



WHERE CAN WE GO
FROM HERE?

Whitney Richter

Chapter 1 ***Dark Highway***

Nick Carter tossed his bag carelessly on the floor beside his bunk. All he wanted to do was sleep. He'd started coming down with something after leaving St. Louis, and he was getting to the point where he couldn't hide it anymore. He hoped that whatever the bug was it went away by the next show. Performing while sick was number one on his "Things That Suck" list.

He was preparing to crawl into bed when Brian came up behind him, absently humming the tune from "Back To Your Heart" while looking intently at a schedule for the next day.

"Man we are booked," he said with a shake of his head. "I don't know about you Frack, but I'll be ready for our break."

"Yeah," Nick muttered. "Me too."

Brian looked up from his paper and frowned slightly at his friend. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "Some of our harmonies seemed a little off tonight. Did you notice anything?"

Nick shot him an annoyed glance. He was exhausted and sick and didn't want to hear Brian's criticism. "Don't you mean to say *I* was off?"

Brian's blue eyes opened a little wider. "It was just an observation. You're usually right on target."

"I don't need to hear this from *you* right now, if you don't mind." Nick closed his eyes, feeling his headache double in intensity.

"Well you don't have to jump on me. I was just trying to help. Is something wrong?"

Nick rolled his eyes and used his superior height to look down condescendingly on his shorter friend. "Nothing is wrong, Brian," he said patronizingly. "I just don't need you mothering me all the time. I can take care of things myself. *Please* go away and leave me alone."

Brian's concern changed quickly to irritation. He was tired and his temper was short. "I didn't know it was a crime to be concerned about your friends. Why don't you grow up a little?"

"In case you missed what I said a few seconds ago, let me say it again. Shut up and *go away*."

Brian was taken aback. A tiny voice in the back of his head was telling him over and over to shut up and drop it, but right then as far as he was concerned that little voice could go straight to hell. "You know what?" he said angrily. "I am so tired of your shit. You have

been blowing everyone off for the past three days and I want to know what the hell is your problem!”

“Brian,” Nick said slowly and deliberately. “Fuck. Off.”

Now Brian was furious. It wasn't like him to lose it so quickly, but tonight just wasn't his night. It never was the day after he let A.J. take him out partying. “You know what? Screw you. I swear, you can be such a whiny brat Nick, and as far as I'm concerned you can just go straight to hell and not come back. I don't want anything to do with you and your ‘pop star’ attitude. I am so glad this tour is almost over, because dealing with you another day is just asking *too much!*” He crumpled up the paper and threw it forcefully at Nick's feet and stormed off to the living area of the bus.

Nick closed his eyes and got into his bed. *I'm sorry, he thought miserably. Shit, Carter. You really did well on that, didn't you? Your own best friend can't stand the sight of you. Way to go.* He sniffled a little and wiped his nose on his sleeve, unable to shake the disgust in Brian's voice. He never yelled at him like that. With a forlorn sigh, Nick pulled out more aspirin from a pocket of his bag and popped two into his mouth, knowing it wouldn't do him any good. As he was about to doze off, Kevin, A.J. and Howie finally made their way noisily onto the bus. Nick groaned. He was never going to get any sleep.

“Yo, yo Howie!” A.J. called.

“Yeah, man?” Howie said, tossing a bag up onto his bunk.

“Did you *see* how hard it's raining out there now?”

“I walked through it didn't I?” He said shooting an exasperated grin in A.J.'s direction. “I'm as wet as you are.”

“Isn't San Antonio supposed to be a desert or some shit? Dude, Jackson, can you even *see* out there?”

“Not as well as I'd like,” their driver said with a lopsided grin. “We're gonna take it slow out of here, just to be safe.”

“Slow?” Kevin interjected, feigning shock. “You? Somebody better buy the devil a parka.”

“I think A.J. already has one,” he cracked.

Kevin guffawed loudly. “I'm gonna tell him you said that.”

“You do and I'll take you to Bumfuck, North Dakota instead of Houston.”

“I think we've been there!” Howie yelled at them from the opposite end of the bus.

The oldest Backstreet Boy snickered as he walked on through the sleeping area. The engine of their bus roared to life under his feet, engaging in that familiar thrum that had become the song of their lives. Mile after mile the highway rolled steadily on beneath them, so much a part of them that it almost seemed like a living thing. Kevin smirked at the thought. The real Backstreet Boys: Nick, A.J., Howie, Brian, Kevin, and The Road. He exhaled a deep breath through narrowly parted lips. It was definitely too late (or was it too early?) to try and be profound. He paused by Nick's bunk, seeing that the curtain was already drawn. "That was quick, Kaos," he remarked, rapping his knuckles lightly on the outer edge. "Come on, Nick, we've got to have a group meeting before you can crash."

"Don't bother with him," Brian said disgustedly as he came over to stand with his cousin. "He is in one hell of a mood."

"Is that so?" Kevin raised an eyebrow, silently asking what was the matter. Instead of Brian though, he got a reply from Nick.

"Kevin, it would be great if I could skip this one. I'm really tired."

"It'd be really great if he'd drop dead," Brian muttered quietly under his breath. Nick heard him anyway, and behind his curtain his mouth fell open. Brian's words were like a kick in the stomach.

Kevin elbowed his cousin sharply in the ribs. Brian grunted and then threw up his arms. "I'm outta here," he said disgustedly, and walked back to the table in the back where Howie and A.J. had already made themselves comfortable, chatting about nothing.

"Dude, what is up with you and Nick?" A.J. asked him as he sat down.

"Oh, he's just being difficult." Brian rubbed his eyes.

"You're looking a little tired, Rok," Howie observed.

"Aren't you?" Brian replied.

"Of course. But you look like you've been run over by a cement truck. Twice."

"It's the new look. I'm setting a trend," he joked.

A.J. grinned and slapped him on the back. "Now that is a look that even I would not try. And that should tell you something right there."

Brian chuckled and then sighed. "Maybe I was a little hard on him. We're all tired this late in the tour, who are we kidding? I lost my temper."

"What did you say to him?" Howie asked sympathetically.

“I hollered at him. I was an ass. But so was he.”

“He has been acting a little weird since St. Louis,” Howie said thoughtfully. “I wonder what could be wrong.”

“Well, I’ve asked him a couple of times, and except for just now when he told me to fuck off, he said he was absolutely fine.”

A.J. removed his feet from the table and let them drop to the floor with a thud. He leaned forward and placed his palms flat on the table with a loud thwack. “He told *you* to fuck off?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yeah.”

“He says that to me all of the time, but I’ve never heard him say it to you and mean it.” A.J. said. “That is interesting.”

“That’s what you call it,” Brian muttered, shaking his head. He glanced at his watch. “What the hell is Kevin doing?” he wondered, and angled his head to look over towards the bunks, where he assumed his cousin was still standing, trying to convince Nick to show himself.

“Don’t sweat it, you’ll both get over it.” A.J. said swinging his feet back on the table.

Howie gave him a Look. “Bone, do you ever wash your socks?” he said in disgust. “You could probably register those things as a new species of life. McLeanians. Found only in the darkest reaches of A.J. McLean’s four month old laundry. Gross!” he made a terrible face as A.J. tried shoving his feet in Howie’s lap. “Get your scrawny ass legs away from me!”

“Whoo!” A.J. whooped with a grin. “Howie D. has *spoken!*”

Howie laughed and shook his head. A.J. had that knack for making sheer exhaustion the most amusing part of what they did. “What the hell are you *on* Bone? Do you know how long we’ve been awake? Wait, don’t answer. If I hear, I’ll cry.”

A.J. tried to look serious for a moment and failed. “Let’s just say I am feeling a success high right now. We are on top of the world right now, and I am determined to enjoy every minute. Nothing is gonna knock me down, especially you guys.”

Kevin gave up trying to coax Nick out of his bunk. He was beginning to suspect that the younger man was sick, and with more than just a cold or a touch of the flu. Nick had that habit of denying that he felt bad until it started to get serious. Why he did it, Kevin didn’t know, though it probably stemmed through too much ribbing from the other fellas when he was younger. Being sick and being away from home had not been something Nick

had dealt well with in their earlier years. *I guess we can save the meeting until the morning*, Kevin thought. He poked his head into the driver's seat before he headed to the back.

"How're the roads, Jackson?" he asked.

"Not too bad," the driver replied. "Rain is still coming down pretty hard, so it's slow going. But we'll get there eventually."

Kevin allowed his gaze to drift to the flat, dark highway. It was fairly deserted; he could only a lone set of headlights from the other direction off in the distance. It was actually a little creepy, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. Chalking it up to exhaustion, he said goodnight. Jackson said nothing; he was concentrating too hard on the vehicle in the distance. Kevin shrugged and turned to leave. Now that sleep was on his mind, he was intent on getting some.

He had not gotten more than a few steps when the hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up, and a strange sensation overtook him, almost like he was flying. Before he knew what hit him, Kevin was slammed forcibly into a wall of bunks. He had barely registered that something had gone wrong when the bus swerved again. This time, another body was hurled at him, a tangled mass of flailing legs and blonde hair.

"Nick!" he yelled at his band mate who was suddenly on top of him. Nick had been on the verge of sleep when he was thrown, and as he was catapulted from his state of near-sleep he struck his head brutally against the wall.

"Are you ok?" Kevin cried, trying to get a grip on the boy. Nick never had the chance to answer.

The sound of screeching brakes and splintering glass ripped through the starless night, skewing that steady musical thrum into a high pitched scream that destroyed the careful harmony the years had created and scattered it mercilessly to the darkness, where no one would find it again.

Brian stood up from the table. "I'm gonna go see what the hell is taking Kevin so long," he called over his shoulder to A.J. and Howie. The words were not even fully uttered when the ground was yanked out from underneath him. He was flung to the ground like a rag doll, landing painfully on his side.

"What the..." A.J. cried as he was thrown from his seat. He had barely struck the floor when things went bad.

In a moment that his brain would never allow himself to remember, Brian was flung mercilessly against side of the bus, where he felt an explosion against his back as the glass of the window shattered upon his impact with it. As the ground came rushing up to meet him, he was dimly aware of the shock of the cold rain hitting his torn skin. And then he could remember no more.

Chapter 2 ***Dethroned***

Tiny beads of precipitation stung A.J.'s flesh repeatedly, insistent on dragging him away from the comfort of unconsciousness. Wet. He was wet. He could feel the dampness seeping through into his very bones, where it had no business being. He did not like being wet. He was wet. This concern was the only thing that his brain was capable of sustaining, and something deep inside told him that his life depended on holding on to that one thought, no matter what the cost. He did so, without question. Wet. He was wet.

As the minutes ticked by, (wet, he was wet) another realization struck him: he was cold. Surely the two were connected somehow. Making that connection however, was too large of a leap for him to make. Oh well. He'd worry about that later. There was something else, too. Another sensation was tugging somewhere in the back of his mind, but as of now it remained hidden from him.

Cautiously, A.J. opened his eyes. That simple movement was enough to uncover with terrifying clarity the mysterious sensation that was nagging at him. Icy hot pain ripped its way up and down his ravaged body; so intense that he was sure it was splitting him into a thousand pieces. He whimpered. Something had happened. What it was he did not know, but something had happened. Something bad. He had to find Howie. Howie would know what it was. He always knew. Summoning up his waning strength, he braved the pain as he cried out into the darkness.

“Howie!”

He was disappointed that his plea wasn't louder, but Howie would hear. He had to. He was always there when A.J. needed him. There was no way that he wouldn't be there now.

“*Howie!*” he cried, more desperate this time. Unfortunately, it was little more than a whisper. Why wasn't he coming? A.J. had to find him. He attempted to sit up, but his body would not obey him. Strange. He called out again, but there was still no answer. In despair, he collapsed back down to the ground. As his mind clouded over, all he could think of was that he was terribly alone, and that his friend had not come when he needed him.

Awareness slammed cruelly into Howie, stealing him out of blessed emptiness and tossing him into a realm of what could only be described as pure agony. He longed for darkness to come and sweep him away again. At least then it didn't hurt. God must be busy elsewhere at that moment though, because no such relief was awarded him. Frightened, he tried to take in his surroundings. He was wet. He was cold. Why was he cold? It was a warm night.

Howie focused on the surface underneath him, hoping it would give him a clue to his predicament. It was hard and slick. His wiggled his fingers experimentally and felt several strands seeking their way through his feeble grasp. Grass. Grass? Why was he there? He should have been in his bunk, asleep. Dazed, he looked around, trying to determine why he was in this position. He raised his hand up until it was in his line of vision, astonished to see that it was covered in blood.

Wow, he thought. Somebody needs a doctor. That is a lot of blood for someone to be losing.

A large weight seemed to have settled firmly and painfully over his chest. He couldn't move without feeling like a knife was being driven through his ribcage, and that was the least of his worries. He still didn't know where he was, or why he was there. It was most puzzling. He attempted to sit up, but nausea overtook him so fast it was all he could do to turn his head away to avoid vomiting on himself. He retched painfully into the muddy ground beside him and waited for several minutes to let the feeling pass. It had been a costly victory, but a victory nonetheless. He was upright (somewhat), and determined to stay that way. He looked around slowly, searching for any clue to his predicament. Not too far away, he was able to make out a lump that didn't seem to belong.

"Hey!" he called out. The nausea returned full force, and he was forced to wait it out before he could call again. He tried to move towards the still form, but quickly decided that was not one of the better ideas he had had in his life. Instead he concentrated on it, watching for any sign of movement. Strangely enough, he heard it before he saw it move.

The voice spoke softly at first. "Nick..." The drilling rain tried to obscure the pitiful cry, but Howie identified the soft southern accent as Brian's. "Nick!" His voice rose at the last syllable. "Nick!" .

"Brian!" Howie called back, trying to get his attention. Brian ignored him.

"Nick! *Answer me!*" came the choked cry again. "Nick!"

Howie tried again to call out to his friend to soothe his panic, but to no avail.

"Oh God, Nick, *please!*"

A terrifying reality, where subconscious and consciousness collided with devastating force enveloped Brian, holding him prisoner in a nightmare he was unable to wake up from. The trauma inflicted on his body caused him to shut down everything save one thought: Getting to Nick. Something was terribly wrong, and in his delirious state the only thing that mattered was making sure that his best friend was all right. Nick had to be all right, or it would be his fault. He had to find Nick. His pleas echoed off into the endless expanse of night, sucked away by the deep void that surrounded him. As each moment passed his desperation deepened, until his consciousness broke through with a tragic discovery. He couldn't breathe.

“Oh God, oh God...” he gasped, frantically trying to suck in a breath of air. The panic tightened its death grip on him, which only made his battle that much more desperate, and even more vain. “Help me!” he screeched, terror in its purest form lacing his voice. “Oh please help me! I need air... *I can't breathe!*”

Fear invaded Howie to the core at the radical change in Brian's pleas. He too began cry for help.

“Help him! Somebody please! That is my friend and he needs help! *Somebody!*” His voice did not even sound like his own. It was ragged and hoarse, as if someone had ripped out his vocal chords and stomped on them.

Howie was dimly aware of the flashing lights that had pulled up nearby. The world was slipping away again, but he fought to maintain his steady cries for help until the blackness was total. Brian's life depended on it.

Brian didn't even feel the touch of the hands that were suddenly there to help him. He continued screaming for air, unaware of the furious barbs of pain that stabbed his entire body, sparring him nothing. All at once oxygen burst its way into his nose, though at the same time he was sure that he was being smothered. He sucked in the air greedily, but still couldn't get enough. His lungs simply refused to breathe. In a last ditch effort to save himself, his battered and weary mind retreated safely inside of itself, leaving his tortured body to fend for itself. Around him, voices overlapped into one another as they struggled to keep that body alive.

“He's going into shock!”

“I can't find a central line...”

“Come on people, keep it together, we're losing him...”

Almost an hour had passed since the collision, and paramedics swarmed the area like a plague of frantic locusts. The roads had been so deserted at that hour of the night in such weather that the next vehicle to pass through had been the first in a line of the Backstreet Boy's tour buses. They had left roughly a half an hour after the Boys, once they had packed up from the show.

They had seen the wreck from a little ways off, though the rain made it difficult to see at all. Upon approaching it, it had taken a few moments to realize that it was one of their own buses, and in fact, the one carrying the singers. The discovery of A.J. lying in the street a few yards away from the tangled remains of the two vehicles had confirmed it. The emergency call was made, and within fifteen minutes the scene was crawling with emergency vehicles. Shortly after finding A.J., Brian and Howie were located several yards apart in a vacant field on the side of the road.

The paramedics working on A.J. put in a call to have him airlifted. Brian was soon given the same orders. His delirium continued, reaching dangerous levels. The oxygen mask provided a brief respite from his immediate source of panic, however it didn't last long. He quickly resumed his wrenching cries for Nick, accompanied by violent thrashing and struggling, which only served to further endanger himself.

Howie managed to reclaim his consciousness with the aid of the paramedics trying to help him. His eyes flashed about wildly as he heard Brian but was unable to see him. He drew in several rapid shallow breaths as his body trembled uncontrollably. Frightened at first by strange voices that tried to comfort him, he was finally able to clear his mind enough to determine they were there to help.

"You have to help Brian, he's my friend and he can't breathe," he said desperately once he found his voice. He stumbled over the words, having difficulty forming them.

"It's ok," a soothing voice assured him. "Your friend is going to be fine. Our best people are working on him."

"Promise?" Howie begged, not caring who the person was or whether or not he could keep the promise. "Please don't let him die."

"We're doing the absolute best we can, just relax," a young man told him. "Everything will be all right. Can you tell me your name?"

