

"Well hey, Roy!" she said brightly, throwing her arms around his neck. "Where have you been all my life?"

Swinging his hips, Roy smiled at her.

“I’ve been right here, sweetie, and if you give me another chance, I can prove to you that I’m the guy for you.” He shouted the words into her ear like a rehearsed script. But with as much alcohol as Kara had ingested, it was sounding pretty damn good.

“Oh Roy, I think I gave you plenty of a chance last night, didn’t I, and you proved yourself more than adequate.” Swinging her head around again, her ponytail whipped Roy in the face.

“Well...” Spitting out a mouthful of her hair, Roy gave her a shit-eating grin as he pulled her closer to him. “Truth be told, old Roy didn’t really get much of a chance to show you The Mystery and all, seeing as how you passed out cold before I could even get my shirt off.”

Kara’s mouth dropped open slightly as she continued to sway to the music. “Are you saying we never had sex?”

“Well, uh, yeah. That’s what I’m saying. But give me another chance, baby, and I can make it up to you.”

Throwing her head back, Kara started to laugh. She laughed so hard, she couldn’t stop, as tears spilled down her face.

“Oh Roy,” Kara said, slapping him on the arm as she pulled away. “Why don’t you just go and stuff it like you stuff your pants.”

Turning, she tripped off towards a line dance just as Boot Scootin’ Boogie began to play, leaving Roy alone and confused in the middle of the dance floor.

“Stuff my pants?” Roy said to himself looking around the bar, then down at his pants, and then around the bar again. “I don’t get it?”

“Oh man, I love this song.” Nick said, grabbing for the closest girl as he headed down to the dance floor. “Do you wanna dance?”

The girl tipped her black cowboy at him with a wink and a grin. “You know I do, cowboy,” she said as the two slid into the line beside Kara. Nick nudged her from the side with a drunken smile pasted on his angelic face.

“Are you having fun, Kara?” he shouted over the music, kicking left when everybody else was kicking right.

“More fun than I’ve had in a lonnnnnng time!” she yelled back. “Thank you.”

The two of them wound up shutting the bar down as they stumbled out onto the deserted Main Street at 2:00 a.m. and headed towards the tiny liquor store five doors down, determined to keep their happy buzz going just a little while longer.

The air was crisp with a stinging bite in it – strange for July? And a light fog had settled close to the ground, giving everything a soft glow.

Coming up on the liquor store, Kara put her hands up to either side of her face and peered inside the darkened store.

“It’s closed,” she said with a pouty voice.

“Closed?” Nick came up beside her, peering inside as well. “That sucks. Are there any other liquor stores in town?” he asked pushing away from the door.

“Nope.” Kara stood back from the door, too. “I want to drink. And I still want to dance.”

“Well hey, we can still dance.” Nick walked off of the sidewalk into the middle of the street, holding out a hand to her.

“Kara, may I have this dance?” he asked, wobbling slightly on drunken legs.

She pushed at her hair that had long ago fallen from its band and now swung loosely around her face and shoulders and smiled at him.

“Yes, Nick, you may.” Stumbling off of the curb, she walked to where he stood, placing her hand in his outstretched hand as he twirled her around in a circle and then clutched her to his chest.

“Can you hear that?” he asked, swaying slowly back and forth with her in his arms.

“Hear what?” she said.

“The music,” he replied in barely a whisper.

Kara looked around at the deserted street, the beautiful bright moon in the sky, and at the fog humming across the ground, and for the first time since her parents’ death, she could hear the music again.

Part 8
I Don't Know What To Say

Once Nick and Kara had sobered up some, they climbed into Nick's car and drove, just drove with no real direction in mind.

Oddly enough, they ended up on the same road where Nick had witnessed the incredible sunset the night before. This time when he parked the car, he was surrounded by billions upon billions of stars winking down at him like they knew some secret he wasn't aware of.

He sat back, enjoying the silence, as Kara sat beside him, now wearing his red hooded sweatshirt, the hood pulled tightly around her face so only her eyes nose and mouth peeked out.

"It's nice to be able to just sit here without saying a word. Most of the girls I know never stop talking," he said, pulling the seat latch so that he could recline.

"I know the type," Kara said, pulling her seat latch too so that they lay side by side, staring up at the sky.

"Sometimes I just want to tell them to shut up and enjoy the silence," Nick said with a small laugh.

"Why don't you?"

"I dunno." He shrugged.

Turning in her seat, Kara gazed over at Nick, taking in his profile, from the top of his wild blonde hair to the bumps of his collarbone just below the collar of his t-shirt. She guessed he was handsome in a brotherly sort of way. Or maybe a best guy friend that you always had a crush on but never dared tell so you could stay friends-sort of way. Reaching out a hand, she tugged on his arm, making him turn to face her.

"How come you haven't made a pass at me?" she asked, a serious look in her eyes. "I mean, we've been together all day long, I'm vulnerable, you're just passing through..."

"I haven't made a pass at you because you would turn me down flat." He pulled her arm to him, pushing her palm out flat and tracing his finger along it like he was a palm reader.

"You don't know that for sure. Why don't you try your famous 'I've only got twenty four hours to live' line on me and see how it works out?" She grinned, enjoying how soft his hands were.

"Nah, I don't want to," he said, crinkling his nose up as he folded her hand into a fist, cupping it between his hands.

“Oh come on, Nick, why don’t you just want to give it a shot?”

“Because that line doesn’t seem so funny anymore,” he said, letting go of her hand as he shifted in his seat.

“Why not?” she asked, reaching out to tweak his nose with a smile.

“It’s not funny anymore because it’s true.”

Kara’s mouth parted, and her eyes widened as she searched his face for a smile or a laugh or anything to let her know that what he had just told her was nothing more than a stupid joke... but there was nothing.

Nothing but his sad blue eyes and the moon reflecting in the darkened centers opening the door to his soul.

“I don’t know what to say,” she whispered.

He smiled. “That’s what everybody says.”

- - -

Looking back, he wasn’t sure when he truly knew that something was wrong with him. Sometimes it seemed like he had always known that he wouldn’t live long, and maybe that was why he had been so determined to stuff so much living into so little time.

He guessed he would never know.

The headaches started right before he began to promote Now or Never. At first, he thought they were from his mother’s assault on him. Then he thought they could possibly be tension headaches brought on by the stress of breaking away from his bandmates and beginning his solo career.

The violent pains would hit him at the strangest times, slamming around in his head until he felt like his teeth would rattle. When he would complain, the powers that be would fill him full of Tylenol with codeine and push him onto the stage for the interviews and performances. He knew that he sounded like an idiot as the reporters tossed question after question at him and he would fail to respond, trying to cover it with a goofy smile that made all the girls scream. But the loopy feeling of the codeine beat the searing pain in his head that would often blind him once he would take the stage, the band pulsating behind him as he ironically sang the words to the song “Help Me.”

By the time he took off on his first solo tour, things were slowly getting worse. He had begun to tremble in the morning, and he started to have weird tingling sensations in his right leg that caused him to trip occasionally.

His short-term memory had never been the greatest, but suddenly he couldn't remember things that he had discussed with people just hours before, and he began to forget words to some of his songs, having to have a teleprompter with the words installed below where he stood on stage.

He knew there were discussions going on backstage that he was drinking or on drugs, and at one point, his assistant Greg confronted him about the issue.

"Nick, do you need some help?" Greg approached Nick backstage after one of the concerts, wearing his usual tattered Abercrombie and Fitch cap and black horn-rimmed glasses that made him look like Drew Carey.