That question required intense thought. "Howie," he said carefully. "My name is Howie Dorough."

"Ok Howie, my name is Daniel. You have been in an accident. We're going to do the best we can to help you and your friends, but I need you to help me too, ok? Can you do that?"

Howie nodded shakily. *Car accident?* he thought incredulously. *What?* "Yes. Yes I can help you."

"We were told there were five of you and two drivers. Is that right? Were those the only people in the bus?"

Howie thought for a few moments. It was a simple question, really. Were they the only ones on the bus? (And why weren't they still *on* the bus again?) Where were they? Had they just done a show? If so, where? He sifted through his questions one by one. Those he could not easily answer he set aside for later. He knew the tour was almost over. None of their families were with them. A light bulb clicked in his foggy brain as he arrived at an answer. "That's all. Just seven," he said finally.

"Ok. Good. Thank you." Daniel paused for a moment, allowing a woman to take Howie's vitals as they prepped him for transport.

“Do you remember anything about the accident?” he asked a little hesitantly.

Howie looked confused for a moment. “Accident?” He thought hard. It was maddening, every single thought he had he needed to manually connect to a related thought. His head didn’t seem to be working properly, and that concerned him. “That’s right, you said I was in an accident. I don’t remember anything.”

“Ok, that’s all right.”

The trembling that had started earlier increased all of the sudden. He felt so cold. Surely all of this was a dream. Aside from the crippling pain that constricted his every thought, nothing seemed real.

The woman spoke up, and began asking him questions about where he hurt.

“I hurt everywhere,” Howie moaned. “Aarrgh!” He gasped as she prodded gently around his ribs. Stars exploded in front of his eyes. “My chest... my chest is killing me.” The woman exchanged glances with Daniel. “He’s stable. We need to load him.”

Daniel turned over his shoulder and signaled one of the several ambulances waiting nearby. As Howie was placed on the stretcher, he heard one of the paramedics asking questions.

“Did they find the other two?”

“Just did. They are still inside the bus.”

“How do they look?”

Daniel then noticed Howie struggling to focus on them, and shook his head at her slightly to signal an end to the conversation.

As they hopped in and closed the doors, the ambulance pulled away and rushed off down the road.

“Can you believe this?” the driver whispered to his companion in the passenger seat. “Do you know who these people are?”

“Who?” The man asked, keeping an eye on the activity in the back.

“These are the Backstreet Boys. Do you have any idea how big this is going to be?”

Chapter 3 ***Aftermath***

Howie awoke to a white ceiling. He stared at it curiously, wondering where in the hell he was. He turned his head slowly to the side, and discovered it hurt to do so. A hand descended on his arm out of nowhere, and he almost jumped out of his skin. He regretted it when he felt how sore his poor body was. To his amazement, he found himself staring in the face of his mother.

“Mom?” he asked groggily. “What are you doing here? Where am I?”

“Oh Howie,” his mother said with a sigh of relief. “It is so good to hear your voice.” Pollyanna, Howie’s sister, suddenly appeared next to her.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Hey,” Howie said back. His smile was genuine, but she could see the tightness at the edge of his lips that said he was in pain. The three of them were silent for a moment; Mrs. Dorrough rubbed her son’s hand while Pollyanna simply watched him with a mixture of relief and thankfulness painted on her face. Howie collected his thoughts.

“I was in an accident.”

“That’s right, honey,” Mrs. Dorrough answered softly.

He closed his eyes trying hard to remember. He vaguely recalled hearing Brian and talking to the paramedic, but it was too hazy for him to be sure it had actually happened.

“What happened?”

As soon as the words left his lips, a doctor walked into his room.

“Why, hello there!” he said cheerily. “I am Dr. Westin. You are looking much better than you did when you came in.”

“Then I must have looked really bad then. I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck.” The room fell silent as his three visitors stared at him. The shock in their eyes alarmed him.

“Will somebody please tell me what happened and why I am here?” Howie said shakily.

“Of course. But first let me tell you about you and what condition you’re in.”

Howie shifted uneasily. “Ok. Shoot.”

“Well, for the most part you were extremely lucky. You did suffer a nasty concussion, which explains why you were out for a day,”

“I was out for a full day?” Howie interrupted, surprised.

“Yes you were. You arrived here about 3:30, 3:45 am, and it is now 9:00 am a day later.”

“Wow. That was some sleeping.”

“Not unusual with this kind of injury. You will probably be a little spacey for another day or so. You still need lots of rest. You also have a fractured tibia in your left arm, a few broken ribs, and a case of whiplash, which is not unexpected. You also have a fracture in your left foot, but when you’re ready to be up and about we can fit you with a walking cast. It won’t slow you down much. Other than that, just a few abrasions and bumps and bruises. They will be pretty uncomfortable for a few days, but they will heal. Be careful around your face, and the general left side of your body. That seems to be where you hit the ground. Fortunately, it seems as though you hit the grass when you were thrown out of the vehicle, so your fall wasn’t quite so hard.”

Howie’s face fell as a sudden realization smacked him cruelly in the face. Did he even dare speak it aloud? He drew in a breath, and summoned his courage.

“What happened? What happened... to the others?”

He braced himself for what he would hear. Pollyanna placed her hand on his leg to let him feel her support. At that moment, he needed all he could get.

Dr. Westin scrutinized him carefully. “Are you sure you want to hear this now? You may want to rest a bit longer and let your strength come back.”

“Do you really think I will get any rest if I don’t know?”

The doctor sighed. “You have a point.” Inhaling deeply, he reluctantly began to speak.

“From the way it appears, a trucker coming from the opposite direction dozed off at the wheel in the rain. He lost control of his vehicle and sideswiped your tour bus. You, Brian Littrell, and A.J. McLean were thrown from the vehicle.”

Howie sucked in a breath sharply, and winced when his ribs objected. “How did we manage that? The door is in the front of the bus.”

“You went through the windows of the living area. That is why your back is so sore.”

“I see,” he said quietly.

“You must have been launched out of the opposite side from your friends, because you landed directly on the grass, as I said. The other two were not quite so lucky. Brian landed on the street and skidded off into the field where you wound up. He has some nasty abrasions from that, and quite a few lacerations on his back. He must have hit the window square with it. He dislocated a shoulder, punctured one lung and the other one

tried to collapse on us. He had some internal injuries, and broke his foot. We almost lost him.”

Tears filled Howie’s eyes. “Oh... God....” he choked out. When he recovered his power of speech, he continued hoarsely. “Is he going to be ok?”

“Time will tell,” Westin replied. “He was delirious when he arrived here. He wasn’t aware of what was happening to him, but he was having trouble breathing and was suffering from an acute anxiety attack, which made things difficult. He is resting right now. We’ve kept him sedated. He’s regained consciousness once or twice, but each time he’s gotten out of control. Hopefully that will break soon. When it does we can try to move him out of ICU.”

“He’s looking for Nick,” Howie said softly, dimly hearing Brian’s calls echoing about in his memory. Dr. Westin looked surprised.

“Yes, each time he wakes up he calls for Mr. Carter.”

“What about the others?”

Dr. Westin bit his lip. What pathetic color Howie had had before was fading quickly. “I don’t know if I should continue. You need to rest.”

“Damn it, *tell* me!”

“Stay calm, Mr. Dorough. You need to relax.”

“How the hell am I supposed to relax when you won’t tell me what’s happened to my friends?” he shouted. Hot tears fell from his eyes and stung the cuts on his cheek. Mrs. Dorough flinched at her son’s outburst.

Westin frowned and sighed. He turned his attention to Howie’s family. “Do you think we might have a few minutes alone?”

Mrs. Dorough tightened her lips but nodded, and she and Pollyanna left the room. They knew what was coming, and to have to hear it again would not be easy.

“Now,” the doctor said, pulling up a chair and sitting beside Howie’s bed. “This is going to be hard for you to hear. Please promise me that if I say it’s too much we will continue this after you’ve had more rest.”

Howie blinked away the rest of his tears and nodded.

“Ok,” Westin nodded, satisfied. He glanced at his clipboard before he resumed.

“A.J. McLean was found in the road by the driver of another of your buses. He suffered burns on his arms from sliding on the pavement, and he has a particularly serious one

on his knee. Walking will be painful for him until it heals. He has a severe concussion, and is still unconscious. We are hoping that he doesn't slip into a coma. He's very lucky he doesn't have a more serious head injury. Brian too. Mr. McLean also has a few broken ribs. He has whiplash, and his right hand is broken in several places. He must have used it to break his fall. He is in the ICU right now, and we are watching him closely."

Howie bit his lip, hard, and turned his head away, trying to regain his composure. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was too impossible.

"Are you all right? Do you want me to stop?" Westin asked him gently.

"Just give me a minute," Howie said, his voice barely above a whisper. After a few moments, he was able to face the doctor.

"Please continue."

"Howie, I need to tell you, this is going to get harder."

"I need to know," he insisted. "What happened to Kevin and Nicky?"

Westin sighed heavily. "Kevin Richardson is in critical condition. He and Mr. Carter were both found in what was left of your sleeping area. Since there were no windows to be thrown from, they were trapped inside. The bus rolled several times," he explained. Howie gripped the side of his bed with his good hand, forcing himself to continue hearing.

"He is in a coma. We had to take out one of his kidneys, and we had other internal damage to deal with. He's had two operations so far, and he may need a third, if he doesn't improve quickly. He broke his femur, and we had to insert a rod in his leg to make sure it heals properly. Right now we are worried about the degree of his head injury, which we won't know until he regains consciousness."

"Will he?" Howie couldn't stop the tears now. They came unbidden, and he couldn't push them away.

"We aren't sure," Westin said quietly.

"Oh my God," Howie choked back another sob, and jammed his head back into his pillow. "This can't be happening, this can't be happening. It has to be a dream, this can't be happening..."

Dr. Westin reached his hand out to Howie, who gripped it tightly, not caring that this man was a virtual stranger. He felt so lost and alone that his soul couldn't bear it, and he needed to know that someone else was there. Anyone. After a few moments of his quiet tears, he asked in a low voice: "What about Nick?"

Westin looked unhappy. “Nick is also in a coma. He is also in critical condition. He is breathing off of a respirator. His injuries are very serious. He had a lot of internal bleeding, and is scheduled to go back into the OR in a few hours. We had to clean up his liver, and we also had problems with his spleen. Thankfully, we didn’t have to remove it. He shattered his kneecap, so we had to replace it. He has a long battle ahead of him, and whether or not he wins is solely up to him.” Nick had other complications, but talking about them wouldn’t help anything. The damage was done.

Howie could hold it back no longer. The tears flowed freely yet again, and sobs racked his weakened body. Dr. Westin stuck his head into the hall and motioned to Howie’s family. Pollyanna rushed back into the room and wrapped her arms around her brother and held him, and he buried his head in her shoulder and wept. A nurse came in moments later with a syringe, and Howie’s cries slowly lessened as he drifted off into a drug induced sleep.

Chapter 4

The World Waits

“This is Tracey Willow with Channel 8 News. We have just received word that music mega stars the Backstreet Boys were involved in a serious accident early this morning while en route to a concert in Houston, TX. No word yet on the conditions of the Boys, but reports tell us the news is not good...”

“This is Kurt Loader with an MTV News special report. A tour bus carrying the Backstreet Boys was involved in a serious accident around 2:00 am this morning. MTV has not received word of any fatalities, but very little information on their condition has been made available. Sources say the driver of the other vehicle involved was killed instantly. As of right now, the remaining shows on the tour have been cancelled as we wait anxiously for news regarding the condition of the band members...”

“This is a News 12 special report. Sources say that two of the Backstreet Boys are dead this morning following a fatal automobile accident that took place on a Texas highway early this morning. The survivors of the crash were airlifted to a San Antonio hospital where their exact condition is unknown, but presumed to be critical...”

San Antonio Express News

Backstreet Boys hospitalized after accident

The music industry suffered a huge blow early yesterday morning when a tour bus carrying the superstar singing group the Backstreet Boys was involved in a fatal accident.

An unidentified trucker lost control of his vehicle when he fell asleep at the wheel and sideswiped the bus around 2:30 yesterday morning. The driver of the truck was killed instantly, and the driver of the tour bus along with the relief driver died at the scene.

Four out of five Backstreet Boys, Nick Carter, Brian Littrell, A.J. McLean, and Kevin Richardson, were air lifted to a local hospital, while the fourth, Howie Dorough, was taken by ambulance. No word has been released about the conditions of the five other than that they have all sustained serious injuries. Prognoses for their recovery have not been made.

The inclement weather at the time, authorities say, is partly to blame for the accident. San Antonio received an inch of rain during the night, and the slick conditions on the roads no doubt contributed to the circumstances that caused the accident.

Millions of fans are in mourning, and people have flooded local San Antonio hospitals in search of the famed

singers and to offer their love and support. Although the hospital caring for the Boys has not been identified, police assistance has been dispatched to several in order to prevent interference to incoming patients.

The group's sophomore album, *Millennium*, has sold over 11 million copies in the US, and the group is responsible for mega hits such as "I Want It That Way" and "Show Me The Meaning Of Being Lonely."

The Backstreet Boys were en route to their next concert in Houston after performing Tuesday night at the Alamodome.

USA Today **Backstreet Boys critically injured**

San Antonio- Two of the Backstreet Boys, arguably the world's leading teen music group, are near death after a highway accident early Tuesday morning.

Nick Carter and Kevin Richardson sustained serious injuries that have them listed as critical condition in a local hospital. Fellow band mates Howie Dorough, Brian Littrell, and A.J. McLean have also been hospitalized with serious injuries. received when their tour bus was run off the road in the rain while on its way to a concert in Houston.

According to officials, the accident occurred when a trucker lost control of his vehicle in the rain and sideswiped the tour bus carrying the singers. Both the unidentified man and the drivers of the tour bus died at the scene.

Little or no information is being given as to the true condition or location of any of the five singers in respect to their privacy due to the strong reaction of fans. Reports say all of the hospitals in San Antonio are surrounded by well-wishers hoping to catch a glimpse of their ailing idols.

The reaction of the public has been immediate. Radio stations all over the country have been flooded with calls, and several cities have reported large gatherings of fans who have come together to offer prayers and get well wishes. All anxiously await the fate of the group that has sold over 24 million albums all over the world.

No official comment has been made from Jive records, or any of the Backstreet Boy's management regarding the accident or the condition of the band members.

Orlando Sentinel **Backstreet Boys involved in fatal accident**

San Antonio – The Backstreet Boys, the international singing sensation who got their start in Orlando, were involved in an early morning highway accident Tuesday that killed three and landed all five members of the band in the hospital.

Sources say that singers Kevin Richardson and Nick Carter are both in critical condition after their tour bus was sideswiped by another vehicle around two AM. Brian Littrell, A.J. McLean and Howie Dorough were thrown from the bus, and are listed in serious condition.

Information on the conditions of the singers is sketchy at best, despite inquiries to local San Antonio hospitals and Jive Records, the record label of the group. Frantic phone calls to local radio and TV stations by fans have yielded frustrating results.

The Backstreet Boys, widely considered to be the instigators of the current pop music explosion, were nearing the end of a world tour in support of their newest album, *Millennium*, which has sold over 12 million copies in the U.S. alone. Assembled in Orlando in 1993, they have since taken the music industry by storm, despite scathing reviews from critics and a lack of respect from other performers in the industry...

Chapter 5

Lost And Found

When Howie awoke he felt completely drained. This surprised him, for he had slept for several hours. Wasn't sleep supposed to have the opposite effect? Then the memory of all that had happened came rushing back at him. He looked over to see Pollyanna asleep in a chair, and he called to her softly. She awoke immediately.

"How do you feel?" she asked him, coming over to his bedside.

"Like shit," he replied truthfully.

She smiled slightly. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Actually, there is. I need to see them. One of them, at least."

She fidgeted uncomfortably. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Can you get a nurse to get a wheelchair or something?"

Pollyanna sighed. "There's no reasoning with you, is there?"

"Please?"

She gave him an exasperated look. "Anything for you, Howie." She came back a few minutes later with Dr. Westin.

"Howie, I would let you go see them, but now is really not the best time. Mr. Littrell woke up not too long ago, but he's not ready to see anyone. You have all been through a lot, but he is not handling any of this well at all. We allowed his family in for a few moments, but even that probably wasn't a good idea. He's still not very aware of his surroundings. He doesn't really comprehend all that has happened, and he's not strong enough to hear it. We keep having to sedate him." He paused for a moment. "Does Brian tend to be on the sensitive side?"

"Yes, he does." Howie answered quickly. He frowned for a moment, and thought. Then his eyes went wide. "The fight!"

Dr. Westin had been turning to leave, but he stopped quickly. "What was that? Are you remembering something from the accident?"

Howie spoke slowly, trying to separate the mess of thoughts he had swimming around in his head. "Brian and Nick had a fight. They're best friends, they never yell at each other like they did then. I don't remember what was said, but it really upset him. Brian, I mean. He tried not to act like it, but it did. I don't think any of us saw Nick after that. Kevin tried to talk to him, but I don't know if he got anything out of him. That's all I remember."

Westin frowned. “Well that could very well be a part of our problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever has Brian so agitated is something that is very important to him. Even his subconscious won’t let go of it. Deep down he knows that something has happened to all of you, and it happened when he was feeling upset over things he’s said to Nick.”

Howie’s breath quickened. “Do you think he feels guilty? Is that why he won’t snap out of it?”

“It’s hard to say,” Westin said carefully. “But he has been through a terrible ordeal, mental and physical. I understand that he has a history of heart trouble as well.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Howie twitched anxiously.

“Hmm. The real world is a terrifying thing for him to face right now. Hopefully we can make him realize that he can pull through if he tries too.” *Before it kills him*, Weston thought silently.