"What do you mean?" Nick asked, wincing as he bent down to tie his shoes.

"Well, I mean, look at you, man, you can't even tie your fucking shoes without pulling some face. The most simple things seem to be stressing you out, man, and I'm just wondering, what's going on?"

Sitting up, Nick wiped a hand across his mouth and tried to smile. "I'm fine, Greg."

"You're on drugs, aren't you?" Nick was surprised by the bluntness of Greg's words. It had been his experience that people only talked about you if you had a problem – not to you.

"No, I'm not on drugs." Standing up, Nick grabbed for a t-shirt and pulled it on.

"Then are you drinking?"

"No."

"Then what the hell is going on, Nick?"

"I wish I knew."

Brian came to Nick's performance in San Francisco in March, casually lounging backstage before the show, ribbing Nick about not being able to get front row seats to his best friend's concert. The two of them clowned around until the show started, when Brian took his seat amongst the squealing girls, shouting right along with them as Nick took the stage.

Brian was disturbed by Nick's appearance onstage, his lack of connection with the crowd as well as the way he seemed to stumble every so often on his feet, as well as on the words to the songs. Nick had never been the most coordinated person Brian had known, but he had never missed a lyric.

After the show, Brian made his way backstage, flashing the pass with Nick's picture on it to the big guy working the doors. He wandered from room to room before finally finding Nick in the bathroom, throwing up blood before eventually blacking out.

When Nick came to, he was lying on a ratty cot in one of the backstage rooms, a cold cloth pressed to his forehead, his mouth dry. He could hear Brian yelling in the background at somebody, "What the hell is going on? I want somebody to tell me what is the matter with him."

Nick smiled wanly to himself, thinking how nice it was to have somebody in his life that cared.

"Nicky." Now Brian was kneeling by his side, turning over the washcloth to the cool side before placing it back on Nick's forehead. "Why didn't you tell me something was wrong?" he asked.

"I didn't want to bug you."

"I'm going to take care of things, Nick. We're going to figure out what's wrong. Okay?" Brian smiled, punching Nick lightly in the arm.

"Okay," Nick whispered, closing his eyes. "Okay."

Brian had taken matters into his own hands, setting up an appointment for Nick at a well-respected clinic in Boston that he himself had gone to when he first began having the reoccurring problems with his heart years before.

They boarded the plane early the next morning, arriving in Boston late in the afternoon. Brian escorted Nick to the clinic, waiting for hours while they went over Nick from stem to stern, doing x-rays, EKGs, EEGs, MRIs, and numerous other blood tests, scans, and probes, before sending them back to the hotel to await the results the following day.

Brian tried to get Nick's mind off of things by taking him to the movies, but the movie sucked, and Nick was tired, so halfway through, they went back to the hotel and went to bed.

Brian stayed up all night, sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, watching Nick sleep. He couldn't remember how many times he had shared a room with Nick over the years, and in all those years, Nick had always been the one to sleep like a log the whole night through. Where Nick dropped, Nick slept, never moving until it was time to get up.

Watching him now, Brian was disturbed at the way Nick's body twitched and jumped, moaning every so often as he flipped from front to back and back to his front again.

Something was very wrong.

Brian and Nick returned to the clinic the following afternoon for a consultation with the doctor and possibly some more tests.

Nick sat on the table in the room, dressed in the pale blue gown, his legs swinging back and forth furiously.

"What if I'm dying?" he said, gnawing on his fingernails, as he glanced nervously around the room.

"You're not dying," Brian said, thumbing through a magazine.

"What are you, a doctor? How do you know I'm not dying."

"Look at you – you're the picture of health. You're probably just suffering from exhaustion or something."

"You don't puke up blood when you're tired. What if I'm dying?"

Brian finally shot a hand out to still Nick's legs as they pumped wildly back and forth. "Stop it already – you're not dying."

Just then, the doctor knocked on the door, entering, a serious look on his face. He shook both young men's hands before pulling up a stool and sitting down a large folder in his hands, containing the results from Nick's tests.

He tried to focus on the positive first, going through the results of the EKG and EEG and then moving on to some of the bloodwork. After a few minutes of talking, the doctor paused, rubbing a finger over his upper lip as he studied the paperwork before him. "All of those tests aside, Nick, I'm afraid that we have found something serious that needs to be discussed."

Nick could feel his body tense as he broke the eye contact with the doctor and began playing with a loose thread hanging from the sleeve of the hospital gown he wore.

"Nick, you have a brain tumor."

As he said the words, the color drained from Nick's face, and his legs began to swing back and forth again.

"So what does that mean?" he said, looking over to Brian, as always, for answers.

“Well, Nick,” the doctor continued, “what it means in most cases, depending on the size and accessibility of the tumor, is that we do surgery to remove the tumor, and then we can do radiation to treat it.”

Brian nodded at Nick.

“But... in your case, we have found that there are multiple tumors that have begun to form, and in addition to the mass of the tumors, we also have the problem of the location of the tumors. They are in an inaccessible location for us to operate. Trying to remove them could mean any number of things, from possible paralysis to death.”

“What are you saying?” Brian asked in an irritable voice, as Nick turned his attention back to the loose thread.

“What I’m saying is that, I’m sorry, there is nothing we can do.”

“Am I going to die?” Nick said, looking down at the floor so he didn’t have to make eye contact with anybody in the room.

“Yes, Nick. You are going to die.”

Brian and Nick sat at the table in the hotel room, silent. Curtains drawn, the hum of the air conditioner in the background.

“What do I do?” Nick finally asked.

Brian sat, stone-faced, across from him, drumming his fingers on the table. “We get a second opinion.”

And so they did. Over the next month, they got a second, third, and fourth opinion from respected doctors all over the country, and the prognosis from all of them was the same.

He was going to die.

Brian and Nick went to see the rest of the guys one by one, starting with A.J.

For some reason, Nick thought it would be easy to tell A.J. the news. He was counting on A.J. to crack one of his jokes, pull him into a hug, and tell him that they would fight the son of a bitch tumor that had invaded his brain.

But that wasn't what happened. As soon as the words left Nick's mouth, A.J. sat glassy-eyed and silent, staring at Nick, taking him in as if for the last time before finally saying, "Nick... I don't know what to say."

Telling Howie hadn't been any easier, with Howie breaking down and sobbing in the living room of his house in Maine. Nick stared out the big picture window, focusing on the fishing boats in the distance, nodding to himself when Howie finally muttered the words.

"Nick... I don't know what to say."

And it just got harder by the time they knocked on Kevin's door.

Just days before, Kevin had signed the papers for his divorce from Kris and was riding on cloud nine after bailing from the marriage that had caused him so much misery.

Brian and Nick sat on the deck on Kevin's Kentucky cabin, listening as Kevin went on and on about his new girlfriend Anne and how perfect they were for each other. He was anxious to get married to her and start a family, and he wanted Nick and Brian to be the first to know that he planned to ask Anne to marry him that very night, now that the divorce was final. When he finally came up for air, Brian spoke.

"Kev, Nick has something he needs to talk to you about."

"Oh shit, buddy, I'm sorry. Here I am going on and on about Anne, and you came here to talk to me about something."

Nick smiled. "It's okay, Kev. I'm happy that you're happy."

"I am, man, I really am." Slapping Nick on the leg, Kevin smiled broadly as he tipped back a beer and glanced up at the blue sky.

"Kevin... I'm dying." Nick spit the words out and then paused, waiting for Kevin's reaction.

Looking back down at Nick, Kevin had a small smile on his face as he looked over to Brian and back to Nick. "Is this a joke?" he said, pointing at them both. "Because if it, is it isn't funny."

"Kev, I wouldn't come all the way to Kentucky to tell you I was dying as a joke."

This time, when Kevin glanced over at Brian, Brian nodded to him, letting him know that what Nick said was true.

“When?” Kevin’s voice became serious.

“Couple of months.”

“We’ll get a second opinion,” he said, slamming his beer bottle down on the deck, anger in his voice.

“We already did, Kevin,” Brian broke in.

“And a second, third, and fourth opinion,” Nick finished.

“Fuck that, then we’ll get a fifth opinion,” Kevin said, standing up, pushing his hands through his hair.

“Kevin, there isn’t anything they can do... I have a brain tumor. I’m gonna die.”

Kicking at the beer bottle, Kevin sent it sailing off of the deck as he paced back and forth before finally turning, tears pooling in his eyes.

“God, Nick... I don’t know what to say.”

Part 9

I'm Gonna Miss Us

Nick and Brian boarded the plane, stuffing their packs in the overhead bin before slipping into their plush seats in first class.

"That was hard," Nick said, pushing up the window to glance outside at the Kentucky skyline.

"I know, buddy," Brian replied. "Hey, make sure to fasten your belt." It was force of habit to remind Nick to put on his seat belt. Regardless of whether they were in a car, boat, train, plane, even the wild rides at Disney World, Nick never remembered to buckle his seat belt.

Reaching for his belt, Nick tugged it around him, adjusting it to fit before sliding it together with a click. "Hey, I bet you'll be glad when you don't have to tell me to do that anymore, huh?" Nick looked over at Brian with a smile.

"I never really minded. It always made me feel good to take care of you.... It still does."

Nick nodded, settling back in his seat as the flight attendant came by to offer them something to drink. They both ordered Coca-Colas with lime, waiting until the flight attendant walked away before continuing the conversation.

"You know, you did a pretty good job raising me, Brian. You should be proud of yourself."

Brian hesitated, not really knowing what to say as the reality of what was to come settled painfully in his chest.

"Hey, Bri?"

"Yeah, Nick."

"You know what I'm going to miss the most? I'm really gonna miss you and me together. You're the only person in my whole life that I have ever been able to be myself around, and I wanted you to know I'm gonna miss it... I'm gonna miss us."

Pushing away at the tears that welled up in his eyes, Brian laid a hand on Nick's leg.

"I'm going to miss us too, Nick... I'm going to miss us, too."

Nick returned to his Florida home armed with prescriptions for pain medications, among other things to keep him comfortable.

Due to the numerous doctor's appointments and his declining health, he had been forced to cancel the final six dates of his solo tour, promising management that he would make up the dates when he could.

But that had been before he was told he was going to die.

Sitting on the floor of his bedroom, phone pulled into his lap, he went over what he was going to say to management to get out of the six dates. He could just tell them no way, he couldn't finish the tour because he was suffering from exhaustion or some other Mariah Carey-type excuse. But then the tabloids would dog him, printing that he was on drugs or something. Or he would have to go and do a striptease on TRL to prove his exhaustion case, and neither one of those things seemed like good alternatives to him.

Standing up, he dropped the phone to the floor and walked to the bathroom. Without turning on the light, he stood in front of the mirror, shadows playing off of his face as he ran a hand over his stubbly chin, studying his pale, drawn reflection in the mirror. He found himself staring into his own haunted blue eyes for what seemed like an eternity as the realization set in... he would never perform again.

And it was like a knife in his gut, the thought that the one thing he loved above all else in his world would be taken from him along with his life.

So he made the decision to finish the tour.

Sold out crowds of loyal fans packed the clubs, vying for the best positions at the front of the stage, all of them screaming Nick's name as they sung along with the words to every song.

He was as on his game as he had ever been, his energy peaking night after night, until his final, incredible performance at The Hard Rock Café in Las Vegas. The concert went on for three hours, Nick performing all the cuts from his CD along with some old Backstreet stuff. And before long, he was singing songs shouted out to him by the crowd as he tried to acknowledge each and every person who had come to show their support of him with some sort of wink, nod or smile.

He wrapped up the whole set with "I Need You Tonight," holding the final note of the song out for as long as he could before throwing his arms up in the air and, unbeknownst to the crowd, taking his final bow.

And then he retreated to his loft in New York to think about his future, or what future he had left.

Kevin, A.J., Brian and Howie showed up on his doorstep on April Fool's Day, all smiles, as they presented him with their idea to record a new CD.

After Black and Blue and The Hits compilation, they had all decided that it was time for The Backstreet Boys to go on the back burner for awhile. Then, when Nick made the decision to pursue a solo project, there had been a long meeting with everybody to discuss the fate of The Backstreet Boys as a band. After three hours and six extra large pizzas with everything on it, Kevin, Nick, Brian, A.J. and Howie reluctantly agreed it was time to go their separate ways as artists, but never as friends.

So now, to have them sitting in his living room, asking him what he thought about them all recording a new CD, it all seemed too much.

"Why are you doing this?" Nick asked, reaching for a cigarette that Brian promptly smacked out his hand. A.J. scooped up the cigarette, lighting it and placing it between his lips.

"We think it's time that we got back in the studio."

"Bull," Nick said, standing up and stepping over Howie to get his other pack of cigarettes on the end table. "You're doing this because you feel sorry for me because I'm dying."

"Nick, shut up," Kevin said, walking to the kitchen for a beer.

"I'm dying, Kevin!" Nick shouted after Kevin as he disappeared into the kitchen. "Recording a new CD isn't going to change that."

"No, you little shit," Kevin barked, walking back into the room with five bottles of Rolling Rock in his hands. "Recording a new CD isn't going to change the fact that you're dying, but maybe it can slow it down."

Plopping down beside Nick, he smacked the pack of cigarettes out of his hand and placed a beer in front of him.

"God would never kill you in the recording studio, Nick. That's your place of worship."

They booked the studio from the second week in April through the end of the July, renting a big house in upstate New York that they could all stay in, commuting together to the studio during the day and home together at night.

They tried not to talk too much about Nick's health, but everybody was keeping a close eye on him, noticing everything from the size of his pupils to the hitch in his gait when

he walked. As the months went on, they could see that Nick was getting tired, and by mid-June, he was having trouble with dizziness and was collapsing frequently.

He was checked into the hospital the following week, where he stayed until his final consultation with his doctor the first Thursday in July.

The doctor sat beside him, talking to him like a son instead of a patient. "I think that you should know that it is time for you to get the things in order that you want to get in order, Nick. You are in the final stages.... you don't have much longer to live."

That same day, Nick called his mom and dad to come and see him. They had been unaware that he was sick or even that he was in the hospital when he called. His mother said she would come and bring the family, but his father was busy and would be unable to make the trip.

He planned out in his head what he wanted to say to his family and how he wanted them to react, but nothing had gone according to plans. When he delivered the news, his mother rolled her eyes at him, leaving the room before he could even finish, while Aaron had broken down bawling like a baby, and his sisters had gathered around Nick, holding him tightly, all of them crying his name.

For some strange reason, he thought his mother would be the one to hold him and cry, but he guessed that was too much to ask from a woman who had taken the ability to cry away from him years before.

The following day, against the advice of his doctors, he discharged himself from the hospital, setting up a meeting with the band to tell them about his decision to take off on a cross-country journey of contemplation before he died.