“What if I talked to him?”

“I can see where that might be helpful, but right now it is probably not a good idea. I promise you that once we get a little more progress from him we will bring you to him.”

“What about any of the others?” Howie asked desperately.

“I know this is hard for you, but you have to be patient. The best thing for you and for them is to get some rest. I’m putting my foot down.”

Frustrated, Howie jerked his head away. He wanted to hit something, and hit it hard. But he wasn’t so far gone that he didn’t see how foolish that would be. He would just have to wait.

A.J. was dreaming. He couldn’t see much in the way of images, but the loneliness he felt invaded his soul so deeply that he thought he was going to die from it. That is, until the pain came. It was agonizing and relentless. The pits of Hell would have been more enticing. He would have given anything to make it stop, but nothing would have. It was unbearable! How could such a fragile body suffer so much? And it wouldn’t let him die. That was all he wanted, to die. He knew it was the only thing that would make the pain stop. He began to yell, but that only made it worse...

He came awake with a jerk. Reality rushed at him so forcefully that it overwhelmed him. He felt as if a thousand knives were stabbing him all over his body, and he screamed.

Two nurses rushed into his room, and A.J. panicked. He jerked upright in his bed, his eyes darting about wildly. Both nurses halted, and one approached slowly. She opened her mouth to say something, but A.J. never gave her the chance.

“No!” he shrieked, and cornered himself against the wall.

“Mr. McLean, it’s ok,” she tried to say soothingly to him. But she allowed the fear she felt for his safety to flicker across her face, and A.J. saw it.

“Don’t touch me!” he shouted, and flung his arm at a tray of equipment nearby. The contents of the tray went flying and landed with a clatter on the floor. The second nurse darted out of the room to page a doctor.

Howie had been trying to read a magazine that his sister had brought him, but he was unable to concentrate on it. He had slept for several hours, and earlier in the day he had visited with his father and brother, but now his family had gone to find some dinner and to get some sleep. Now he had nothing but his thoughts. Suddenly Dr. Westin hurried into his room, worry etched in his face.

“What is it?” Howie asked, alarmed. “What happened?”

“Howie, we need your help. Are you up to it?”

“Tell me what happened!” he demanded.

“A.J. woke up. He is giving us trouble. I would like for you to come and see if you can calm him down.”

“Take me there!” Howie said, worry overcoming him. The doctor and an orderly helped ease him into a wheelchair, and they took him off down the hall to the elevator.

He could hear A.J. hollering all the way down the hall. There was no mistaking him. The nurses seemed in chaos. Had the circumstances been any different, Howie would have thought the situation funny. But as he reached the door, a horrifying sight met him. A.J. had ripped the IVs out of his arms and hands, and torn a bandage off of his face. It oozed blood where the stitches had been disturbed. It looked as if he had torn the cast around his hand and lower arm part ways off. He was crouched in a chair on the opposite side of his room, and had seized one of the sharper instruments that had fallen on the floor. He brandished it threateningly. How he had gotten to the chair was beyond Howie, for he could see the terrible burn on his knee that Dr. Westin had been referring to. As it was, he was resting all of his weight on his good leg. He was screaming continually at them.

“*Get away from me!*” he cried over and over. His raspy voice made it sound that much worse. But it was not any of this that concerned Howie. It was his eyes. They were ablaze with a primal fire that made him almost unrecognizable. Howie’s blood ran cold, and he was actually afraid that A.J. might stab him. His eyes darted rapidly back and forth, trying to look at everyone, but not really seeing anything. Howie was in plain view, but A.J. didn’t know him. He couldn’t know him. It took Howie a moment to realize exactly what was wrong with him, and how deep it was, because it seemed so unfathomable.

A.J. was scared to death.

It wasn’t just fear or a desire to be difficult. It was absolute terror. His whole body was trembling, and if someone couldn’t reach him soon, he would collapse. Howie had never seen anything like it before, and to see this happening to his friend just killed him. He had to help him, but his own fear and the shock of this foreign person that had once been his friend raving in front of him made his feet turn to stone. He couldn’t make himself go to him.

“A.J!” Howie said brokenly, attempting to gain his attention. Summoning every last drop of courage that he could find within himself, he stood up painfully from his wheelchair. A.J.’s response was instinctive and immediate. He reached up for the blinds on the window and jerked them hard, intending to fling them. They came crashing down, and in his panicked attempt to get out of the way he stumbled off of the chair and fell heavily to the ground with a yell. As soon as he hit he scrambled upright and crouched in the corner, gasping for breath.

“No!” Howie whimpered, which only seemed to put A.J. more on the defensive. He jabbed forward with the instrument, and Howie reeled backwards.

“Oh, *God!*” Howie gasped. His ribs screamed in protest, and he felt short of breath. His heart raced, and his whole body began to shake. A nurse made a move to help him, but it caused A.J. to try and claw his way up the wall. Howie couldn’t stop the tears of sorrow and fear that built up inside. Where was the A.J. he had known for so long? Surely he was still there somewhere! But if he was, there was no indication in the shadow of a man that he saw before him.

“A.J., please stop this. It’s me, this is Howie!” He cried desperately.

“Keep talking to him,” the doctor whispered. Howie dropped slowly to the floor in front of him, and tried not to sob when A.J. flinched violently away.

“It’s going to be ok, man. Listen to me. It’s me. Howie. You know me. I’m not gonna hurt you. You have got to believe me. I’m your friend. I promise I won’t hurt you. Just... *please stop this!*” The words were coming quickly, but strangely calm. It was funny, because Howie’s own panic level was skyrocketing.

“A.J. It’s me. You’re going to be ok. Trust me. Just trust me. You’ve trusted me for years. There’s no reason for you to stop now. I’m here for you. All you have to do is see that.”

A.J. paused, and though he was breathing heavily and the wild look had not yet left his eyes, he had stopped screaming. Howie racked his brain for something, anything that might reach him. He did the first thing he thought of. He began to sing softly.

“I’ll be the one, I’ll be the light where you can run to make it all right,”

It hurt to sing, but he knew it had to work. He was in agony now, but there was no way he was going to leave A.J. like this. Even if it meant he would die right there on the floor, he wouldn’t allow himself to go until he had found A.J.

*“I’ll be the one who will make all your sorrows undone.
I’ll be the light, when you feel like there’s nowhere to run.
I’ll be the one to hold you, and make sure that you’ll be all right.
You need me like I need you...”*

“We can share our dreams coming true...” A.J. whispered softly, a solitary tear falling down his face. For the first time, A.J. seemed to look at Howie, instead of through him.

“Howie?” he murmured, his voice on the verge of breaking.

“It’s me, buddy. You’re going to be ok.” Relief washed over him like a tidal wave, threatening to sweep him away.

“Oh, God...” A.J. began to sob. Howie reached out to embrace him, and A.J. grabbed on to him tightly.

“You scared me...” Howie said, the reality of what had just happened finally catching up to him. “God you scared me...”

“I hurt... everywhere,” A.J. moaned. All of the fight and desperation had left him. “Why does everything hurt so much?”

“We were in an accident,” Howie told him quietly.

“It hurts...”

Howie held him close, feeling his body tremble uncontrollably. Despite his own pain, he would have gladly born what his friend was going through now to take it away from him. He couldn’t bear to watch someone go through it.

“I know,” he told him. “The doctors are going to help you. Will you let them? That’s all they want to do, help you.”

A.J. nodded shakily. “Just make it stop,” he begged. “Please make it stop.”

“They’ll make it stop. I’ll make sure they do. I’m right here A.J., and no one is going to hurt you. They’d have to get through me first. You’re ok. You’re not alone.”

Dr. Westin approached them slowly. A.J. gripped Howie’s arm tightly.

“You’re not alone,” Howie repeated. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Will you let me help you?” Westin asked softly.

“Just make the pain go away...”

He let out an agonized cry that almost hurt Howie more than the entire scene earlier. Now the real A.J. was here, and he *felt* the pain.

“Ok. I’ll do the best that I can. Do you trust me?”

A.J. nodded weakly, never relaxing his grip on Howie.

He slid a needle into his arm and injected some medicine. After a few moments, A.J. relaxed against his friend in a deep sleep.

Dr. Westin looked up at Howie. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t have to. He’s my friend. I would do anything for him.”

“Yes, I believe you would.”

Howie released a breath he didn’t even realize he was holding. “What made him do that?”

“There was a mix-up on his pain meds,” Westin said uncomfortably. “He didn’t get his last round of them, and he woke up in a great deal of pain. and that’s the way he reacted to it. I don’t ever think I’ve seen that response from someone before.”

Howie’s eyes flashed angrily. “So because someone screwed up A.J. had to go *through* that? That could have killed him! What is *wrong* with you people? How *dare* you!” He began to struggle to his feet, ignoring the fact that he was exhausted and couldn’t. Dr. Westin reached out to help him, but Howie jerked away from him.

“Howie, please. It was a terrible thing. I promise you action will be taken, but you have to realize that things happen. Let me help you to your chair. You need to go back to your room and sleep. I’m sorry I had to ask you to do this, but I don’t think there was any other way. I’m going to try and move you in here, because I want A.J. to have you close by when he wakes up.

“Damn right.” Howie growled, but allowed the doctor and another nurse to help him.

“Take it easy. How do you feel? You’re looking pretty pale.”

“I don’t feel that hot,” Howie murmured. Abruptly, all he wanted to do was lie down. It suddenly seemed too much to ask for him to do so much as sit up. “I really need to lie down,” he said weakly, feebly trying to brace himself somehow in his chair. Nausea washed over him, and he leaned his head back and closed his eyes as he was whisked back to his room.

Chapter 6

Paradise Lost

Brian stared up at the ceiling in the darkness. He had discovered that this was the activity that he could do with the least amount of pain. It hurt to move, it hurt to breathe, it hurt to think. So he just lay there, and stared at the ceiling. He was glad that pain deterred him from thinking, because it kept him from wondering what had happened. Every time he began to think about that question, he'd start hurting more and have to stop.

He wasn't sure where he was, but for the moment that did not bother him. He was just happy to be able to stare at the ceiling with a minimal amount of agony. That was, until the door opened. The sudden light caused him to flinch, which of course, hurt. He grunted painfully, and his voice cracked as he whispered out loud.

"Who's there?"

"You're awake," a voice answered him, sounding pleased.

"What..." Brian started. He wasn't even sure what to ask.

"May I turn on the light?" the voice asked.

"Light hurts my eyes," he mumbled.

"That's ok then. We'll leave it off. I won't bother you for very long. You need all the rest you can get." Brian nodded, closing his eyes again.

Dr. Westin introduced himself and pulled up a chair next to the bed.

"Brian do you have any idea where you are?"

Brian shook his head slightly. "No," he croaked.

"You're in the hospital. You were in an accident, and you have some nasty injuries. Do you understand?"

Brian looked confused. "An accident?"

"That's right."

"I don't remember."

"That's ok," Westin assured him.

"Is that why I hurt so much?"

“Yes. If you are feeling a lot of pain I’ll tell the nurse to give you something more for it.”

Brian nodded. “Please.”

“Ok,” he said, scribbling something on his clipboard. “I’m glad you’re doing better. You didn’t look so hot not too long ago. This is the first time you’ve woken up and been aware of your surroundings.”

“How long have I been here?”

“About two days.”

“Wow.” Brian nestled his head deeper into his pillow. It became very hard all of the sudden to focus on the doctor, and to keep his eyes open.

“I’m going to let you get some rest right now, so we’ll talk later, ok?”

“Yeah,” Brian said, drifting off again.

Westin quietly left the room and gave the nurse on duty some instructions. “It looks like he is finally coming out of it,” he remarked. “Thank goodness. Keep a close eye on him, he’s going to be a little trickier to deal with than the others.”

“Even more so than McLean?” The nurse asked with a raised eyebrow.

He handed her the clipboard. “Yes. A.J. is going to be all right given a little time. I don’t think our incident this afternoon will be repeated. Brian is going to be a little more delicate. This is going to be a long recovery. I just hope all of them make it.”

“What’s the news with the others?”

“Carter and Richardson are still in a coma. Carter had surgery a little while ago. I’m very worried about him. His immune system was already weakened when he came in. He had pneumonia. That just makes his fight that much harder. Richardson might be back in the OR soon too. Hite still suspects he has some internal bleeding.”

The nurse shook her head. “Boy oh boy. This is just unbelievable.”

“This is News Channel 4 at 10, I am Debra Daniels. Our top story tonight remains the hospitalization of the pop group the Backstreet Boys here in San Antonio. Hospital spokesmen tell us that Howie Dorough is awake and responding to questions. No improvement is reported in the most critically injured Boys, Kevin Richardson, and Nick Carter, who have both been listed in critical condition. A.J McLean has been upgraded to serious condition, as has Brian Littrell. The young men were hospitalized two days ago after their tour bus was hit by a trucker on Highway 35 while they were

en route to their next concert in Houston. The Backstreet Boys had just finished performing here in San Antonio the night of the accident..."

"This is Kurt Loader from MTV News with an update on the ailing Backstreet Boys. Hospital spokespersons report that Howie Dorough is awake and alert and answering questions. He is expected to make a full recovery. The lives of Kevin Richardson and Nick Carter still hang in the balance however, and doctors are reluctant to predict their chances. A.J. McLean and Brian Littrell are no longer critical, but they have yet to regain consciousness. Needless to say, the remaining shows on the Backstreet Boys tour have been cancelled. Fans of the group everywhere have gathered together to offer their hopes and prayers..."

Brian woke up several more times throughout the next day, and though he was still exhausted, he was able to remain awake for longer periods of time. His parents had tried to see him earlier, but he just couldn't stand the way they looked at him. There was such sadness in them, and he was terrified to find out what it meant. He had made the connection earlier that he was probably not alone in the accident, although no one had mentioned anyone else to him. Something awful had happened, but he was not ready yet to ask what.

All he wanted was to remain in his own little realm of pain. He did not want to acknowledge the rest of the world. To do so would have meant even more suffering. His plan had worked so far, since he was only up for ten minutes or so at a time. It worked, that is, until that afternoon.

He happened to be awake when a nurse came in to take his blood pressure. She left the door open, and he could hear the radio playing softly outside. All of the sudden he heard a few familiar chords, and then Nick's voice filled the speaker.

"I don't know what he does to make you cry..."

Brian gasped, and covered his face with his hands. "Oh my God, Oh my God," he began to sob. Somewhere deep in his memory, an image came to his head.

As far as I'm concerned you can just go straight to hell and not come back.

"What? What is it?" the nurse asked, alarmed. Brian just shook his head, and continued to cry, his frail body shaking from the enormity of his sobs.

She darted out of the room and called for a doctor. "Dr. Westin! He's doing it again!" she said urgently. Westin came rushing over.

"Brian?" he asked gently. "What's the matter?"

“Th-the radio...the radio... Oh God, what happened to my friends? Nick. What happened to my friends...”

Westin sighed. “I was waiting for this. I wasn’t going to tell you anything until you were ready to ask.”

After a few hours more sleep, Brian woke up again. He felt even more drained than before, and his heart was filled with despair. His own cousin, and his best friend in the world were fighting a losing battle for their lives. He was terrified that not only might he lose one, but he might lose them both. It was something he could never bring himself to face.

The nurse asked him if he wanted to see his parents. Brian shook his head. He couldn’t do it. He wanted their company and knew he needed their support, but he simply couldn’t do it. He knew he was hurting them by saying no, but the only thing that seemed safe to him was sleep, so that was what he chose.

The next time he woke, it was to the voice of one of the orderlies.

“Brian?”

“Yes?” he mumbled, not willing to open his eyes.

“There’s someone here who wants to see you.”

“No,” he rasped. “I don’t want to see anybody.”

“I think this is someone you want to see.”

Brian slowly opened his eyes and focused on him. “Why?” he asked bitterly.

“Trust me on this one. Doctor’s orders. Besides, he’s very anxious to see you.”

“Fine.”

To his great surprise, Howie appeared in the doorway in a wheelchair.

What Howie saw was a pathetic sight. All of the life seemed to have gone out of his friend. His normally sparkling blue eyes were flat and dull, and his usually pleasant face was pale and drawn. He seemed even smaller than his 5’8” frame in the bed, with multiple IVs coming out of both arms and his hand. An oxygen mask was draped around his face. A nasty gash ran the length of his forehead, and Howie could see the dreadful

cuts that covered his arms. They were similar to his own. Upon seeing Howie, a flicker of life fluttered behind his eyes, but it passed quickly.

“Howie,” Brian murmured. The orderly placed his wheelchair next to Brian’s bed and then left them alone. For a moment they said nothing, and then Howie reached out his good hand. Brian clasped it tightly, and the tears spilled over. Howie thought his cry earlier had helped him, but he was wrong. The two broke down together, and eased each other’s pain although neither said a word.

“I’m so glad you are ok,” Howie managed to say after a long while.

Brian nodded. “They told me about the others,” Brian said dully. “About Nick...”

“I know man, I know,” Howie said, feeling the sting at the corner of his eyes yet again. “The only other one they’ve let me see is A.J., and that’s because they needed me to calm his down. He kinda flipped out.”

“A.J.” Brian whispered. “Is he going to be all right?”

“I think so,” Howie answered. “They are going to put us in a room together, for his sake. He didn’t react very well to the world when he woke up. They want me to be there when he wakes up again. They say he probably will in another hour or so.” Howie was rambling, but he couldn’t stop himself. It was killing him to see Brian like this.

“What are we going to do?” Brian asked. The emptiness in his eyes had been replaced with incredible pain and suffering. Howie almost wished for them to be blank as they were before.