They were all concerned about what would happen to him along the way, but he assured them that what was meant to be was meant to be, making them promise that if they didn't see him again, they would stick to their agreement about releasing the CD.

He'd returned to Florida the next day to shut his house down before he left. His mother met up with him at the house, their final confrontation nasty as well as necessary to close the door on that chapter of his life.

Then he hopped in his convertible and was gone.

Now, sitting there beside Kara, none of it seemed important, but rather a small footnote in a life well lived.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered.

He smiled. "That's what everybody says."

Kara took his hand into hers, holding it tightly, both of them looking beyond the darkness of the sky to the place where Nick would eventually belong.

“I have a brain tumor. There isn’t anything that anyone can do to help me.” Nick rubbed his tired eyes.

“How long do you have left?”

“Days... hours... minutes. Not long.” He tried to shrug it off like it didn’t matter. Like he had made peace with his lot in life, which wasn’t true.

Pulling away from Kara, Nick reached for the door handle of the car, popping it open and stretching out his impossibly long legs with a sigh.

“Don’t go!” Kara shouted, her words echoing in the wide-open sky.

Nick turned. “I wasn’t leaving. I was just gonna sit on the hood of the car?”

Kara laughed. “No, I didn’t mean don’t go away from the car; I meant don’t go, period. Stay here with me, with us.” Stepping out of the car, she followed him, reaching for his outstretched hand as he tugged her gently onto the hood of the car beside him.

“You can stay here with my grandparents; they have a spare room, and my grandmother is an excellent cook. We could take care of you, buy you some more time. The doctors aren’t always right, Nick.”

The desperation in her voice made Nick’s heart hurt. He had heard the desperation before... in Brian’s voice, Kevin’s voice, Howie’s voice, and A.J.’s voice. It was the desperation people felt when they knew there was nothing they could do.

“I can’t stay.” He ran a hand down her arm, smiling at the delicate features of her face peeking up at him from the confines of the red hooded sweatshirt. Reaching out, he loosened the ties, pulling the hood from around her face and pushing it off of her head.

“I don’t want you to die, Nick,” she said, closing her eyes as he pulled her into a warm embrace. “Please don’t go.”

Part 10 ***It Feels Right***

The connection Nick was feeling with Kara at that moment was unlike anything he had ever felt before in his life. Powerful in its utter simplicity. He dragged a shaking hand through her hair, their breath twisting in the air.

“Kara.” Her name caught in his throat as he stroked her cheek, letting his hand frame her face before tracing his index finger down her neck to her shoulder.

She sighed, swallowing hard, closing her eyes before leaning into him.

Nick had waited a lifetime for this kind of connection with a woman. What he was feeling with Kara was something so much more than two bodies rolling around together on a bed. It was a connection of souls that he would carry with him even after he crossed over to the other side.

“What’s happening, Nick?” Kara asked, wrapping her arms around him as the stars shifted overhead in the sky, popping like hot white lights.

“I don’t know,” Nick answered in a whisper, “but it feels right.”

They fell asleep curled up on the hood of the red Mustang convertible. A tangle of arms and legs, their faces pressed together, holding hands with fingers intertwined.

Kara dreamt, in bright, bold colors, of her parents showering their love down on her from up above. How she had longed to see their faces again, without the cold grimaces of death. Her mother was as beautiful as ever, with her warm, chestnut-colored hair framing her face, her green eyes twinkling, her bright white smiling glowing, as she reached out her arms to Kara. And her father... oh, her wonderful father. So tall and strong, with his sweep of tawny-colored hair and his ruddy, tanned complexion that seemed to glow as he threw back his head, his laughter booming out in the sky.

The wonderful dreams seemed to go on for an eternity, flashbacks of a life and a love shared between a family that, thanks to Nick, she would now keep in her heart for a lifetime. She didn’t ever want to wake up from the wonderful dreams, but she was suddenly very aware of the pull of a windshield wiper in her hair, as well as a hood ornament digging into her ankle as the morning sun warmed her skin.

Opening her eyes, she smiled.

Nick was rolled on his side, facing her, mouth parted, snoring lightly. She didn’t want to wake him, so she just lay there staring at him while he slept, trying to make a memory of the beautiful young man that would last forever.

When his blue eyes finally blinked open, he smiled a tired smile at her. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

Untangling his legs from hers, Nick stretched, rubbing his hands over his wild hair. “What time is it?” he asked.

“Who cares?” Kara yawned.

“Good point.” He laughed, groaning as he sat up. “Man, I’m getting too old to be sleeping on the hoods of a cars.”

Kara tried to unwind the windshield wiper from her hair. “Hey, do you think I could get some help with this,” she said with a small laugh.

Nick turned, sizing up the situation. “Yet another benefit of having my having short hair,” he said, working his hands through her hair. “No windshield wiper damage if you get one caught in it.” They both tried to laugh, but a sudden reality hung heavy in the early morning air.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Kara looked up at him with eyes that begged him to stay.

“Yeah, I have to go.” Nick held out the windshield wiper for her to take. “Here, a souvenir from our time together,” he said, placing a light kiss on her forehead before jumping down off the hood. “C’mon, let me help you.” He held out a hand to her, and she paused, wondering for a brief moment what would happen if she didn’t let him help her down.

Would he stay?

Finally, she placed her hand in his, letting him pull her to the ground.

“Do you want me to drop you off back at your grandparents’?” He walked her to the passenger side of the car, opening the door for her.

Kara nodded and then shook her head. “No, I have to be at The Market early again this morning to help them unload the fruit. I guess you’d better just drop me off there.”

Nick shut the door, leaning on it for a brief moment, looking down at her before pushing away and walking to the driver’s side.

The ride to The Market was filled with patches of sad silence, the music from the radio filling in the awkward lulls in conversation that only a few hours before had been jammed full of witty banter.

Nick could see the white tents being raised into the sky in the distance, as the vendors got ready to start another long day. Pulling off to the side of the road, he glanced up ahead, smiling as he noticed Kara's grandparents' old blue pickup truck rumbling across the field, boxes of fruit knocking and jostling in the back, her grandmother's wide brimmed straw hat peeking out the passenger side window.

Then he looked to Kara. A girl who had let him into her life with no strings attached to who he was or what he was. She accepted him for him, and in his life, that had been a rarity. It was everything he had always wanted in life, and now he had it... in his memories. A place where nobody could ever take it away from him, not in life and not in death.

"I guess we're here." Nick propped himself up in his seat, the car still running.

"Yeah." Kara looked at him, then down to the red sweatshirt she still wore. "Oh, I guess you'll be needing this," she said with a small laugh, as she went to pull it over her head.

"No." Nick stopped her. "Please, keep it to remember me by." He felt stupid saying the words, but her smile merely melted all his feelings of inadequacy away.

Kara placed a hand on the door latch, popping the door open before Nick could climb out and make his way around to help her out. Standing, she heaved the door shut and turned to face him.

"So what happens now?" she asked.

"I don't know," Nick said, taking her hands into his. "But from what I'm told, it will be something wonderful."

"Who told you that?" Kara's bottom lip trembled ever so slightly.

Nick just smiled, glancing up at the sky before pulling Kara to him, both of them holding tightly to each other like their lives depended on it.

"I really have to go." Nick pulled her back from him, kissing her over and over on the top of her head.

Kara stood back, smiling, reaching for his hand. "Nick." She pressed the palm of his hand to her cheek. "I won't forget to open my heart so that you can come back to me."

"If you don't cry, then eventually a part of you will die."

"Crying will let them go, Kara, so that your heart will open up and they can come back to you."

“It’s okay to cry, Kara. It just means you miss them.”

Nick’s own words echoed in his brain, as he dipped his head with a smile. Dropping his hand from her soft, warm face, Nick backed up and walked to the car, climbing behind the wheel with more feelings than he imagined a human being could ever have pushing and pulling inside of his chest.

Kara turned and started off across the field in the direction of The Market, the sleeves of his sweatshirt swinging below her fingertips, her pace picking up the closer she got to the tents. He didn’t know if he wanted her to look back or not.

When she finally reached her grandparents’ tent, he could see them pull her into warm embraces of welcoming love, making him smile. He saw Allie climb from her car and walk towards Kara, the two of them standing toe to toe for a full minute before Kara finally yanked her sister into an awkward hug that was hesitantly returned. Without hearing their words, Nick could see the two sisters’ hatred for one another melting into a mutual understanding.

Pushing the car into drive, Nick glanced down for a moment before looking up again, wanting just one more glimpse into Kara’s world before he set off on his journey, but something seemed odd.

He blinked twice in confusion, as the big white tents billowing in the breeze one by one began to disappear...

Glancing up to Kara’s grandparents’ beautiful farmhouse, perched so magnificently on the hillside in gleaming white and yellow, it too seemed to be fading away...

Beginning to protest the odd happenings around him, Nick noticed a group of people walking beside the car, laughing and talking as they headed off in the direction of The Market.

“Hey, do you guys see what’s going on?” Nick called out to them. They turned to look at him, the colors in their faces blurring like melting crayons.

Nick’s eyes frantically searched his surroundings... the dissolving treetops and houses of the nearby town... the cars flashing by him that seemed to bleed into white light. Reaching out his shaking hand, he slowly traced the outline of Kara, her sister, and her grandparents, standing by the blue pickup truck, waving to him with smiles on their faces.

One by one, they were fading from his vision...

“This is like a dream,” he said, climbing from the car as Kara walked around to meet him.

“Isn’t life just one big dream anyway?” she said, hooking an arm around his waist as they walked towards the porch.

Throwing the car into park, Nick opened the door and climbed out, his mouth parted in protest as he spun around slowly in a circle, watching the world he had created crumbling around him like pastel dust.

And then he knew... knew that the last twenty-four hours had been nothing more than a beautiful dream.

Part 11 ***In Search Of Kara***

It was early on a Saturday morning that a young couple traveling cross-country found Nick Carter lying face down by the side of the road on a deserted stretch of open highway, less than a half mile from his Mustang convertible, a red hooded sweatshirt clutched tightly in his hand.

The couple took him to a nearby hospital, alerting the staff that the young man had spent much of the ride in the backseat of their car shivering and lethargic, whispering the name 'Kara' over and over.

Everybody at the hospital had assumed he was on drugs or even mentally ill, scouring his pockets for I.D. to tell them of his identity, but he carried none. The police were called and sent back to tow the Mustang into town, where they also found no I.D., just a car full of items that were obviously meant for a long and winding road trip across country. There were postcards in a stack on the passenger seat from each stop along his journey, a trunk full of clothing, and empty boxes of food. And between the seats in the console, there were bottles of medication that spoke of ailments far greater than the 'migraine headaches' listed on one of the bottles.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, Nick told the doctors that he was dying from a brain tumor, which in turn prompted all sort of questions from the hospital staff that Nick either couldn't answer or wouldn't.

They asked him if he had family, and his answer was "no."

They asked him if he had a wife or girlfriend they could call, and his answer was "no."

They asked him if he had friends that could be reached. He said "no."

Nick told them nothing of who he really was or what his name meant to music fans all over the world because, in the end, what did it really matter? He was just Nickolas Gene Carter, a young man who was dying.

And being a star didn't change that.

The doctors ran tests to confirm what they had been told by Nick. After the tests, they sat him down, explaining to him that he was dying. Considering he had already told them that he was dying when they brought his ass into the hospital, he didn't feel like they should have gotten any kind of gold star for the diagnosis.

Afterwards, a consultation was set up for him with a woman named Helen who worked in hospital administration. She was kind, with a gentle smile and a warm demeanor, taking the time to set down her official clipboard and talk to him like a person instead of a statistic.

“I have a son who is just your age,” she said, looking into his pale blue eyes. “I would hope that if he were dying, he would call me to let me know so that I could be with him.”

Nick looked down, kneading his hands in his lap, a slow smile spreading across his face. “Well, then you are a hell of a better mother than my mom is.”

“Do you want to die alone, Nick?”

“I’m not alone,” Nick said, shaking his head, images of Kara dancing in his brain. “I’m never going to be alone.”

After conferring with Nick’s doctors, Helen made the decision that Nick should be transferred to the nearby Hospice House, where he could spend his final days in comfort and peace.

He left the hospital that afternoon, the few possessions he had from the Mustang sent ahead in a taxicab while he was set to be transferred to the hospice in an ambulance. He told Helen that he would be just fine riding in the cab with his things, but she insisted that he ride in the ambulance, and he didn’t feel like arguing.

“So what do you think would happen to me if I went in the cab? There might be a car accident and I would get killed?” Nick laughed, an ironic smile on his cherubic face that made Helen smile.

“Very funny smart guy,” she said, pushing him upside of the head before pulling him into a warm embrace as the two of them sat in the back of the ambulance that was idling at the emergency room doors.

“You call me if you need anything,” she said, releasing him as the EMT climbed in the back of the ambulance, signaling that they were ready to go.

“You know I will.”

Climbing out of the back of the ambulance, Helen watched as they closed the doors, Nick’s smiling face etched in her brain as the ambulance pulled slowly away from the hospital.

“I wish you peace, Nick Carter,” she whispered into the warm, summer sky. “I wish you peace.”

Nick settled into The Hospice House like it was a second home. His room was wonderful, with a large stone fireplace and mahogany furniture, reminding him of his loft in New York. There was also a wall of windows with a wonderful view of the lush

green mountains and a patio on which he could spend the days getting lost in the wonder of the nature and beauty surrounding him. The staff was all so friendly, taking to him immediately. And the other residents of the house were so kind and welcoming. Everybody called him Nicky, and there were days when he felt like a little kid again. He almost forgot that he was there to die.

Nick's dreams of Kara and her world became more vivid as the days went on. He could see her working at The Market, every so often her eyes drifting to the brilliant blue sky, and he knew she was thinking of him. He noticed that she wore his sweatshirt tied around her waist even on the hottest of summer days, and it made him smile.

Occasionally, he would see Roy show up at The Market, his jeans pulled too tight in all the wrong places as he flipped at his hair, trying to entice Kara to take on The Mystery. One day, she tossed a rotten apple at him, beaming him in the back of the head as he stood by the tent selling fresh herbs, running a wide toothed comb through his freshly frosted hair. Turning around, he glared at Kara as she pointed to Allie, shrugging her shoulders as if to say, "I don't know why she would throw an apple at you, hot stuff."

At night, Nick would watch Kara walk along the outer edge of her grandparents' orchard, always stopping at the spot where Nick had found her the day she wept over the loss of her parents. Looking up at the sky, she would say his name... "Nick."

"Kara," Nick moaned.

"Nick, can I get you anything?"

Blinking, Nick opened his eyes slowly, the comforting earth tones and warm crackling fire of his hospice room surrounding him like a favorite comfy blanket

"Nick?" Laura, his nurse, sat beside him, a glass of ice water in her hand, the pale green accordion straw tilted in his direction.