“Pray,” was all Howie could think of. That seemed to comfort him, and the two joined hands and prayed. At that moment, it was all they had.

Chapter 7

The Fallen Heroes

Howie stayed with Brian until he was asleep again. He had actually begun to doze off himself. His eyelids felt like lead. A nurse came in to check on them, and found him almost asleep. She touched his arm and told him she was going to take him to his new room with A.J. Howie nodded sleepily, and gently tried to pry his hand away from Brian's grasp. Once that was done, he was wheeled out. He was asleep before he even reached his room. With some help, he was moved from the wheelchair to his new bed, in a double with A.J. He did not stir until an hour later, when A.J. woke up again.

A.J. lay there for several minutes, assessing his situation. "Howie? Are you there?"

His voice sounded raspy and confused. All he really remembered from before was that something had been terribly wrong, but Howie had been there with him, so it was all right. He was tired and he hurt all over, but he felt safe. Cautiously he turned his head to the side and saw his friend sleeping nearby. He was instantly concerned about all of the cuts and bruises, and the cast on his arm. Taking no real notice of his own injuries, he tried to get up to go see what was the matter with him. He winced in surprise when his side felt like it was suddenly lit by a torch.

"What the..." he looked in surprise at the tubes coming out of his arms and the cast around his lower arm. His torso was incredibly stiff.

"What the *hell?*" he said aloud. His voice surprised him. He almost couldn't use it.

A nurse poked her head in. "Welcome back," she said with a smile. "Why on earth are you sitting up? You need to be laying down Mr. McLean."

"What happened to my friend over there? Is he all right? He looks terrible!" A.J. coughed painfully. Howie stirred in his bed, and opened his eyes.

"I look better than you do, if I do say so myself," he replied with a tired smile.

"I can't even get up," A.J. said in wonder, easing back against the pillows. The nurse fiddled with his IVs, and adjusted his pain medication. "I'll have the doctor come in to see you right away to answer your questions."

"Can it be later? I'm *exhausted*. Shit!" She nodded and left the room.

"I'm not surprised, with that stunt you pulled earlier," Howie said dryly.

"Earlier?"

"Why do you think I'm so tired? I was trying to keep you from jumping out of your skin."

"I don't understand, I can't even move," he said sleepily.

“You sure could earlier.”

“Right,” he mumbled, drifting off again.

“I’m glad you are doing better,” Howie said in a small voice. “I was so scared...”

The tremble A.J. heard in Howie’s voice brought back the dim memory of his fear. His eyes opened wide again. “I was scared too...” he said, his voice barely a whisper. He couldn’t remember what had happened, but the traces of that fear that had permeated him so completely were there. Howie noticed the sudden change in his voice, and attempted to sit up.

“You ok?”

A.J. exhaled shakily, and turned his head to face Howie. “Something really bad happened to us, didn’t it?”

Howie nodded tearfully. “Yeah. Something bad happened.”

“Where are the others?”

Howie couldn’t answer. All he could do was cry. Being the strong one was all of the sudden too much for him, and he couldn’t take it anymore. It was usually Kevin’s job anyway. He didn’t want it. He hated himself for that thought, but there was nothing he could do.

A.J. lay back again, his eyes wet. He chose Brian’s course of action, and pushed away reality for a little while longer, not quite willing to accept it. He waited for sleep to take him.

“No, Mr. Dorough is not able to answer any questions,” a hospital rep repeated for the hundredth time.

The world had been screaming for answers, and the hospital finally agreed to a quick press conference, with hospital reps only, once permission was obtained from family members.

“I thought you said he was awake!” someone shouted.

“Howie Dorough is fully conscious and is aware of what has happened. Although his injuries were not quite as severe as some of the others, he has been through a great shock these past few days. The only visitors he’s been able to receive are his family members. He is not strong enough for anything more than that. This has been a very difficult three days.”

“What is the status of the others?” another member of the press yelled over the buzz of the crowd.

“The Carters and the Richardsons have asked that I not release any details about their sons’ condition,” he started, trying to ignore the angry mutterings of the crowd. “All I can say is that they are both still in critical. We are hoping from the best.”

“Will they be able to perform again?”

“I hardly think that is a question that should be addressed at this time. Next question?”

“What about Brian Littrell and A.J. McLean?”

“Mr. McLean and Mr. Littrell have both been drifting in and out of consciousness. Neither has been awake for any significant amount of time. As of right now, their physical prognosis is looking pretty good. Brian has been told what has happened, A.J. has not.”

“When will we be able to talk to Brian?”

“Not any time soon. He’s had an extremely rough time of it.”

“Why hasn’t A.J. been told about what happened?”

“We had some difficulties with him when he woke up...”

“What kind of difficulties?” someone interrupted.

“I’m not at liberty to say. But we are being very careful with him. We want to make this as easy on these young men as possible.”

“When will we be able to speak with any of the Backstreet Boys themselves?”

“That all depends on them and their doctors. We have not mentioned anything to any of them about the public since their admittance here, and I doubt it has crossed any of their minds. Dr. Westin, who is overseeing their care, has promised that at the appropriate time he will hold another press conference to give more of the answers you are looking for. That is all I can say for now.”

The mob of people began shouting in protest, but the spokesman quickly left the stage.

He marveled at the crowd that had gathered all around the building. Security had forced everyone well away from the emergency doors and all of the other entryways, but there were still people everywhere. Most of them were young girls, but he saw people of all ages. Some of them were standing, some of them were sitting, and many of them held lit candles and photos of the Backstreet Boys. Their music could be heard everywhere.

Some people were crying and hugging, and other had joined hands to pray. Although the rep was annoyed at the vultures that demanded information and a terrible invasion of privacy, he couldn't help but be touched by the love that he could feel everywhere. He'd never seen this kind of tragedy bringing out devotion of this magnitude. There were signs with Bible quotes, and people praying. Not even just for the Boys, but for each other. And it wasn't just here, he had found out. Similar displays were being reported all over the country, and even the world. It was amazing. These men had touched the lives of countless people, and there was no way any of these fans were going to let their heroes down.

Chapter 8

Self Destruct

“I want to see Nick... and Kevin.”

Brian stared into the face of Dr. Westin. His parents and his brother were sitting in the chairs in his room, having finally been granted entrance by their son. Even now, their presence was of little comfort. They had been able to do little for him. He had spoken to them, they had hugged him, and they had offered their support to him, but none of it really seemed to matter to him. There was only one thing he needed right now.

He was honestly glad his family there. He knew that his refusal to see them when he was awake had been a horrible thing to do, and that they would never understand why he had shut them out. He couldn't even explain it to himself. All he knew was that he was helpless, helpless to save Nick and Kevin, and helpless to stop the pressure that closed over his chest and at the mercy of lungs that refused to breathe. The anxiety attacks were almost a routine. If he could just see them. If he could just reassure himself that Nick and Kevin were there, maybe they would stop...

“I want to see Nick and Kevin,” he repeated again, using as much strength as he could muster.

“I'm afraid that's not possible.”

“Why not?” he demanded.

“Because you are not strong enough. I do not want you to move from this bed until I say it is ok.”

“But I need to see them!”

“Brian, I'm sorry. I can't let you. Please understand that, it is for your own health.”

“My health doesn't matter! Don't you understand?” His voice broke as tears of rage streamed down his face. “I have to see them. I have to see if they are ok.” He took in a few short breaths.

“I'm sorry,” Dr. Westin said quietly. “They are getting the best care that we have to offer. We are doing absolutely everything we can for them; you just have to have faith in that. It is better all around if you stay put.”

“They need to know I'm there,” Brian said with so much despair that it crushed Westin's heart. He had never seen someone so broken as the man who lay before him. Sighing heavily, he forced himself to meet the intense gaze of his young patient. “I can't let you, Brian.”

The tears came with a vengeance, and Brian balled his hands into fists.

“You son of a bitch,” he cursed, and then covered his face with his hands as a terrific sob shook his body. “Son of a bitch.” This time he said it with despair rather than hatred.

Mrs. Littrell gripped the shirt of her husband tightly. She couldn’t stand this. Her son was carrying pain that went far beyond the extent of his injuries. She thought she had cried until her eyes had run dry, but now found fresh tears covering her cheeks. She gasped in panic when she heard her son wheezing.

“I have to see them,” he gasped out, desperate for breath. “You have to let me see Kevin. I have to find Nick... Oh God where is Nick? Nick! *Answer me!*”

Dr. Westin wasted no time calling in support and ushering the Littrells out of the room. “It’ll be all right, he’ll be ok, but I need you to leave and give us some space to work,” he told them shortly.

Once outside, Mrs. Littrell broke down sobbing in her husband’s arms.

“Why did this happen?” she asked tearfully. “Why did this have to happen?”

Dr. Westin pulled the oxygen mask encircling Brian’s head away and replaced it with one that covered his nose and mouth. It was a difficult task, for Brian had begun thrashing about in his frenzy. He jerked his head backwards and arched his back in an attempt to get air. The gashes in his back screamed out in protest, wrenching a cry of agony from his throat.

“Brian!” Dr. Westin shouted, trying to get him to focus. “Take my hand. We’re going to help you, but you have to stop! Take my hand, squeeze my hand! Come on!” he growled.

Brian seized the doctor’s outstretched hand with a grip that almost made him cry out. In his weakened state, there was no way he should have that much strength. He stared straight into Westin, his deep blue eyes wide with panic and desperation as the sweat beaded on his brow. The look in his eyes spelled one thing out in perfect clarity for the doctor to read: He was not going to die. Not while his friends were still fighting. Those eyes left an imprint on Westin’s soul he wouldn’t forget until the day he died.

The sweat dripped down Brian’s face as he breathed in and out at a furious rate. Westin snapped out of his trance and barked some orders out. This young man was going to survive even if he had to fight the Grim Reaper himself for him.

After a few minutes that threatened to last an eternity, Brian’s breathing began to return to normal. His pulse came down, and his vitals began to stabilize. Not once did he tear his gaze from Westin until his eyes closed in sleep. His grip loosened on the doctor’s hand and fell away. Westin discovered that he was bleeding from the nail imprints Brian had left on him. When he left, the young man was sleeping peacefully.

Dr. Westin went out to give his report to Brian's family. He still felt a little shaky himself. Westin wasn't sure how much more of this Brian's body could take. If he continued like this, it was likely to kill him.

"How is he?" Mr. Littrell asked anxiously.

"He's sleeping now."

"Thank God."

"I must say he is certainly not helping his recovery any. Each one of these anxiety attacks just wears his body out more."

"What can we do? Can't you just let him see his friends? That's all he wants!"

"Right now, I really can't let him. It might help him, but he is definitely not ready for a wheelchair right now, and to see Nick and Kevin in their current state may shock him. Mr. Dorough is the only one of them that I am allowing to move about. As long as A.J. handles things well and feels up to it, I may let him come visit your son, but Brian is simply not ready. As soon as he can handle being out of bed, I will have him taken up to see Nick and Kevin. But right now, it would be very dangerous to do so, especially while he is still having these anxiety attacks."

"I see."

Westin patted Mrs. Littrell's arm reassuringly. "Just stay strong and be there for Brian when he needs you. He may not realize it, but he really does need your support. It's the best we can do for now. The rest is all up to him."

Chapter 9 ***Holding On***

“Can we go see Brian?” Howie asked anxiously.

It was difficult to keep track of time, but Pollyanna had informed him that it was Tuesday morning, the fourth morning since the wreck. He felt a little more alert now, after a long night of sleep. He couldn't remember the last time he had spent so much time sleeping. Denise McLean and Dr. Westin had told A.J. all about the wreck while Howie slept earlier that morning. His eyes were red and puffy from crying, but he handled it better than anyone had expected.

“Brian's not quite up for it, Howie,” Westin said carefully.

“What do you mean?” Howie asked alarmed. A.J. also turned his full attention to the doctor, waiting to hear his response.

“He had a bit of a relapse last night.”

A chill rushed through A.J.'s spine. Brian was in trouble, and they were not there for him. Brian *needed* them, and they weren't there.

“What happened?” Howie whispered.

“I'm afraid that he had another anxiety attack. He's sleeping now,” he added quickly, seeing the expressions on their faces.

“I want to be there when he wakes up,” A.J. said suddenly.

Westin thought for a moment, considering A.J.'s request.

“He needs us. Don't let him be alone!”

A little of the desperation that had fueled his earlier rampage crept back into A.J.'s hoarse voice. He hoisted himself up on his elbows, and stared Westin straight in the eyes.

“I know I'm tired, and I know I'm weak. But I swear to *God* I will rip these things out of my arms and give you some real trouble if you don't take me to Brian.”

Howie smiled a little in relief to see the old A.J creep back up to the surface. There was nothing like a friend in need to bring out the fighter in him. Needless to say, Westin was taken aback, but inwardly pleased at the reaction. A.J. was going to be fine.

He lay back against the pillows, exhausted from his outburst.

“I’ll tell you what,” the doctor said after a moment. “You get some rest. Brian won’t be up at all for a few more hours. When I think it is time, I will have someone bring the two of you up to see him. Is that ok?”

“Ok,” Howie said for the two of them. Before Westin could leave, he asked another question. “How are Nick and Kevin?”

“About the same. Kevin is still in Post Op. He was operated on earlier. I will have a report shortly of how it went. Nick went through surgery as well as can be expected. For now he seems to be stable, but he needs a lot of luck. Having to deal with his injuries on top of his illness is really hard on his body. He has to fight twice as hard as the rest of you.

“What do you mean, his illness?”

Westin looked a bit surprised. “You didn’t know?”

Howie shook his head.

“Nick was very sick with pneumonia.”

“What?” Howie and A.J. said together in disbelief.

Howie was dumbfounded. “Oh my God. That’s what was wrong. He was sick and didn’t tell anyone. Jesus.”

“What do you mean?” A.J. asked.

“Do you remember the fight Nick and Brian had? Nick was being a total ass. His performance that night was less than stellar, and Brian asked him about it. They blew up at each other. That’s the last thing I remember. The wreck must have happened after that.

“I don’t remember,” A.J. said, doing his best to try.

Howie turned to the doctor. “Whatever you do, don’t tell that to Brian. None of us knew he was sick; he’s really good at hiding it. It would kill him to know that the last thing he did with Nick was yell at him the way he did when he was sick.”

“Would he even remember?” A.J. asked.

“Part of him does,” Howie said bitterly. “You haven’t seen him. He may not remember what happened, but somewhere deep down he knows. It’s eating at him. It’s what keeps causing his anxiety attacks, isn’t it.” It was not a question.

“That’s probably about right,” Westin said softly. “I’m hoping that the two of you can help pull him out of this.”

“What are we going to do if they don’t make it?” A.J. whispered. “It will kill him. That’s his cousin *and* his best friend.”

Howie glared at him. “Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that. Do you hear me? *Ever!*”

A.J. just shook his head miserably.

“We have high hopes,” Westin tried to assure them. “But we do have to be prepared for the worst.”

“When can we see them?”

“I was thinking about letting you up to see them this evening. I’m pleased with your progress, and I think it would be all right.”

“Not A.J.?” Howie asked, knitting his brow.

“I’m going out on a limb letting him up to see Brian.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that anyway,” A.J. said quietly, staring at the ceiling. “I want to, but...”

“I can’t go alone,” Howie said, disturbed at the thought. “I can’t do that alone.”

“I’ll come and see how you feel a little later. There’s no rush.” He turned and left them alone.

“We have to be there for them,” Howie told A.J. “They need us. Brian needs us. We can’t leave them alone.”

“No,” A.J. said as a tear ran down his cheek. “God no, we can’t leave them alone.” He bit his lip, screwing up his courage. “But I’m scared, Howie. I’m scared and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what I would do if you weren’t here with me...”

“I know what you would do,” Howie said to himself, shivering at the memory of A.J. gone berserk.

“What?” A.J. asked him.

“Nothing.”

Howie would never tell him. He couldn’t.

“Just shut up and sleep so we can be there for Brian. We can at least do that much.”

It wasn't long before Dr. Westin came back to get them.

"Do you still want to do this?"

"Yes," Howie said firmly.

"Ok then, this is how it's going to go. A.J., Nurse Andrea and I are going to help you get into this chair. You need to tell me if your ribs bother you. Howie did well before, but you aggravated things...earlier."

"I did?" A.J. asked with a frown. Dr. Westin pretended not to hear him, hoping he wouldn't have to explain. He moved over to Howie, and helped him into his chair. Howie grunted uncomfortably.

"The rest of the guys had better heal quick, because this is killing me," he muttered, attempting to bring some humor to the situation. Westin smiled.

"Ok, A.J., your turn." It took a little longer to get A.J. in the chair, but they finally succeeded.

"Oh man, this hurts like a bitch!" he remarked sullenly. "I'm ok," he added quickly, seeing Westin's raised eyebrow.

"Are you sure?"

"If I'm lying you'll know when I pass out."

"Right," he said dryly.

"Can't they just wheel my bed next time?" A.J. whined as he was pushed out the door.

"A.J.," Howie warned. "Shut up."

Both of them were surprised to see a large security guard standing right outside of their room. Dr. Westin explained. "There are a lot of your fans all over the place. We're doing a good job keeping them outside, but we've had a couple get closer than we'd like. Security is just to make sure that you get the privacy you deserve."

The two of them glanced at each other. The public hadn't even crossed their minds.

"What is everybody saying about us?" Howie asked curiously.

"We have been keeping most of the details quiet. There was a small press conference yesterday. Everybody knows that there was an accident, but we've tried to keep the details to a complete minimum for your own sake."

“Good Lord, they will want to know that we are ok,” Howie said.

“I think other things are more important right now,” A.J. said somewhat angrily.