"I was having the most wonderful dream." He tried to prop himself up on his elbows but was too weak. Setting down the glass of water, Laura reached for another pillow, plumping it up before pulling Nick forward just enough to slide the pillow in behind his head.

"Tell me about it," she said with a smile, brushing a hand through his wild hair.

Laura was fairly new to The Hospice House. Fresh out of nursing school, she had always been anxious to work in the maternity ward, surrounded by wrinkly, new life and glowing, happy mothers. But a trip to a hospice for one of her clinicals in her second semester changed her mind. The incredible dignity that the people in the hospice showed in the face of death brought tears to her eyes and passion to her heart. And so

she decided that helping people at the end of their journey was what she was meant to do with her life.

In her six months working at The Hospice House, Laura had dealt mostly with elderly people. So it came as quite a surprise to her, five days ago, when she walked into the room of her new patient and was greeted by handsome young man in his early twenties with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Nick was a dream patient, filled with funny stories and an awkwardness about him that was so endearing. She found herself going home each night with him on her brain, feeling like she knew him from somewhere, like a long lost brother or old friend. There were some days, as the two sat playing Checkers and sipping colas on the patio of Nick's room, that Laura had a hard time believing that he was really going to die. His smile was too bold and his eyes too bright. But then there were days like today, when he lay listlessly in his bed, his body trembling as he whispered the name "Kara" over and over, sweat beading his brow.

Nick spoke the name Kara often when he slept. Laura often wondered if she was his ex girlfriend, or ex wife? Or maybe she was his child? They hadn't talked too much about family or friends or the life that lead him to being found lying by the side of the road. And she found it strange and sad that nobody came to visit him or sent him letters when he was so close to death.

"Nick, you were going to tell me about your dream," she said, holding the glass steady as Nick sipped water through the straw, his eyes adjusting to the light from the curtain Laura pulled open when she entered the room.

"You were dreaming about that girl again, huh?" Laura poked him in the chest. "How many times have I told you to stop having nasty dreams when I'm on duty."

Nick laughed, coughing a little into his hand. "Laura, did you ever have something that you had always wanted right at your fingertips, but you could never quite grab it?"

Laura nodded, thinking of all of the things in her life she had had at her fingertips but could never quite grab. The hot guy she had wanted to ask to her first prom that moved away before she could ask him. That blue Honda parked in the SuperMart parking lot that she had begged her Dad to help her buy when she turned sixteen – only to find out the day they called that someone else had given them money for it an hour before. That incredible suede chocolate brown jacket in the window of Ivy's Boutique that matched her eyes and when she went in to try it on, they didn't have her size. Sure, she knew about having things right at her fingertips that she could never quite grab.

"Yeah, I know what you mean for sure." She pulled the straw away when he signaled that he was finished.

"Well... I think I'm getting closer. Closer to grabbing it." He smiled such a sweet smile that it broke Laura's heart.

She now knew what he was talking about. He wasn't talking about dates, or cars or some random piece of clothing... he was talking about death and what awaited him on the other side.

“What can I do to help you, Nick? Can I call somebody? Can I call Kara?”

At the mention of Kara's name Nick's face lit up.

“No, you don't need to call her. She'll know when it's time.”

That night after her shift ended, Laura did something she knew she shouldn't have done. Making her way back down the hall to Nick's room, she knocked twice like always and poked her head inside.

He was sleeping, his head lolled off to one side of the pillow, hair spiking out in a million directions, a sports magazine draped across his chest. Entering the room, she closed the door behind her, making sure it clicked shut, and walked to the bed. Smiling, she pulled his covers up around him like he was a small child and, closing the magazine, placed it on the nightstand near his water. Then, looking around the room, she made her way to the bureau against the far wall and slid open the top drawer.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw him twitch a few times before settling back into a deep sleep. She knew that time was running out for Nick. She had seen the signs more times than she cared to count. The pale features, the weight loss, endless hours of morphine-aided sleep.

Swiping her hand around in the drawer, she came up with what she had been looking for, a worn, brown leather wallet.

Turning it over in her hand, she debated whether to just put the wallet back and go home. But her heart won out over her ethics and morals, and before she knew it, she had tucked the wallet in her back pocket and was headed for the door.

Turning off his light, she whispered goodnight into the darkness and closed Nick's door.

Walking into her apartment, Laura felt like a thief. Slamming her front door shut, she stood on her tiptoes to peer out of the peephole, sure that there were going to be policemen with battering rams ready to knock down her door and arrest her for taking Nick's wallet.

Turning and falling back against the door, she ran a shaking hand across her forehead before pulling the wallet from her purse, where she had stashed it before leaving work, and tossing it across the room onto the couch.

“What are you doing?” she said aloud, smacking her palm against her forehead. “You can’t do this. This isn’t right.” Slinging her purse to the floor, she walked to the couch and plopped down, dragging the wallet into her lap.

Nick was dying, and if there was someone out there to be there for him in his final days, then Laura felt it was her obligation to find him or her. Taking a deep breath she opened the wallet and began to go through the contents in search of Kara.

Part 12 ***I Failed***

Laura slid the contents of the wallet out item by item, laying them out on the sofa next to her. There was Nick's driver's license, giving a Florida address, accompanied by a mug shot-like photo of him that made her laugh. Next there was a Visa, MasterCard, and American Express card. Opening the billfold, Laura pulled out two one hundred-dollar bills and a wad of one dollar bills, along with four quarters and a few nickels. There weren't any pictures in the wallet or mushy, sentimental things like a lock of child's hair or a love letter tucked away for safekeeping, but there was a tattered, worn-looking "In Case of Emergency Call" card that she pulled from one of the slots.

Most of the lines on the card, like the ones for hospital, doctor, and medications taken, were left blank. But in the top field where it had the "Who To Contact In Case Of Emergency" info, the name Brian Littrell was scratched sloppily in a blue ink. There was also a phone number that had been scribbled out and replaced a few times, a cell phone number, and a home address in Florida that had also been scratched out.

Reaching for the phone, Laura dialed the number before she had a chance to talk herself out of it. Taking a deep breath, she held it through six rings before a voice finally came on the other end of the line.

"Hello."

"Um... is this Brian-" Laura fumbled for the card on the couch. "-Brian Littrell?"

"Hang on." Brian held the phone away from his ear as he spoke. "No, babe, let's just eat in tonight, maybe get some pizza or something... okay, but let's just get pepperoni, none of that artichoke, sun-dried tomato garbage that you like to wreck a good pizza with!"

He laughed as he spoke, and Laura could hear a woman in the background say, "How about pepperoni and anchovies?" before bursting out into a fit of giggles. It made Laura smile.

"Ugh, you do that, and we are getting a divorce, Mrs. Littrell!" Brian laughed before turning his attention back to his phone. "Okay, sorry, I'm back."

"Oh, okay." Laura stood up and began to pace the room. "Well, is this Brian Littrell?"

"The one and only," he said with a smile in his voice.

"I'm looking for a woman named Kara, and I was hoping you could help me." Laura twisted her hair nervously around her index finger as she spoke.

"Kara?" Brian blew Leighanne a kiss as she ordered the pizza, wincing when he heard her say the words "artichokes and sun-dried tomatoes" into the receiver.

“Yes, Kara.”

“I don’t know anybody named Kara. Hey, babe?” He motioned for Leighanne to look up. “Babe, do we know anybody named Kara?” Leighanne shook her head as she finished ordering some bread sticks and a couple of two liter bottles of Coke. “Sorry, but we don’t know anybody named Kara... Who did you say this was again?”