“Eventually we are going to have to face the public,” Howie pointed out.

“Only when you are ready,” Westin insisted. “No one is going to pressure you to do or say anything. You are going to take all of the time that you need, Understand?”

“Yeah,” Howie answered.

“Here we go,” Westin said as he and the nurse guided them into Brian’s room, placing them on either side of the bed.

“He may not wake up for a little while yet. Andrea here is going to be right around the corner at the nurse’s station. If you need anything just call her.”

“Right,” Howie murmured. A.J. was staring at Brian’s still form in front of him.

“Oh my God,” he whispered, horrified at the sight. Howie had said that things were bad, but he had never pictured this. Brian looked so small and frail...

“We’re here Rok,” A.J. told him when he found his voice. “We’re here for you.”

After about twenty minutes had passed, Brian stirred. Howie pushed himself up out of his chair with a grimace. He gripped on to the railing of the bed and waited for his friend to open his eyes. A.J. watched Howie carefully, looking for any sign that he would need help. Satisfied that he wouldn’t, he turned his attention back to Brian, who opened his eyes slowly.

“A.J.?” he croaked in surprise. “Is that really you?”

“Yeah, bro. It’s me,” A.J. said comfortingly, patting his hand.

“I don’t believe it.”

“You thought you could get rid of me that easily? Never.” He had been hoping for a smile, anything to reassure him that the person in front of him was still the Brian he had known for so long. He didn’t get it. “Howie’s here too,” he murmured.

“I’m right here, Rok,” Howie said.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Brian said softly, closing his eyes briefly.

“Believe me, we are too. You have got to quit scaring us like that.”

“What?” he asked, confused.

“Nothing. Never mind,” A.J. told him. “We just came to chill with you a little while because the Doc said you weren’t doing so hot.”

Brian began to cry quietly. “They won’t let me see Nick or Kevin.”

“I know. They won’t let us see them either,” Howie said. “But they are gonna be ok. Don’t worry. They will be ok.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I know them. And they are not going to leave us.” Beads of sweat popped out on Howie’s forehead, and the hand that helped support his weight had begun to tremble a bit.

“Howie, sit down,” A.J. ordered. “Now.”

Brian tried to focus on him as Howie maneuvered himself back to his chair.

“D, are you all right?”

“Don’t worry about me. Worry about you. You have got us all freaked out. You won’t do Nick and Kevin any good by working yourself up the way you keep doing. The best thing you can do for them is to get better yourself, and you aren’t letting that happen. Not to mention, A.J. will kick your ass if you don’t pull yourself together.

“I yelled at him,” Brian said closing his eyes again.

A.J. looked at him blankly, but Howie understood. “Yeah, you did. But that’s ok. He knows you didn’t mean it. He’s Nick. He understands. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“I can’t help it,” he said, choking back more tears.

“Yes you can,” Howie insisted. “You just have to put some effort into it and help yourself out a little. What is Nick going to say when he wakes up and finds you like this? He is going to be *pissed* and you know it.”

Brian gave a tiny laugh, which turned into a painful wheeze.

“Steady,” A.J. said, raising his voice a bit. He glanced up at Howie, his face a little pale. “I think I need to head back. I’m gonna pass out.”

“For Christ sakes, get the nurse then,” Howie said, exasperated. A.J. pressed the call button, and a moment later Andrea walked in.

“Unless you want me all over the floor I think I need to go back and lie down,” A.J. informed her. She rolled her eyes and looked questionably at Howie.

“I’ll stay for a little while longer,” Howie responded. “If that’s ok.”

“Sure. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

After they had left, Howie looked Brian straight in the eyes. “Don’t give up on us. Whatever you do, don’t give up on us. *We need* each other, and you can’t give up on us.”

Brian shook his head, tears falling on his pillow. “I won’t,” he said determinedly. “I promise.”

Howie squeezed his hand. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just get better. Understand?”

“I have never been able to win an argument with you before, Howie. What makes you think I can start now?”

Howie forced a smile. “Good point.” He became serious again. “I’ll tell you what. You just worry about getting better for a while. When Dr. Westin says its ok, we will go and see Nick and Kevin together. I don’t think we should do it alone.”

Brian nodded gratefully. “I would like that.”

“So stop worrying about it until then. And besides, Kevin just had surgery. The last thing he would want is for us to be mothering him when he needs his sleep. You know what a bear he can be. Nick too.”

“Howie?” Brian asked, hesitantly.

“What?”

“I don’t deserve friends like you and the others.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Howie exclaimed. “Jesus, Brian. Don’t do this to yourself.”

The torture that haunted Brian’s eyes looked almost ready to consume him, and it broke Howie apart inside. There were only to people who could relieve it: Nick and Kevin. And that wasn’t possible. *He can’t do this by himself*, Howie thought.

“Brian,” Howie said slowly. “I know that what you’re feeling is killing you. I know that I can’t help you the way you need to be helped. You need them, and I can’t give them to you. The only thing I have to offer is the assurance that A.J. and I are hurting just like you. The five of us are a part of each other, and that will *never* change. No matter what

happens. And I know that I cannot take losing one of you, not to mention three. Right now I am petrified that I am going to lose you too.”

Brian was moved by Howie’s words. For the first time he began to see the effect that this disaster was having on all of them. His eyes filled again, and threatened to spill over.

“I have watched two of what I consider to be my own family fall to pieces right before my eyes. What you feel you do or don’t deserve doesn’t matter. You have what you have, and right now we are all we’ve got. Don’t let go of that. Ever.”

By the time the nurse came to fetch Howie, Brian looked much better. A little of his color had returned, and he seemed to be resting peacefully for the first time since the accident.

“How did you do that?” the nurse whispered incredulously.

“We’ve been together as a group for a long time,” Howie told her. “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

Chapter 10

Hand In Hand

It was two days before Brian was ready to get out of bed and see his friends. He had held it together just as he promised. He had not had another anxiety attack, and had focused all of his efforts on healing. Howie, who had progressed to using a cane to hobble around, had come to see him twice more. A.J. had decided to rest more before he attempted another venture out of his bed, claiming that Howie pounding around with his cane was keeping him awake all of the time.

When Dr. Westin came into the room to inform them of Brian's decision, he found Howie speaking with the band's manager.

"I'm feeling much better," Howie was arguing. "I may need a few more days, but I can handle a short press conference. They are our fans, and they're worried about us! They've been with us through this much, they deserve to know what's going on."

"Hold on there, Howie," Dr. Westin said sternly. Howie looked up guiltily.

"You need to consult me before you do anything like that."

"Sorry," he mumbled. Westin softened. To go through this kind of ordeal and still be thinking of everyone but himself took a big heart.

"Well, if its any consolation, I was going to have you discharged tomorrow afternoon."

"Really?" Howie asked, surprised.

"You've been doing very well, and there's no real reason to keep you here, as long as you get plenty of rest."

"Where would I go? I can't leave San Antonio while everyone else is still here."

"I suppose we could make some arrangements," he said slowly. "If you feel that strongly about it."

"There's not exactly anywhere around here that I could go without... crowd control."

"You do have a point. I'll see what I can do."

"When do you think I will be ready to hold a press conference? I'll wait until you say it's ok."

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "Let me tell you this. Brian has decided that it is time for him to go and see Nick and Kevin. That's why I came down here. He, of course, doesn't want to go alone, and I don't want him to either. He has been doing very well these past two days, and I think it will be ok, but he needs the support of his friends to do this. If

you are willing, I was going to let the two of you go with him up to ICU. After that, we will see how you feel.”

Howie was quiet for a moment at the news. It was A.J. that spoke up.

“Is there any change yet in either of them?”

Westin sighed. “I’m going to level with you. I am encouraged by Kevin’s condition; I think the odds are starting to look a little in his favor. But Nick is still a question mark. I need you to be prepared if he takes a turn for the worse. If he doesn’t wake up soon, he may never wake up. I want you to be prepared for that.”

“Have you told this to Brian?” Howie asked, a feeling of dread washing over him.

“No. And I’m not going to right now. It would do more harm than good.”

Howie glanced over at A.J., who was staring at his hands. He had been complaining about his ribs all morning. He hadn’t been able to get comfortable. Howie wasn’t sure if he wanted to come to see Kevin and Nick now or not.

“Are you up to it, Bone?”

“Yeah,” A.J. said, not looking up from his hands. He had begun to fiddle with his cast. He was nervous and worried. He had been trying hard not to think about Nick or Kevin, and to have it thrust upon him that Nick might very well die was difficult to deal with to say the least.

“How are your ribs?” Westin asked him.

“Fine,” A.J. lied. They had been bothering him off and on for the past few days, especially after his trip up to see Brian, but today in particular his chest had been aching non-stop.

“All right then. I will tell them to expect you up in ICU. They will try and clear the place out a bit. I’ll send for Brian, and then you can go up together.”

“How is he going to handle the wheelchair?”

“He probably won’t for too long. It will probably irritate his back a bit, and he will get tired a lot quicker than he thinks.”

“Then lets do this.”

On the way to ICU, A.J. found himself repeating some of their older lyrics over and over quietly to himself, almost subconsciously.

“Just roll with it... everything will be fine... just roll with it... its gonna be all right... just roll with it...”

Howie noticed, but said nothing. A.J. was looking ahead, waiting for them to bring Brian out. Howie had elected to walk up with his cane. A.J. began to fiddle with his IV tube, but a look from the nurse made him scowl and quit. Howie leaned over and spoke to him quietly so that the nurse wouldn't hear.

“How's your chest?”

“I'd like to chop off everything below my neck,” he replied. He thought for a moment. “I take that back,” he said. “The neck has to go too.”

Brian met them by the elevator. An oxygen tank accompanied him, for he still wore the mask around his nose, and an IV stand with two pouches hanging from it. He still looked like a nightmare, the cuts and bruises on his head and arms standing out strongly on his pale skin.

“B-Rok, you are one sexy man in that hospital gown,” A.J. said with a grin. He wanted to see Brian smile again. What he got wasn't quite what he wanted, but it was a start.

“Likewise,” he said with the faintest trace of a smile on his lips. Howie tried not to show his worry. In any other situation, Brian would have had a field day with that kind of comment. He never would have let A.J. get away with that.

Three security guards were escorting them to their destination, but had been informed by Dr. Westin that they were to wait at the door, and let them be alone inside.

“Are we ready for this?” Howie asked the other two. They both nodded, but Brian looked even more pale than usual. The elevator doors opened and Howie hobbled inside followed by his wheelchair bound companions. A.J. grimaced as he was rolled in.

“Watch the knee,” he muttered.

The elevator ride was silent until the doors opened on the floor that contained the ICU. A.J. exhaled slowly a breath he didn't even know he'd been holding.

“We're in this together,” Howie said aloud. “Let's not forget that. We're all in this together.”

He carefully exited the elevator, and was guided over to a room by one of the nurses who greeted them.

Brian was glad he was sitting, because he would have fallen otherwise. He was completely unprepared for what he saw. The nurse had brought them into Kevin's room. It was small, the bed taking up most of the room. His cousin lay perfectly still, his face as

white as the sheet he was laying on. His hands rested by his sides, and aside from the machines and tubes that seemed to be everywhere, he appeared to be sleeping peacefully. His head was bandaged, concealing all evidence of his dark brown hair. A cast covered his entire left leg, and Brian remembered the rod that was in his femur. An oxygen mask covered his face and nose, the overall effect eerily reminiscent of Brian's scenes from the video they had shot for "Show Me The Meaning Of Being Lonely." He shuddered. Howie approached him and placed his hand on Brian's shoulder.

"You all right?" Howie murmured softly.

Brian drew in a shaky breath and nodded, but it couldn't be farther from the truth. Surely this was a dream. Kevin was the strong one; Kevin was the one who held them all together. He looked out for them, got them to where they needed to be, kept them in line. He was the one they looked up to. He was Brian's own blood. This was *wrong*.

Brian reached out and took one of Kevin's hands, disturbed at how cool it felt. He recalled an image of Kevin throwing his heart out during their countless performances. He never failed to put his all into everything, and Brian was sure it was the only reason he was still breathing right now. Try as he may, he couldn't stop the memories from flooding him.

He remembered his cousin's shy smile and his determination to hold them together when things got bad. He really was like a father to all of them. And here he was, lying in a hospital bed, the machines around him feeding him whatever life he still clung to. He noticed the lack of scrapes and burns along his arms, and remembered that Kevin had never made it outside of the bus.

"Kevin?" he whispered, his eyes watering. "Kev, it's me, Brian. Can you hear me?"

"Keep talking, man." A.J. encouraged him. "I've read they can hear you when they're in a coma."

A.J. too looked shocked at what he was seeing, and his eyes were wet. The mischievous sparkle they had possessed earlier was nowhere to be found.

Brian continued to speak, a tremor in his voice. "Kevin, I'm here. So are Howie and A.J. And we're gonna be here when you wake up, too. So you'd better wake up soon, because..." he had to stop and get himself back under control. He had to keep control, for him, for Kevin, and for A.J. and Howie.

A.J. was forced to look away. He brought a hand up to his face, and rested his fingertips on the bridge of his nose, squeezing away tears. After a while, Brian was able to continue.

"Because this really sucks," he said finally. "I'm not sure how much longer we can do this without you. We need you back with us Kevin." He motioned towards Howie and A.J. "They need their big brother, and I need my cousin. Please get back here, *please*," he begged. He brought his free hand up to his face, and hid his eyes.

*Tell me why I can't be there where you are
There's something missing in my heart.
There's nowhere to run, there's nowhere to go
Surrender my heart body and soul...*

The words echoed inside Howie's head where he couldn't escape them. He'd always thought of his sister Caroline when he sang them, but now they were taking on an even deeper meaning.

The three of them stayed with Kevin for a little while longer, sharing in their grief and giving each other strength. A.J. firmly believed that none of them could have been there right then without the others. After a while, A.J.'s chest became too much for him to take on top of everything else. He leaned over and whispered to Howie, who made his way slowly over to a nurse. She and two others came to help them out. Brian was reluctant to leave.

"Promise me that if he shows any signs of waking up, someone will come get me," he said wearily.

"Of course," one of the nurses assured him. "Dr. Westin says that after you've rested awhile you can come up to see Nick if you like."

Brian didn't put up a fight. Howie offered to come back to his room and stay with him for a while.

"They are going to give A.J. some pain medicine that will put him out, so I would be more than happy to stay with you," he told him.

"I think I want to be alone," Brian replied, staring off at nothing.

"No you don't," Howie insisted. "You may not want to admit it, but it's the truth. I said we were in this together, and I meant it. I'm coming with you."

Brian was too exhausted to argue. Inwardly, he was grateful. Howie followed them into Brian's room, and pulled up a chair next to his bed, where he sat until Brian fell asleep. Before he drifted off, he directed his gaze to Howie.

"Thank you," he said sleepily.

"No problem."

"You know what?" Brian asked suddenly.

"What?"

"I want a basketball. That's all I want to do. Play basketball. Isn't that crazy?"

Howie had to laugh. “Yeah, life’s a bitch like that isn’t it?”

Chapter 11 ***Tomorrow, Forever, Together***

Several hours later, they were ready for an attempt to see Nick. A.J. looked a little spacey from his medication, but he sobered quickly when they reached Nick's doorway. Brian moaned softly at the sight before him. If Kevin had been bad, nothing prepared them for Nick.

If Brian hadn't been told that this was his best friend, he wouldn't have guessed. He looked incredibly frail, nothing like the 6'1" young man that he used to play basketball with and pull pranks with on the others. A long gash ran along the side of his face, disappearing under the white bandage that encircled his head. There was no color to his skin. A large bruise covered his right cheek, a startling contrast to his pale face. His chest rose and fell with the rhythm of the respirator, and there were more machines connected to him than Brian thought humanly possible. Nick seemed more machine than human, as if the machines were controlling every function of his body. Brian looked over at Nick's knee, which was locked in a brace. He remembered the shattered kneecap. Insanely, Brian wondered if he would be able to play basketball with him again with that knee. The room was eerily silent, and Brian resisted the urge to scream.

A.J. couldn't believe what he was seeing. This was not Nick. This couldn't be Nick. The Nick he knew was always laughing and joking, and so full of life. This looked like an empty shell. The respirator was what killed him. It looked like it should be choking him, but in reality it was what was keeping him alive.

He looked quickly up at Howie, who stared at their fifth group member, disbelieving. Brian placed his hand gently on Nick's arm.

"Nicky," he said softly, remarkably calm. "It's time to wake up. You need to come back to us. Do you hear me? Enough of the bullshit." The only response was the ticking of the machines surrounding them.

"We're all a little freaked here, man," A.J. added. "I know you like pranks but this one's a little over the top, don't you think?"

Howie managed a tiny smile. "Yeah, and I have to deal with A.J. as my roommate. The sooner you and Kevin get up the sooner I can get out of here."

"Don't listen to him, Nick, I'm a great roommate," A.J. told him. "He's just mad because I keep winning at cards."

Brian tried to smile at their light banter, knowing it was the kind of thing Nick needed to hear from them, but he couldn't join in. Instead, his face contorted, and he choked back a sob. The sound of the respirator seemed to be mocking him, and it was driving him mad. He kept telling himself to be strong, but it was so *hard*.

Howie saw that Brian was slowly losing control of himself, and thought quickly. He decided that if it could help A.J., it could help Brian, and maybe even Nick. Anything for them to concentrate on, besides how close to death Nick seemed to be.

*“Don’t wanna lose you now, oh no, I know we can win this.
Don’t wanna lose you now, no no, or ever again,”* he sang softly.

His voice was far from its best, but right then it didn’t matter. A.J. glanced at him in surprise, but quickly joined in.