“I didn’t; my name is Laura.”

“May I ask where you got my phone number from, Miss-?”

“Laura,” Laura replied again, clearing her throat. “You can call me Laura.” She paused, intimidated by the way his voice had gone from playful to official in the span of a sentence. “Well, I have this friend....”

“Look, Laura, I don’t mean to sound cruel, but this is my home, and I would rather not mix my professional life and my home life.” Leighanne walked through the kitchen towards the French doors that lead to the backyard, rolling her eyes. Another fan who had gotten a hold of their personal phone number, calling for a favor.

“Huh?” Laura stopped, leaning in the kitchen doorway.

“Huh?” Brian was suddenly confused as well.

“Well, I was going to say that I have this friend, and he is dying.” She rushed the words out so that he couldn’t interrupt her again. “And I feel sad that nobody is here for him. He keeps talking about somebody named Kara, and when I found your number in his wallet, I was hoping...”

“Nick,” Brian whispered the name, cutting Laura off mid-sentence.

“Yes, how did you....?”

“Where is he? I’ve been trying to find that little bastard for days. Tell me where he is right now.” The forcefulness of Brian’s voice startled Laura, and she found herself quickly rattling off the address to The Hospice House twice.

“How the hell long has he been there, and why wasn’t I contacted sooner?” Brian scribbled the information down on a pad of paper before walking through the kitchen and up the stairs in the direction of the bedroom.

“He said that he didn’t have any family or friends. I stole his wallet because I felt bad, and I thought maybe I could find the name of someone to call. You’re not going to tell on me, are you? I could get in so much trouble.”

“Is he in the hospital?” Brian threw open his closet doors, pulling out his overnight bag.

“No, he’s in a hospice.”

At the sound of the word “hospice,” Brian froze, dropping the bag to the ground. The word hospice sounded so final. It felt like a punch to his gut to think of Nick in such a place, all alone and cut off from the world.

“I’m taking the earliest flight out of here. Give me your phone number. I will be in touch when I get into town.”

Brian tossed a few essentials into his bag. Taking the stairs two at a time, he dropped his bags in the kitchen and walked out onto the deck, calling down to Leighanne, who was playing on the lawn with the dogs.

“I have to go. Nick needs me,” he shouted.

Leighanne turned, eyes wide, one arm cocked in mid-air to throw a ball to the dogs. “How much longer?” She dropped the ball and walked across the lawn to Brian, a serious look on her face.

“Not much.”

Grabbing his face into her hands, she planted a gentle kiss on his lips. “Go to him.”

Brian called ahead to the airport from the car, booking the earliest flight out of Atlanta. The ticket agent urged him to think about taking the next flight out, since he would be cutting it close trying to board the earlier flight, but he insisted, barely making it as he ran up to the gates just as they were announcing the final boarding call.

Sliding into his seat in first class, he looked out the window, remembering the last time he and Nick had been on a plane together after going to visit Kevin.

“You know what I’m going to miss the most? I’m really gonna miss you and me together. You’re the only person in my whole life that I have ever been able to be myself around, and I wanted you to know I’m gonna miss it... I’m gonna miss us.”

Digging his fists into his eyes, Brian let his head drop back against the seat and wondered. He wondered why sometimes things were so fucked up that death could snuff out the life of a twenty-three-year-old kid, a kid whose candle burned so brightly, you couldn’t resist standing close enough to the flame to get burned.

As the flight attendants came into the aisles and the pilot’s voice could be heard in a soft mumble over the speakers, Brian sighed, closing his eyes and letting the tears flow freely down his face.

The time had come to say goodbye.

Laura watched the numbers on the clock tick by, tossing and turning Nick's wallet on the pillow beside her, the phone clutched tightly in her hand. When the phone rang, it made her jump as she pushed the 'on' button.

"Yes."

"My flight lands in about an hour. Can you pick me up at the airport?"

"I'll be there."

Brian gave Laura the flight number and then hung up. Climbing out of bed, she found herself rushing around like a crazy woman, pulling on a pair of Levis and a sweater, forgoing her hair and makeup as she grabbed her keys, slipped on a pair of clogs, and headed for her car.

It was almost 2:00 a.m. when she pulled the car into the airport parking lot and made her way inside. It seemed so strange to be walking down the nearly deserted terminal littered with a few maintenance workers mopping and vacuuming and some straggling, bleary-eyed passengers that walked quietly in the direction of the baggage carousel.

Finding Brian's flight number on one of the overhead screens, she continued walking until she found the lounge for his flight and sunk down into one of the chairs, legs stretched out in front of her, arms folded over her chest as she drifted into a light, uncomfortable sleep.

"Hey."

Laura squinted through her eyelashes as someone lightly nudged her legs with the toe of his shoes.

"Hey, wake up."

Again with the nudging, she thought, a hand going to her neck where a wicked kink had formed.

"I'm guessing you are Laura."

Sitting all the way up, Laura's eyes opened a little wider as she yawned. "And you must be Brian Littrell."

Laura and Brian walked back towards her car, neither one really talking. She kept stealing glances at him as they walked. She could tell he had been crying, and the look on his face spoke of sadness and loss.

“I’m really sorry about Nick.” She chose her words carefully as they exited the airport and headed for the parking lot. “He’s a great guy.”

Brian just nodded.

“Have you known him a long time?”

“Since he was a kid.” Brian spoke to the ground, clearing his throat as the two climbed in the car and slammed the doors. “So did Nick ever mention me?” Brian stuffed his bag down by his feet and reached for his seatbelt.

“Nope, the only person he has ever talked about is Kara. I really wish we could find her for him because she obviously means a lot to him,” Laura said, pushing the key into the ignition. “But he wouldn’t let me call her. He said she would know when it was time, and she would be there. But that doesn’t make any sense to me. How can someone just know when it is time for somebody else to die?”

Brian sat back, feeling sick to his stomach even discussing the subject of Nick’s dying with some stranger.

“Is there anybody else you know that would know where to find Kara?” Laura jerked the car into reverse, flipping on the radio and turning it low.

“Nick’s never mentioned a girl named Kara to me, ever. The last girlfriend he had was named Tiffany, or Cassidy or Whitney or something like that, and that was like a year ago. There hasn’t been anybody serious since.” Brian tried to fight the irritation in his voice as he answered her.

“You’re mad that he wasn’t asking for you?” Laura asked, staring straight ahead as she drove.

“Yeah, I guess I’m a little mad, but it’s not just that. It’s always been my job to take care of him.” Brian traced imaginary patterns on the window as he spoke. “And I failed.”

Part 13

Rise And Fall

“Hey Laura, what are you doing back here? Your shift doesn’t start until 9:00 a.m.” Francine, the night receptionist, set down her cup of overpriced coffee and flashed Brian and Laura a smile as they walked into the lobby of The Hospice House.

“I brought a friend of Nick’s in to see him.” Laura hooked an arm through Brian’s arm. “This is his buddy Brian.” Brian leaned forward, shaking Francine’s hand.

“Brian, we’re glad you came. He’s not doing so well.” Francine shifted her gaze over to Laura and back to Brian. “We don’t think it is going to be much longer.”

Laura’s grip on Brian’s arm tightened slightly and then released. “Thanks, Francine,” she said, turning and walking quickly down the hall towards Nick’s room, Brian following closely on her heels.