“Don’t wanna lose you now,” Howie began again.
“Don’t wanna lose you now,” A.J. chimed in softly.
“I know we can win this,” Brian continued, surprising them both.
“Don’t wanna lose you now, or ever again.”

Brian took over, and although his pain and suffering showed clearly in every note he sang, it was still like a voice out of heaven.

*“I’ve got this feeling you’re not gonna stay, it’s burning within me
The fear of losing, of slipping away, it just keeps getting closer.
Whatever reason to leave that you have, Your place is right here beside us.
And I wish that I didn’t need you so bad, your face just won’t go away.”*

A.J. couldn’t help but think that if any of this helped Nick, it was that voice. *Follow it home,* A.J. thought.

*“Don’t wanna lose to loneliness,
I know that we can win,”* they all three sang together

*“Don’t wanna lose to emptiness,”
“Oh no, Never again.”
“Don’t wanna lose to loneliness,”*

“No way,” Brian murmured.

*“I know that we can win this.
Don’t wanna lose you now,
No no, or ever again.”*

A.J. finished for them.

“Don’t wanna lose you now,” he ended quietly, not caring that his throat and his ribs were killing him.

Had any of them noticed or cared, they would have found that everyone in the ICU had stopped and was staring at them. They were pleading for their friend’s life with the gifts that God had given them, and though they were far from top form, the melody had been

hauntingly beautiful. The sound was soft, lacking the power that they projected in their concerts. But the strength their hearts created behind their words took away the breath of anyone who could hear it.

Silence existed everywhere for a few moments, and a tear ran down the face of one of the nurses. Dr. Westin had been speaking with another doctor, but his full attention was now on the three Backstreet Boys. At that moment, he would have given anything to pull the other two young men through. The silence lasted for a few more moments until it was broken by the sounds of Brian's heavy sobs.

Brian folded his arms and rested them on Nick's bed and buried his head in them, shaking uncontrollably. Howie went over to him, doing his best to crouch down beside him. Brian felt his presence and put his head into Howie's shoulder, weeping shamelessly. A.J. had to turn away as his own tears fell; watching Brian fall to pieces was too much to bear. He looked so pale and weak, especially with the oxygen mask he still wore. One tap was all that was needed to make him shatter into a million pieces.

Howie looked up as a nurse approached them. He shook his head at her and raised a hand that told her to leave them alone.

Brian's sobs finally began to slow, and he tried to get a grip on himself.

"You know," he said after a while, searching for anything to make things seem somewhat normal again. "Maybe if we'd done 'If You Want It To Be Good Girl' he'd come around."

A slow smile spread across A.J.'s face. "That sure as hell would have gotten his attention," he said gruffly, trying to hide the fact that he had been crying.

When he was ready, all three were taken back to their rooms. This time A.J. offered to go in with Brian. Howie was grateful to him. There was no way he would have abandoned his friend, but he was exhausted and needed to lie down. He had not slept since early that morning. It was probably the best arrangement anyhow, A.J. looked as though he too needed the company. It made him feel better to give Brian his support; it was his way of dealing with it. He would rather focus on the others than to face his own grief.

"Bone?" Brian asked in a tiny voice.

"Yeah man?"

"What's going to happen if they die?"

"They aren't going to," A.J. said, harsher than he meant to.

"I keep trying to believe that," he said over a wave of emotion that was trying to get the better of him. "But did you see him? That's not Nick. That is not the Nick I know. God,

A.J. the four of you have been so much apart of my life, how am I supposed to live the rest of it without them?”

“I don’t know,” A.J. said with a tremble. “I don’t know Rok. The only thing I know is that you and me, and Howie, will do it together. No matter where you look, we’ll be there. I couldn’t do it any other way.”

“Me neither,” Brian said softly. “You know, if I had just one more day with them, I might be able to handle this. One more day.” He wrung his hands, a look of pure anguish contorting his face. “For Christ sakes Alex, he probably hates me right now! The last time I spoke with him I screamed at him and told him that I never wanted to see him again. If he dies, the last moment I will have had with him I told him he was worthless. I can’t live with that. Jesus, I can’t live with that.”

A.J.’s eyes stung as he watched his friend suffer. When he found his voice, he managed to choke out whatever solace he could find. “Brian, you know he knows better than that. Friends fight. Best friends fight. What you said may have hurt, but deep down he knows. You don’t have to tell him. That’s the beauty of the friendship y’all have. He just knows. No matter what, you’ve got his forgiveness. Even I know that. The question is, whether or not you can forgive yourself. You have to Brian. Howie and I need you, and we need you right now.”

Brian reached out and seized his hand, squeezing it as tightly as he could. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

“Thank God,” A.J. said with a weak smile. “No matter what happens, we stand together. If we do that, we can make it. I hope to God they are with us. But if they aren’t, we’ll get up and go on, and we’ll do it together.”

Brian nodded. “Together.”

As he watched Brian fall asleep, A.J. realized just how much worse he looked from that morning. Brian was a strong person, one they could all count on, but right now he was so badly broken that A.J. feared they wouldn’t get him back, despite the words he had just said. What if they weren’t strong enough? Angrily, he fought back the doubt and sought out some hope. Maybe after this last breakdown, Brian would be all right. He had to be. He couldn’t keep going on like this. None of them could. A.J. prayed silently for the countless time for Nick and Kevin to pull through, and for this terrible nightmare to end.

Chapter 12

Hats

When Brian woke up after a long sleep, he felt a renewed sense of hope. The hopelessness that had pervaded his soul ever since he had woken up seemed to have lifted, and although his usual sparkle had not yet returned, his eyes had regained a little of their luster. Life seemed to be returning to him, little by little. A.J.'s words stayed with him, and it was as if seeing Nick and Kevin, and shedding his tears had cleansed him somehow. Their undecided fate still tore at him, but knowing that A.J. and Howie were right by his side he felt he was better able to face it. Dr. Westin was amazed at this turnaround, but at the same time he was delighted.

When Brian's family arrived that morning, he was eager for their company.

"You look a lot better than yesterday," Harold remarked, pleased to see his brother up and alert. He had adjusted the bed so that he was in a sitting position, and smiled at them when they came in. Mrs. Littrell shed tears of joy when she saw him, for it was the first time that his smile had been genuine.

"Hey Mom," he said, chuckling a bit as she hugged him. "I feel a lot better," he told his brother.

"Ready to go out and play basketball?" Harold asked with a grin.

"Just bring me a ball. I was telling Howie that yesterday."

"We hear you went up to see Kevin and Nick yesterday," his father said.

"Yeah, I did."

They watched him worriedly, looking for his reaction. Brian sighed.

"I broke. It was really hard. But A.J. helped me realize that it was either pull through and be strong for them and myself, or lie down and die. And seeing A.J. and Howie in there with me, I knew that wasn't an option. I'm not exactly where I want to be yet," he added. "I'm pretty sure there are tears up there yet that are going to come out whether I like it or not. Amazingly enough I'm not dry yet," he said with a lopsided smile. "But I think I'll be ok. I just couldn't deal with it before."

"I'm just glad to have the old Brian back with us," his mother told him.

"I don't know if I'm all back in one piece," he admitted. "But I'm certainly not broken all over the floor. And actually, there are two people that swept me up that I need to thank."

Dr. Westin had sentenced A.J. to bed rest after another examination. He was unhappy with the healing of his ribs and his knee.

“You shouldn’t have been out of bed so much if your chest was hurting you this badly,” he’d said disapprovingly. A.J. had just shrugged at him. “Sorry,” he said, not sounding the least bit sorry.

“If you want to heal properly you need to cooperate,” he said sternly.

“I’ll tell you what,” A.J. said. “If you can get me my leopard print cowboy hat, I will cooperate with anything you say.”

Howie almost choked on the water he was drinking.

“What?” Dr. Westin asked, baffled at his request.

“Your *hat*?” Howie exclaimed.

“That’s right. I want my hat.”

Howie groaned. “Oh God, we’re in trouble now.”

“I’m not sure I’m following you,” Dr. Westin said.

“Ask my mother,” A.J. said. “She said she’d be here around noon. She’ll know.”

Westin stared at him for a moment, and then just shook his head. “I don’t believe this. It had to be the Backstreet Boys,” he muttered as he exited the room.

Howie burst out laughing after his departure, and then clutched his rib cage while making a face. “Ow!” he grimaced. “I cannot believe you!” he said, turning to A.J, who saw nothing unusual about his request.

“I haven’t been able to do my hair or dress in any of my clothes in over a week now. I’m tired of being a patient on their terms,” he said simply. “I’m stuck in these damn hospital gowns, I’ve got more injuries than I can count, several of which have messed with my tattoos, which needless to say really pisses me off, and I can’t even walk. I want something to be my way.”

“Whatever you say, A.J,” Howie said, deciding not to argue with him.

After that, A.J. decided to take another nap. Howie picked up a magazine to pass the time. He was surprised to see a picture of themselves on the cover. It hurt a little to see Nick and Kevin’s smiling faces. It was one of their “happy” photos where all five of them were grinning.

“Man, we are all over the news!” he said to himself as he browsed a few of the other magazines in the stack beside his bed. He couldn’t believe some of the outrageous stories that had been printed. “I have got to have that press conference and clear up some of this nonsense,” he muttered, disgusted. He abandoned the magazines and picked up a book. After awhile, he’d had enough of that too. *I’m so sick of doing nothing!* he thought to himself. “Maybe they will let me go up to see Nick and Kevin again,” he wondered aloud.

“Mind if I come with you?” a voice interrupted him. He looked up quickly to see Brian in his doorway, accompanied by Harold pushing his wheelchair.

“Brian! Wow, I wasn’t expecting to see you!” he said happily. “Damn, you look a lot better than yesterday.”

“Thanks,” he said, flashing a smile as he lowered his eyes, embarrassed. “I feel a lot better.” He hesitated, and looked down at his hands. “I’m not allowed to stay here too long, but I wanted to tell you and A.J. thank you.”

“B-Rok, you say it yourself. We are like a family. And we are always going to be there for each other. You don’t have to thank anyone.”

“Yes, I do. I should have been there for the two of you, and I wasn’t. All I could think about was myself. I’m sorry.”

“Brian, look at me,” Howie ordered. “You were thinking of Nick and Kevin. That’s who you were thinking about. Don’t talk nonsense.”

“Like I said before, I can’t argue with you Howie,” Brian said, although he still wasn’t convinced. He decided to change the subject. “I guess A.J. is snoozing,” he said, nodding toward A.J.’s bed.

“Yeah,” Howie chuckled. “He fell asleep after telling Dr. Westin that unless he got his leopard print cowboy hat he was going to quit being a good patient.”

“He *what?*”

“That’s what I said. I don’t know about you, but I think he’s slept long enough.”

“What are you proposing?”

“You are the king of practical jokes, what do you suggest?”

Brian smiled. “Well, I’ve got plenty, but I think he needs to heal a little more first.” He thought for a moment. “How about this,” he said, and cleared his throat.

*“Sometimes I wish I could, turn back time
Impossible as it may seem*

*But I wish I could, so bad, baby
Quit playing games with my heart,”*

Howie was grinning, and eagerly joined in.

“Quit playing games with my heart,”

“With my heart,”

“Before you tear us apart,”

“My heart,”

“Quit playing games with my heart,”

“I should have known from the start,”

“You know you gotta stop,”

“From my heart,”

“You’re tearing us apart,”

“Quit playing games with my heart,”

Howie yelped as A.J.’s pillow smacked him in the head.

“Oh baby, baby, the sleep that I had was so good,” A.J. growled along with the song. “And that *really* hurt my shoulder,” he complained, rubbing it. “God that sounded awful.” He snickered, and was thrilled when Brian joined in. Any irritation at being woken up vanished at the sight of Brian up and cheerful.

“You do,” Brian said with a smile. “I came to say thank you.”

“And since you have,” Harold said, “You are now going back to your room, or Mom will have my head.”

“What,” A.J. said with a lazy grin. “You couldn’t have waited until a reasonable hour of the afternoon to wake me up? It’s not even noon yet!”

Brian laughed. And honest to goodness laugh. Howie grinned in response and thwacked his stolen pillow against A.J.’s bed. “Go back to sleep Bone.”

“Make up your mind, will you? Geez,” he grumbled. “Give me back my pillow.”

Howie handed him the pillow. He would have thrown it, but was afraid that he would hurt him. Harold pushed Brian out of the room and back into the hall. A nurse walked by and grinned at him.

“If y’all keep singing like that, you are going to alert the fans to where you are,” she told him.

“Let them hear,” Brian said, waving his arm weakly. His excitement was starting to catch up to him, and he felt a little woozy. “I felt like doing some caterwauling.”

“I could tell.”

“Seriously. Let me music heal your soul, man. Woman,” he corrected hastily. Harold made as if to bat the back of his head.

“You touch me and I’ll have every teenage girl in this city on your ass,” Brian warned with a drowsy smile.

“You’re half asleep. You’d better stop talking before you hurt yourself.”

“Too late.”

“Well Brian is a relief,” A.J. said later after he’d had a satisfactory nap.

“What do you mean?” Howie asked distractedly. He was reading from yet another of the piles of get well wishes that had come from the fans.

“Well, you saw him earlier. Hell, he started *singing*,”

“We sang yesterday too,” Howie pointed out. A.J.’s face sobered.

“That was different,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, I guess it was.” He was quiet for a moment. “I guess seeing them and all did him a lot of good. I hoped it would.”

“Well, it is a relief. He was really starting to worry me.”

“Me too,” Howie admitted. “Oh,” he remembered suddenly, “Your mom said that she’s taken care of your hat, and it will be here soon.”

A.J. looked pleased. “Leave it to my mother. She can work miracles.”

“Can she work one on Kevin and Nick?” Howie asked without thinking. A.J. stared at him.

“Sorry,” he said hastily. “I shouldn’t have said that. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You’re forgiven, but only because I’m getting my hat.”

Chapter 13

Sentry

Brian was granted permission the following morning to go back up to ICU. He was given a nurse to chauffeur him around, and he had her bring him into Kevin's room. Ann Richardson was there with him. The nurse informed Brian that she had been by Kevin's side religiously since the accident. Seeing her now, she looked absolutely terrible. Brian wondered if she had even slept since it had happened. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her hands shook slightly. She had dropped by his room yesterday on a rare venture away from Kevin's tiny enclosure, but only briefly.

He spoke with her for a while and convinced her to go to her hotel and get some much needed rest, assuring her that he would stay in the ICU with Kevin and Nick until she returned. After she left, Brian came across Nick's mother for the first time since the accident. It was more difficult to see her than he was expecting. She gave him a hug, and told him how much better he looked.

"Thanks, but what I would really like is to get rid of this oxygen mask," he said, pointing to the tube that still encircled his head.

"Well, I'm sure they'll let you take it off soon." Jane Carter smiled at him, but it was a sad smile. Brian wanted to cry seeing her hurt so much, but he held it in.

"He's gonna be ok, Jane," Brian told her. "I know it. He will be."

"Thanks, honey," she said, ruffling his hair.

"Where's the rest of the Carter clan?"

"Bob was here with the kids, but they flew home yesterday. They couldn't miss any more school."

"I'll bet Aaron was pissed," Brian said with a chuckle.

"Yes, he was. I told them they could come back on the weekend."

"Tell them I want to see them when they do."

"I will," she said with a tiny smile.

Nothing had changed with either Nick or Kevin; they both looked the same as they had before. One of the doctors who had been in charge of Kevin came in to check on him, and Brian spoke with him for a little while about his cousin's condition. Dr. Westin had told Dr. Hite, Kevin's doctor, that Brian was going to be there, and to answer any questions he had. He showed Brian the machines that were connected to him and explained their purpose and what their readings meant. Brian concentrated on everything he had to say, wanting to be sure he could keep track of his cousin's

condition. For a moment he had almost been able to forget that it was in fact Kevin who was lying in that bed. It seemed too surreal. He just never even *moved*. No twitching from whatever he was dreaming, no shifting around to get more comfortable, no talking in his sleep. It was like he was a mannequin, something plastic and artificial, instead of his flesh and blood cousin whom he loved as a brother.

The same routine was repeated in Nick's room, although it took a little less time because he was already familiar with some of the devices he had just seen in Kevin's room. This time it seemed harder to deal with though. The respirator almost drove him crazy, that unending pattern that made Nick seem more like Darth Vader than Nick Carter. Brian wondered if he would ever be able to watch Star Wars again. "*He's more machine now, than man...*" He shivered as his mind recalled a line from the movie.

After the doctor left, Brian spent the time talking to Nick. He told him about everything that had happened, and what was going on now. The entire time he searched for any sign that Nick could hear him or understand him, but received none. The only response was the rhythmic sound of the respirator.

"Nicky, come on. I know you're in there," he said, frustrated.

Nothing.

"The press conference has been scheduled for tomorrow afternoon," Howie told Dr. Westin. "I think around four or so. The Marriott hotel on the Riverwalk is giving us the space, so I'll be going there."

"Why the Marriott?" Westin asked.

"That's where most of our families are, and it's where we stayed for the show that we did here." He shook his head. "Damn, that seems so long ago."

"I'll bet it does. Who is taking you over?"

"My mother has a rental. She's going to come and get me. My body guard is going to be there too," he added quickly when he saw Westin's doubtful look. "I may need help getting out of the building though."

"We can help take care of that. We've been keeping the emergency doors clear of people. You can have her pull up there, and we'll sneak you out that way."

"How many people are still out there?" Howie asked out of curiosity.

"As many or more as before," Westin told him.

"Wow."

“Yes. It is pretty impressive. We have gotten more get well cards and fan mail for you and the other four in the last several days than we know what to do with.”

“I’ve read some of them,” Howie said with a smile, indicating the pile of letters on the floor. “It’s great to know they care so much.”

“Well, we’ll get you out and then bring you back here, if that is what you want. There’s no real problem with you staying here with A.J. for now, we certainly wouldn’t put him in a room with someone else. That could be pandemonium.”

“Good. I want to stay here at least until the other two wake up,” he said. *If they wake up*, he thought silently. He refused to let the thought go any farther. Dr. Westin agreed to the plan.

After a rest, Brian went back up to the ICU. Westin was slightly concerned about the amount of time he was spending out of bed, but he seemed to be doing all right, so he allowed it to continue. The last thing he wanted was to take back some of the progress Brian had made.

When he was wheeled in, he greeted Kevin’s mother.

“Hey, Aunt Ann. I was gonna chat with my cousin for awhile.”

She smiled at him. “Sure Brian. He’d like that. I think he’s probably tired of hearing my voice. I’ll go run and get something to eat, and leave you two alone.”

“Yeah, go find my mother. She’s around here somewhere. Harold flew home last night, he had to go back to work.”

“I think I’ll do that.”

A nurse kept an eye on him from a distance as he chatted with Kevin. Brian read him an article from a magazine about themselves, his eyes watering only once. The nurse almost came in to take him out, but thought better of it. Brian quickly calmed and continued reading.

“We are all over the news, Kev,” Brian told him, one he had finished. “Howie’s going to hold a press conference tomorrow afternoon and try to set the record straight. A.J. and I want to go, but we’re still invalids. I know that you would want to go, but you kind of have to wake up first. Wake up, sleep walk, snore, something.” He sighed. “And another thing, Howie said he’s going to stay here in a room with A.J. even though he’s been given the ok to be released just because he wants to be around when you wake up. So if you don’t want those two to kill each other, you’ll open your eyes.” Brian stopped speaking

for a moment and glanced at a few of the monitors hooked up to Kevin. He frowned at one and called a nurse.

“Does that reading look a little off to you?” he asked. “It’s changed a little from what Dr. Hite showed me earlier.”

She examined the reading in question. “Nope, it’s all right. It’s still within the parameters that it was set for, but I can have Dr. Hite look at it if you’re concerned.”

“Would you?” Brian asked gratefully.

“Sure, no problem.”

Dr. Hite appeared shortly, and took a look at the data of several of the machines. “Everything’s normal,” he reported when he was done. “It was good of you to be concerned though,” he told Brian.

“Yeah,” Brian said, looking relieved.

“Over all, I think he’s looking better every day,” Hite confided to him.

“Really?” Brian asked, getting excited.

“I can’t make any promises, but we’re hopeful that he’s through the worst of it. The question that remains is whether or not there are any lasting effects from the head injury.”

Brian thanked him, and he left.

“Did you hear that, Kevin? You’re running out of excuses. You’re gonna have to wake up soon, so you might as well get it over with.”

He sat in silence with him for a while longer, trying to think of what to say. He remembered singing with Howie earlier, and realized that that had been the best he’d felt in a long time. Why not try it again? He drew in a deep breath and exhaled, and thought of a song.

“This one kinda seems appropriate. Just don’t get the wrong idea, ok? I’m not your lover.” He grinned, thinking it would have made Kevin laugh. Summoning his strength and his courage, he began to sing.

*“I try to pick the pieces up, and I can’t think of starting over,
We used to share the stars above,
I don’t wanna think of change
But now I’ve gotta move on
I’ve gotta catch up to the world.
Even though I gave you my life*

*As wrong as it seems, I know its right.
But is there a place that I can go away
To escape the love that I will forever know,
Where can we go from here
All I know is that I love you still.
Sometimes we do things against our will
I know I cry lonely tears,
Where can we go from here
Why, why do I cry inside for love that's gone away,
And how, how can I carry on
When I know all the love is gone,"*

Brian paused. He could have sworn that he saw Kevin's finger's twitch. He watched him carefully for a few moments, hoping against hope. Nothing happened. Trying to conceal his disappointment, he continued singing.

Once again, had he noticed, he would have found that everyone within earshot had grown quiet, and was listening to him. Including Ann, who had returned from the cafeteria. Her eyes welled up with tears as she listened. A nurse gently took her by the arm and led her away to sit down. Brian sang on, blissfully unaware of what was going on outside the room.

*"Tell me where can I go to get away from the pain of loving you
Tell me where
Where can we go from here
All I know is that I love you still
Sometimes we do things against our will
I know I cry lonely tears
Where can we go from here?"*

He held the last note, but broke it off abruptly. That time he was sure. Kevin had moved his hand. The movement was slight, but it was there. He had no doubt.

"Kevin?" he asked hopefully. "Kev, can you hear me? It's Brian. Come on, man. Wake up. I know you can hear me."

He searched Kevin's face for any sign that he could hear him. Sure enough, he saw his features contort slightly, and he groaned softly.

Brian's heart leapt into his throat. "Kevin! Come on buddy, I know you're in there."

Kevin's eyes fluttered slightly, and he took in a deep breath, flinching as he did so. He turned his head in Brian's direction.

"Brian?"

Chapter 14

Hope

Brian could not contain his excitement.

“Yeah man, it’s me. I’m right here Kev.” He signaled with his arm to anyone who might be nearby. Dr. Hite whispered to a nurse to tell her to get Mrs. Richardson.

“How do you feel?”

Kevin closed his eyes in a soft grimace. He was still ghastly pale.

“Terrible,” he managed to say, although it was hard for Brian to hear him. Ann Richardson hurried into the room.

“Kevin!” she gasped. “Oh thank God.”

“Mom?” Kevin asked, trying to focus his attention on her.

“It’s me honey. I’m here.”

Kevin said nothing for a moment, trying to sort things out in his confused brain. He refocused on Ann. “Why?”

Brian stifled a chuckle. “Cause she’s your mom, numbskull.”

“What happened?” He was genuinely lost as to what was going on.

“You were in an accident,” Brian said softly. “You and me, and Howie, A.J., and Nick. But you’re going to be ok, got that?”

Kevin nodded. “I’m so tired,” he murmured.

“That’s ok. You get some sleep. We’ll explain everything when you feel better, ok?”

Kevin nodded again, drifting off. Brian and Ann turned to Dr. Hite, brimming with enthusiasm. He motioned for them to move outside.

“Well,” he began with a smile. “Obviously, this is wonderful. He’s still got a long ways to go, but the fact that he was responsive to your questions and seemed to know who you were is fantastic news.”

Brian barely heard him. The joy of hearing Kevin’s voice again overwhelmed him.

“Can’t this thing go any faster?” Brian asked in irritation to the nurse who was pushing his wheelchair.

“We’ll get there, don’t worry,” she said, exasperated.

He drummed his fingers anxiously. He had to get to Howie and A.J. to tell them the good news. He pressed the oxygen tube up closer to his nose, feeling a bit short of breath. The nurse saw him.

“Whoa there,” she said, halting him. “Are you feeling ok?”

“I’m fine. Just get me to Howie and A.J.”

“How is your breathing? Are you short of breath?”

“Just a little, but I’m fine. Don’t *worry*,” he said when he saw her pointed look. “I am not going to pass out!”

“You can tell the good news to your friends, but then you are going to your room and resting.”

“But what if he wakes up again?”

“Then his mother and Dr. Hite or Dr. Westin can talk to him. You are going to rest.” He scowled at her. “It’s my way or no way,” she said firmly.

Brian caved. “Fine. Let’s *go* already.”

Howie and A.J. were playing cards. A.J. was feeling particularly well that afternoon, after sleeping half of the day away.

Howie had taken that opportunity wander around a bit. He’d stopped up to see Kevin and Nick earlier in the day, but Dr. Westin hadn’t approved of his wanderings. Despite all of the extra security, he was concerned Howie would be spotted by the wrong people and get mobbed. So, he had come back to his room, and was thankful when A.J. woke up and felt like being ‘active.’ The fact that he had received his hat, which he was now proudly displaying, had put him in a much more cheerful mood than before.

“I win again,” he said with a cocky grin.

“That’s because you cheat,” Howie retorted.

“Hey,” A.J. warned. “I can have you tossed out of here on your ass, you know. You don’t have to be here. *You* are my guest.” He put large emphasis on the ‘you,’ removing his hat and pointing at him with it. Howie didn’t get a chance to reply because Brian appeared, breathless in their doorway.

“He’s awake!”

“What?” they both exclaimed.

“Kevin’s awake!”

“Shit, that’s great!” A.J. cried, jerking forward. He scrunched up his face when his ribs objected to his action. “Ouch, *damnnit!*”

“When?” Howie asked, getting carefully out of his chair.

“Just a few minutes ago. He opened his eyes, and he knew who I was.”

“That’s incredible! When can we see him?” Howie yelled.

“Well, he’s sleeping now. I don’t know when he’ll wake up again. Ask Dr. Westin.”

“Oh this is great,” Howie said breathlessly. “Now if only we could get Nick to come around...”

The next afternoon, Howie prepared to leave for the press conference. His trip out to the hotel went more smoothly than they expected, considering everyone had heard about the press conference, and knew that Howie would be leaving the hospital.

Sure enough, there were cheers and squeals from excited fans as he was escorted out, but security kept them back a good distance. He reached the hotel in one piece, where familiar faces from the record company were waiting to escort him inside. He shook hands with the people he knew, and they told him how happy they were to see him up and about. He had received flowers from most of them, as had all of the others.

“Give us a few more minutes to get everyone settled out there, and then we’ll get this thing started,” someone told him.

“No problem,” Howie said, and walked over to a chair with the help of his cane. “Just make sure I’ve got some water out there, and make sure everyone knows this needs to be on the short side. I promised my doctor I wouldn’t overdo it.”

When they were ready for him, someone came to help him out to his seat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Howie Dorough of the Backstreet Boys.”

Chapter 15

One Voice

As soon as he walked out onto the stage where the conference was set up, flashes went off everywhere, and voices began buzzing excitedly. Howie squinted under the intensity of the flashes. He waved his free hand at the crowd.

“Hi everybody,” he said, taking his seat. Once he was settled, he adjusted the mike to speak.

“Before we start this, let me just say thank you for coming. All of us really appreciate all of your prayers and support. You’ll have to excuse all my bumps and bruises, I know I don’t look my best, but that is why we are all here today. And I’m sure they’ve already told you this, but we need to keep this kind of short, because I’m going to tire out pretty easy. Please keep that in mind. I want to answer as many of your questions as I can, but I also don’t want to pass out up on this stage or something equally embarrassing.” He smiled a little, and got a few chuckles in response.

He scanned the crowd and saw several familiar faces from the reporting world, including VJs from Much Music and MTV UK, and John Norris from MTV.

“Well, who has the first question?” He pointed to someone in the crowd.

“What is the condition of your fellow band members, as well as yourself?”

“Well, “ Howie began, “As you can see, I’m doing pretty well. I have a fractured foot, that’s why I’ve got the cane, and a broken arm here, but other than that I was pretty lucky. I don’t have any injuries that won’t heal.” He paused. “Umm, A.J. McLean is doing pretty well now, he’s awake more and more during the day. We are sharing a hospital room, and we play cards and stuff when he’s not sleeping. He’s pretty happy right now, he has one of his hats with him now that he wears all of the time that drives the nurses nuts. He’s got some broken ribs, broken hand, and some whiplash. But he’s going to be fine, he just likes to complain.

“As for Brian, well, he’s doing a lot better. We were pretty worried about him for a while, he took everything really hard, and he had some complications, but he’s doing a lot better now. Both of them wished that they could be here, but physically they aren’t ready yet.”

Howie paused to take a sip of water.

“Some of the best news I have to say hasn’t been released to the press yet so I’m very happy to be the first to tell you that Kevin regained consciousness for the first time yesterday afternoon.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd at this news. Once they had quieted, Howie went on.

“Brian and Mrs. Richardson were there when it happened, and he knew who they were and was responsive to their questions, so that is really good. He’s been in and out I hear, usually up for a couple of minutes at a time, but we are, needless to say, thrilled to have him back with us. So we’ll keep you updated with his progress.”

“What about Nick Carter?”

Howie glanced down for a moment. “Unfortunately I don’t have such good news about Nick. He is still in the ICU in critical condition. We don’t know when or if he is going to come out of the coma, so we need everyone out there to pray for him, and for the rest of us.”

“What are his odds of survival?”

“I haven’t asked that question, and even if I had I don’t feel it’s necessary to say that here. That’s private information.”

“What happened the night of the accident?”

“Well, none of us remember it at all. I remember being on the bus that night, but I don’t remember the accident itself at all. Neither do the others. Brian and A.J. don’t even remember doing the show that night. But what we have been told is that a trucker lost control of his vehicle and sideswiped us. Brian, A.J. and I were thrown out the windows, and Kevin and Nick were trapped inside when the bus rolled. I’d say we need to thank the Lord above that we came out of it as well as we have.”

“Are the Backstreet Boys still a group? Or is this going to be the end?”

Howie drew in a deep breath. “Wow. That’s quite a question. That is going to be hard to answer without giving the wrong impression, but here I go. We really haven’t even thought about it. The only things on our minds have been to heal and get better and to be there for each other. We all believe that Nick and Kevin will recover just fine, but we really don’t know for sure right now. As for what the future holds for the Backstreet Boys, I really don’t know.” He cracked a smile. “I can tell you, pretty confidently that touring won’t happen for awhile, considering none of us are itching to get out on the dance floor any time soon.”

“What has been the effect of this tragedy on all of you? How are you holding up?”

“Well,” Howie said slowly. “It’s been very, very hard. I was the first one to wake up after it happened, and I’m not ashamed to say that I cried like a baby when they told me what happened. A.J. and Brian and I have really had to lean on each other for support. Like I said before Brian took things very hard. But we’re starting to come around. We’re very positive now, especially since Kevin woke up. A.J.’s starting to get a little restless I think, he’s been trying the patience of a few of the nurses. Brian and I even pulled a little bit of

a joke on him yesterday. We've even done a little singing here and there. So, we're coming around."

"What do you have to say about the response of the fans to your accident?"

"Oh man, I can't say enough. We are so thankful to them for their love and support through our time of need. There have been people outside the hospital all of the time, we've gotten thousands of cards and letters from our fans. I on behalf of the others want to offer our sincerest thanks to them for that, and I would also like to ask for their continued prayers. I have no doubt those prayers are why we are still here."

"Has there been any incidents with any of your fans getting out of control?"

"Not that I know of," Howie replied. "The hospital has been absolutely wonderful in looking out for all of our health and safety, I cannot thank them enough for all they have done for us. Under the circumstances we've done very well."

"How long do you estimate everyone's total recovery time to be?"

"To be honest, I have no idea. I think it's still too early to tell. Brian has been carting around in his wheelchair, but he's not in any shape to walk yet, and actually I believe his doctor is a little unhappy with him being up and about so much, but he wants to be with Nick and Kevin. And he can be really stubborn, so right now he's having his way. A.J. was moving around a little bit earlier in the week, but his injuries were aggravated by it, so he's back to bed rest. You can imagine how unhappy that makes him. And I can't even begin to tell you about Kevin's recovery. I haven't been able to talk to him at all yet."

"Will any of the others be making any public appearances once they are released from the hospital?"

"That would be up to them. Like I said before, A.J. and Brian wanted to be here with me today, but they aren't strong enough yet, and I myself had to kind of talk my doctor into letting me do this."

John Norris stood up to ask a question. "How do you like San Antonio so far?"

Howie chuckled at the question. "Please don't make me laugh, it hurts my ribs."

"I'll try my best," he replied.

"In answer to your question, I find this to be a lovely city. Unfortunately, the only look I've gotten of the Riverwalk is what I saw on my way here. I hope to get a chance to look around a bit before we end up going home."

"I have another question for you if you don't mind Howie," Norris spoke up again.

"Ask away."

“MTV has gotten a lot of calls from your fans wondering how this accident was going to affect the release of your next single.”

“That’s an interesting question. No one has mentioned anything about it to me; I haven’t done much in the way of business recently, for obvious reasons. I would like to know the answer to that myself.”

Someone leaned over and whispered something to him. Howie spoke into the microphone.

“I have just been told that the release of the new single will be put on hold until some of this blows over a bit. Unfortunately for us and for you at MTV, we can’t promise you a video. We were scheduled to do some shooting for it after the tour ended, but all of that has been chucked in the garbage for right now. Next question? One or two more and I think we need to call it a day.”

“Do you have a message for your fans?”

“Ah, yes I do. I, speaking on behalf of the Backstreet Boys would like to say thank you for your past, present and future support of us and our music. We love you, and we need you now more than ever, and we are going to do the best we can to get better and get back in the game. I hope you can be patient and give us the time we’re going to need. We love you all, and we haven’t forgotten you.” Howie glanced to the person sitting next to him and nodded, signaling he was ready to go.

“Ok, ladies and gentlemen. Howie needs to get back and get some rest. Thank you for coming, I hope he was able to answer most of your questions.”

There were only mild protests as Howie was escorted out of the hotel. He collapsed into the car with a sigh of relief. “Dr. Westin was right,” he told his mother. “I still have a ways to go.” He used the back of his hand to wipe off the few beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead. “But at least its been done. I feel better having gotten the story straight with the public.”

Mrs. Dorough smiled at her son from the driver’s seat. “I’m proud of you. That wasn’t an easy thing to do. Certainly no one expected you to go out there and do that when you still aren’t physically healed yet.”

“Maybe they didn’t expect it, but they deserved it. We’ve gotten where we are because of the fans, Mom.”