The two walked in tandem down the dimly lit hall towards Nick’s room, a sense of urgency hanging heavy in the air as Laura placed her hand on the knob, opened the door, and walked inside.

Sandy, Nick’s night nurse, sat in a chair beside his bed, her hand gripped loosely around his wrist as she timed his pulse on her watch. Glancing up, she smiled faintly at Laura and Brian, shaking her head. “It won’t be long now,” she whispered, lying Nick’s arm at his side before standing.

“Is he in pain?” Brian stepped forward out of the shadows.

“No, he’s not in any pain.” Sandy grabbed for Laura’s hand, squeezing it tightly. “I’m glad you came back. I know he would want you here at the end.”

Brian walked forward, eyes closed, into the glow of the lamplight beside Nick’s bed. Opening his eyes slowly, he looked down at his friend, shaking his head. “Ah Nick, look at you, buddy,” he whispered.

Nick lay motionless in the bed, the burgundy sheets pulled up around his chest, his arms at his side. His skin was pale, and his cheeks were hollow from the loss of weight. There were dark circles beneath his eyes, and his hair had turned a strange shade of sandy blonde. It was odd to Brian how quickly Nick’s looks had changed in the week or so since he had last seen him, a sure sign of the toll his disease had taken on him.

Sitting in the chair, Brian reached for Nick’s hand. “Buddy, can you hear me?”

Laura melted into the shadows in the back of the room, tears pooling in her eyes as Brian spoke.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner. But, you little shit, you wouldn’t tell anybody how to reach me.” Brian laughed softly. “Leave it to you to be a pain in the ass even when you’re... dying.” His voice caught on the last word. “Dying.” He said it again, clearing his throat. “You’re really dying.”

Nick’s hand twitched beneath Brian’s hand, as he struggled to open his eyes.

“Bri.” His voice was weak and barely recognizable, but the brilliant blue of his eyes was pure Nick.

“I’m here, Nick.” Brian leaned in, resting his chin on Nick’s arm as they stared into one another’s eyes.

“Everything is going to be okay, Brian,” Nick whispered, lightly squeezing Brian’s hand. “Kara will make sure of it. She’s going to take good care of me now.”

Brian shook his head. “Who is Kara, Nick? Where can we find her?”

Nick smiled. “She’ll know when it’s time, Brian. She’ll know when it’s time.” Then, closing his eyes, he sighed. “I’m so tired.”

“Then you go ahead and close your eyes and rest for awhile, Nick. I’ll be right here if you need me.”

Smiling, Nick nodded before drifting back to sleep.

As dawn began to break, the pink and yellow hues of morning slowly melted their way through the curtains in Nick’s room, washing away the darkness of night and bathing the room in a soft, pastel glow.

Laura slept curled up in the recliner in the corner of the room while Brian slept in the chair at Nick’s bedside, his head lying on his arm which was draped over Nick’s chest so he could feel the slow rise and fall of life left in his friend’s body.

The door to the room opened slowly and then closed, as Kara made her way quietly through the room, the red sweatshirt tied around her waist, a smile on her face.

She glanced over at Laura and then down to Brian before setting her eyes on Nick. Walking around to the opposite side of the bed from where Brian slept, she leaned down, fluttering her eyelashes playfully across Nick’s forehead and cheeks. His nose twitched slightly as he opened his eyes.

“You’re here,” he whispered.

“Did you doubt I would come for you?” she replied.

“Never.” Nick shook his head, brushing her hair from her shoulder. “I never doubted you for a second.”

Cupping his face in her hands, Kara smiled.

Brian’s eyes were open, but his head remained still as he silently watched his friend carry on the one-sided conversation with the air.

“Kara, I’m ready to go now. Is it time?”

Kara ran her hands slowly up the side of his face, lacing her fingers through his wild hair, enveloping him with warmth and understanding.

“Yes, Nick, it’s time.”

“She’ll know when it’s time.”

Lying there, listening to Nick speak, realization washed over Brian, and he knew. Knew that Kara had come for Nick, just as he had said.

It was time.

Across the room, Laura peered through her long lashes at the beauty of what was happening right before her. The beauty of life walking hand in hand with the mystery of death.

Then Brian felt Nick’s chest rise and fall... rise and fall..... rise and fall..... rise and fall..... rise.....

And then he was gone.

Nick and Kara walked across the field, hand in hand, towards the white canvas tents billowing in the warm summer breeze. Toby came out to meet them, circling around Nick’s feet until he stooped to pet the scruffy little guy on the head. Satisfied with the attention, Toby then turned and headed back in the direction of Kara’s grandparents’ tent.

“First thing I’m gonna do is give that little mutt a bath.” Nick laughed, watching Toby swipe an apple from an unsuspecting customer’s box of apples. “And maybe teach him some manners.”

Kara giggled, watching Toby haul the apple around the back of the tent. “He’s going to be a handful. Are you sure you’re ready for that kind of responsibility?” she said, standing on her tiptoes to ruffle Nick’s hair.

“You know it.” He reached out, ruffling her hair back, before grabbing her around the waist and hauling her off of her feet. “And I’m pretty sure I can handle you too, Miss Clark.”

“Oh you think so, Mr. Carter?”

“I know so.”

Setting her down, the two continued in the direction of the tents, Nick grabbing an apron out of the old blue pickup truck before following Kara through the back flap of the tent to where her grandparents and sister were busy with their customers.

Kara’s grandmother turned, a bright smile on her face when she saw Nick. Walking to him, she wrapped him in a warm embrace, squeezing him tightly before thumping her hand on his stomach. “First thing we’re going to have to do is fatten you up, young man,” she said, squeezing his face in her hands. “Tonight we’ll have pot roast.”

Nick laughed planting a kiss on the woman’s forehead before she turned to walk back to her customers.

“Hey, boy.” Kara’s grandfather came over to him, slinging an arm around Nick’s shoulder. “Tell me something. How’d you get that granddaughter of mine to come back for you, huh?”

Nick slung his arm around her grandfather’s shoulder, narrowing up his eyes like he was going to tell the old man the secret to eternal life. “Let’s just say I gave her a line she couldn’t resist.”

“Oh yeah, what line?”

“I told her that I only had twenty-four hours to live and my last wish was to spend every minute of it with her.”

Kara’s grandfather threw his head back in laughter, slapping Nick on the back. “And she fell for it?”

“I told you, it works every time!”

“You’re a character, Nick,” her grandfather said, shaking his head as he walked away. “A real character!”

Looking up, Nick saw Allie glancing at him over her shoulder, a mock look of disgust on her face that quickly melted away as she walked towards him, tossing him a fat red apple that he snatched out of mid-air.

“So, it looks like you’re going to be staying for awhile,” Allie said, hands on hips.

“Yup.” Nick took a big bite out of the apple, holding it out to Allie as a peace offering.

Taking the apple from him, she polished it on her shirt before taking a bite. “Well then, I guess I might as well say it,” she said, tossing the apple back to Nick.

“Say what?”

“Welcome home, Nick.” A slow smile spread across her face. “I’m glad you came back.”

“Me too, Allie,” Nick said, looking out to the sea of welcoming faces that crowded The Market tents. “Me too.”

Nick gazed around the tent at his new “family.” Kara’s grandmother and grandfather stealing a quick hug in the corner of the tent, Allie wiping her hands on her apron as she stooped to fill a bag with some oranges, Toby making himself at home, curled up by a box of grapefruit at the back of the tent. And then there was Kara... his angel.

And Nick felt, for the first time in his life, that he was truly home.

The End