“I know. You say that all the time. That’s why I’m proud of you.”

A.J. was asleep when Howie returned, but cracked open an eye when he entered their room.

“Howie D. I saw you on TV,” he muttered sleepily.

“How did I do?”

“Better than I would’ve.”

“You would have fallen asleep in the middle of it.”

“I know.”

Howie sensed that there was something wrong, he could see it in his friend’s eyes, but he said nothing.

“Have you gone to see Kevin yet?”

“No. They said he woke up twice today, and actually stayed awake for about ten minutes or so the last time. They still haven’t told him what happened.”

“Was Brian there?”

“Naw, Dr. Westin imprisoned him just like he did me. They didn’t like his respiration and he busted open a few of the sutures on his back with all of his moving around. Besides, he’s got to be hurting all over the place. He was more screwed up than I am, and *I* don’t want to get out of bed. He’s pissed though, of course.”

“Naturally.”

A.J. grew quiet all of the sudden.

“What is it?” Howie asked, his concern mounting.

“I’ve got some bad news.”

“Is it Nick?” Howie asked immediately.

“Yeah.”

“Oh God, Nick’s dead,” Howie said growing pale. A torrent of thoughts loosed themselves inside of his head, making him dizzy. *No, no, no, no, no. Nick’s not dead, Nick can’t be dead, we’re all going to walk out of here, together, the five of us. Nick can’t be dead...*

“Damn, Howie, sit down for chrissakes,” A.J. said, alarmed. Howie fumbled for a chair and sat down heavily.

“No, Nick isn’t dead, but we need a miracle and we need it now.”

“What happened?”

A.J. refused to look at him.

“A.J., I swear to God, you’d better tell me what the hell happened...”

He looked hurt at Howie’s tone, but answered. “They are taking him off the respirator. If his systems don’t kick in and take over when they do, they say he’s going to die,” he said softly.

Howie was dumbstruck. “*What?* Then why the hell are they doing it?”

A tear rolled down A.J.’s face. “It was Jane’s decision. She said she doesn’t want him to live like this, and the doctors said that if he doesn’t come around on his own than he won’t come around at all.”

“I don’t understand why they would do this,” Howie said in small voice. He sounded almost like a child. It was so unfair, earlier today things had been looking so bright.

“You know Nick wouldn’t want to live off of a respirator, Howie. It’s the last thing he would want. It wouldn’t be fair to force him to continue to live like that.”

Howie just shook his head, unable to speak.

“The doctors say he still has a chance, but not to get our hopes up.”

“Does Brian know?” he mumbled.

“No, they haven’t told him. Westin is afraid of what he’ll do.”

“No shit...” he put his heads in his hands, searching for control. He felt A.J.’s hand reach over to rub his back.

“We’ve got to have faith, D. He can still win this.”

“When are they doing it?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Chapter 16

The Dream

A.J. and Howie were both present when Brian was informed of the Carter's decision. His reaction was about what they expected.

"No!" he screeched. "They can't do that! Not to Nick! They *can't!*"

"Calm down Brian," A.J. started to say.

"*Shut up, A.J. Just shut up,*" Brian yelled hoarsely. "How can you let them do this?"

"It's out of our hands," Howie said quietly.

"How dare you call yourselves his friends! How *dare* you!"

Brian's harsh words were like a punch in the stomach for both of them. A.J. looked ill, as if his words had physically assaulted him. Howie could swear that he actually heard the air rush out of his lungs. He rested a hand on his shoulder. A.J. trembled a little at his touch, but Howie sensed that he needed to feel his presence. *If we don't stand together, we'll all fall,* Howie thought.

"Take it easy Brian, you aren't doing anyone any good. Don't say something you'll regret. We're hurting as much as you are!" he said desperately.

Brian lunged forward at him, a look of pure hatred burning in his eyes. The emotion was so foreign coming from him that Howie and A.J. actually backed away. It was hardly necessary, because Brian didn't get very far. He cried out in pain and doubled over, his breathing taking on that sickeningly familiar wheezing sound. Dr. Westin cleared the room. Howie was terrified, but even as he was gently shoved out of the room, he knew that Brian's reaction was not one that he meant. They couldn't lose each other now. He called back over his shoulder.

"Brian, we aren't going to abandon you, or him, no matter what you do or say. But think about Kevin! He's going to want you to be there when he gets back with the program, and what are we going to tell him? Nick too, Brian. He can still make it. Don't do this to yourself!"

Once out in the hall, Howie slammed his fist against the wall.

"Easy," A.J. said dully.

"Is he going to be all right?" Howie asked when a nurse exited the room.

"He'll be fine. We sedated him before it got too bad. But he is going to be awfully sore tomorrow; all that movement was not good for him. He did have surgery just a few days ago."

“I can’t believe this,” A.J. said miserably, pulling his hat down over his face as far as possible. “This can’t be happening.”

“It is,” Howie said grimly. “And right now there is nothing we can do about it.”

Kevin stirred again, and forced his eyes open. He felt someone squeeze his hand, and looked over to see his mother.

“Mom,” he murmured.

“Hi honey. How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “Tired. Where’s Brian?”

“He’s not here right now,” she told him. “He’s sleeping now.”

“Is he all right?”

“Yeah, honey. He’s ok.”

“He was here before, wasn’t he? Or was that a dream?”

“No, it wasn’t a dream. He was here. He’s been so worried about you.”

“Why?”

“Because you were in an accident. You’ve been badly injured. Do you remember that we told you that you were in an accident?”

“I... I think so. Where are the others?”

“A.J. and Howie are on another floor. They’re ok. They will be here to see you soon. They’ve been pretty worried about you too.”

Kevin was still a little too out of it to realize that Ann had said nothing about Nick.

“What’s wrong with me?”

“You have a broken leg, and your head got knocked around in the wreck, so you may be a little foggy for a while, but that’s ok. You are probably pretty sore, you’ve had three surgeries.”

“Sounds like fun,” he said softly. “Can I see Brian?”

“Not right now, Kevin. He’s in bed, and the doctor doesn’t want him to get up to see anyone right now.”

“Is he ok?”

“Yes honey, he’s ok. I told you that already, do you remember?”

“Oh,” was all he said. “When can I see him?”

“I don’t know. I’ll make sure he comes to see you whenever the doctors say that it’s ok. How’s that?”

“That’s ok,” Kevin agreed. He moved his head back so he was staring at the ceiling again. “Why am I so tired?” he asked.

“You’ve been through a lot. Your body needs to rest as much as it can so you can heal.”

“I wish I could talk to Brian,” Kevin said again.

“Let me go ask the doctor,” Mrs. Richardson said finally.

“Ok.”

A few minutes later she came back, with the same answer she’d already been giving him. Kevin was already asleep.

“This is normal for right now,” Dr. Hite told her. “He won’t be fully awake for a few more days yet. Just give him time and bear with him. Answer his questions and keep telling him what happened. It’ll sink in eventually.”

The Carters were gathered around Nick’s room. Robert had flown in with all of the kids, and they all waited tearfully for the doctors to remove Nick from the respirator that forced him to breathe. A.J. and Howie were there too, as was Brian (under heavy sedation) against the wishes of Dr. Westin. His eyes were slightly glazed, but he was still in tears. Howie stood behind A.J.’s wheelchair. When the doctor came in, A.J. reached backwards and grabbed his hand. This action surprised Howie, because it was very un-A.J. He realized then that despite the fact that his friend could put up an amazing front, he was just as torn up on the inside as he was. A.J. may have seemed all right, but he was just as close to the edge of the cliff as the rest of them.

“I would like to remind you all, that this does not mean we are going to lose Nick,” Hite told them all somberly. “If he starts breathing on his own right away, he has a very good chance. It’s all up to him now.”

The tension in the room was thick enough to be cut with a knife. A.J. and Howie craned their necks to be able to see what was going on. Even Dr. Hite looked nervous. Nick's chest did not move. Howie looked away, his eyes bright. They were going to lose him. They were really going to lose him. Brian wept. The control that he thought he had gained just two days ago was gone. He had been wrong. He couldn't face this. This couldn't happen. It just couldn't. He was losing his best friend. Nick was right there, slipping away, and Brian could do nothing to keep him here. He would have reached out and grabbed him, forcing him to stay if he could. He looked over at Howie and A.J., envying their strength. They were upset, but they could keep it together. He could not. Why the hell couldn't he? *Why?*

Nick, he thought bleakly. *Don't give up. Prove them wrong. You have to. You can't leave.*

Nick was dreaming.

He was in a tunnel. He didn't like to be in that tunnel, and he looked around him for the way out. In one direction, he could feel sunlight. It wasn't normal sunlight; there was something different about it. Something special. It drew him, and he wanted to go to it. He turned and headed in its direction, but a sound stopped him. He could hear someone crying.

Brian? He thought, incredulous. He never saw Brian cry, but he was sure that it was him. *What on earth could be wrong?*

His friend's voice was coming from the other end of the tunnel. But that end frightened him even more than being in the tunnel did. He was closer to the sunlight, and there was nothing fearful about it. He wanted to go there. But Brian was crying! Even though he felt peace radiating from where he stood, the grief and loneliness that his best friend was trying to hold inside drilled a hole into his heart. The heavy emotions that Brian bore flooded into Nick through that hole, and he shrieked at the awesome power it had. It assaulted him from every angle, overpowering him. He collapsed, struggling in vain to writher away from the agony that was battering him with no signs of mercy.

Brian! he screamed. *Help me! Make it stop!* The pain was going to destroy him!

When he was sure he could take no more, the light from his end of the tunnel seemed to shine brighter, wrapping him up in a warm blanket. The pain ebbed slowly away and he lay on the ground, relishing in the warm light that cleansed the pain away.

Something whispered to him to stand. Weakly, and with great effort, he pulled himself up to his knees. He could still see Brian at the far end of the tunnel. He too began to cry when he realized that his friend still suffered from the unbearable torture that Nick had just felt. He had to get to him. He had to help him.

Nick shuddered. Going to him would mean walking through the tunnel. Deep down he knew the pain would get worse the farther he walked. He began to doubt himself. He couldn't do it.

You can't leave.

Leave? Why couldn't he? The way out was right there. It would be so easy.

He cried out all of the sudden. His chest felt tight. He couldn't breathe. He turned back to the light end of the tunnel. It was so safe. He knew that the sudden pain in his chest would go away if he went there. But Brian was crying! Brian was *hurting*.

(Why? What could have possibly happened to him to make him suffer so much?)

Where were the others? A.J., Howie, and Kevin should be there to help him. Where were they? Brian needed them! Nick was getting desperate. He had to find out what was wrong with his friend, but he was terrified to make the journey.

He struggled to draw in a breath. It was almost impossible. He turned toward the sunlight, making up his mind. He just couldn't do it. The others couldn't be far away. They would help him. He just couldn't do it.

All of a sudden though, he heard the voice call his name.

Nick.

He stopped and turned.

Nick.

It was Brian. He was sure. Then in horror he realized, Brian was crying for *him*.

Why? Nick wondered. *Doesn't he know that I am ok?*

He turned and ran down the tunnel, gasping for the air that his body refused to take in. He had to get to Brian to tell him that he was all right, even if it killed him. It *was* going to kill him, he realized all too quickly. He staggered and almost fell, as the hole Brian's pain had opened in his heart was ripped back open, allowing even more to invade him. It infected his very soul, tearing him apart with a fury that the devil himself could not reproduce.

No! he screamed. He wanted to lie down and die, right then. But Brian's suffering face filled his hazy thoughts, and the knowledge that he was the only one who could ease his best friend's misery gave him a new strength. He kept his feet and tried to run.

As he ran, he found that he couldn't pick up any speed. Actually, he was slowing down. He was desperate for a breath, and the pain he felt was crushing him. Now he was scared to death. He had to make it. *He had to!*

I'm coming, Brian!

He pushed harder towards the end of the tunnel. He wanted to collapse it hurt so bad, but he forced the desire to fall from his head, refusing to give in. Unfortunately, what pathetic strength he had was fading quickly. The only sound that filled his ears was the sound of Brian crying. He reached the end of the tunnel, and stared out into the abyss that yawned in front of him. There he finally saw his friend, helpless in a wheelchair, his head buried in his hands as he cried softly. He looked as if he'd lost his best friend in the world.

But I'm your best friend, he thought miserably.

He wasn't going to make it. The pain was waiting for him, taunting him. The price of this journey was going to be higher than Nick was going to be able to pay, and he was afraid. But he had to help Brian. With his last ounce of strength, he threw himself into the abyss, and the blanket of pain and suffering had him caught, and wrapped him up tight.

All of the sudden, Jane gasped.

Howie whirled back around, hoping against hope. Sure enough, Nick's chest rose and fell, his own body taking over the job of putting air in his lungs. A.J. started to cry with relief.

"Thank you God," Howie murmured to himself. "Thank you." He looked over at Brian.

"Brian," he called to him. "*Brian!*"

Brian raised his head slowly.

"Look! He's breathing. *Look damn it!*"

Brian turned his head to where Nick lay. He couldn't believe his eyes. Nick was alive. He wasn't awake, but he was alive. Brian cried out with joy. Hite smiled at them.

"Now we have to wait and see if he decides to wake up any time soon."

Brian, Howie, and A.J. were sent back to their rooms to rest. All three were worn out, and Brian looked on the verge of collapse. He was uneasy about leaving, but Westin told him not to expect anything from Nick until at least the next morning. Reluctantly, he was taken back to his room. Sleep came much quicker than he was expecting.

Chapter 17

One Small Miracle

Brian woke up around ten the next morning. Horrified that he had slept for over sixteen hours, he called for a nurse.

“I need to go up and see Nick,” he informed her.

She sighed. “Dr. Westin would rather that you stay put.”

“Everything is still all right with him, isn’t it?”

“Yes, he’s still around, don’t worry.”

Brian breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, I would really like to go see him.” He hoped that pitiful pleading would win her over.

“Actually, your friend Kevin has been asking for you. Would you like to go and say hello to him? Perhaps after that you can swing by and pop in on Nick.”

Brian looked eager. “Yes, that sounds great.”

As he was eased into the wheelchair, he had to bite his tongue to keep from crying out. His muscles, his ribs, and his back screamed in protest. He leaned heavily on the nurse as she got him seated.

“That all right?” she asked him.

“Yeah,” he managed to say.

She wheeled him up to the ICU and over to Kevin. He was sleeping, of course. Brian glanced back at the nurse for help on how to proceed.

“You can wake him up. It’s all right. He will be happy to see you.”

Brian nodded at her, and she stepped out to give them some privacy.

“Yo, Kevin,” Brian called softly. “Train, it’s me.”

Kevin stirred a bit and then opened his eyes.

“Hey, Bri,” he said drowsily. “It’s about time you showed up.”

“I came when I could, cuz.”

“Where’ve you been?”

Brian cracked a smile. “A.J. was having all of the fun causing trouble for the doctors and nurses so I thought I’d try my hand at it.”

“You’re causing trouble?” Kevin asked him. Brian was thrilled to see him looking so much more alert than he had before.

“Yeah,” he said, smiling and dropping his eyes.

“Well don’t get into too much trouble, cause whenever I get up I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Glad to hear it. Damn, you sound a lot better than the last time I was in here.”

“You came to see me?” Kevin asked, frowning a bit, trying to concentrate.

Brian’s face fell. “Yeah, I did. When you first woke up.”

“Oh.”

“Do you remember?”

“I don’t know what the hell I remember,” he whispered, looking upset.

“Hey man, chill out. It’s ok. You banged your head real good. Probably killed off your last three brain cells. Give it time, everything will come back to you.”

“Do you know what happened? Do you remember?” Kevin asked hopefully.

“No, I don’t remember,” Brian confessed. “But they told me what happened.”

“Will you tell me? I can’t remember if they told me before.”

“Sure. Sure I’ll tell you. Umm, well, a rig on the highway leaving San Antonio sideswiped us. A.J., Howie and I got thrown out of the bus, we went out through the windows-”

Kevin’s eyes went wide. “What?” he said hoarsely. “Are you all ok?”

Brian smiled at him. “We’ve been better. But we’re going to be ok. Howie’s doing great right now. A.J.’s going to be fine, and I’m going to be fine. We’re ok. We’re better than you are,” he added.

“Good,” he breathed out.

“And you and Nick were stuck in the bus. The bus rolled, and you two got thrown around.”

Kevin thought hard for a moment. “Nick?”

Brian's eyes watered a little. "Yeah. You and Nick were together."

"Where is he?" Kevin's eyes were wide and full of concern. He looked so vulnerable, Brian was afraid to tell him the truth. Kevin was always the rock; he was the one they all looked up to. If he fell apart, as far as Brian was concerned it was over.

"He's not doing so good, Kev."

"Oh no..."

"Hey, hey. Don't flip out on me. That's my job," Brian said. "We got a small miracle from him yesterday. He'll come around. He always proves everyone wrong. This time won't be any different."

Brian wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He wanted to believe his own words so badly. But deep in his heart he was terrified. He wasn't sure if he could deal with losing Nick. He took Kevin's hand and squeezed it, and smiled when he felt Kevin's weak grip try and squeeze back.

After a while Kevin drifted back off to sleep. Brian stayed by his side the entire time, although his entire body was aching so badly he had to use every ounce of strength to stay upright. His face was white when the nurse came for him.

"Ok, that's it. You are going to go back to your room. Right now."

Brian protested weakly, but wound up gasping in pain.

"Come on," she said urgently. She hurried him back and had Dr. Westin come in to see to him.

"I should have put my foot down," he said angrily. "I should not have let you up."

"Kevin needed me," Brian whispered, his face pale and drawn.

"You are staying right here until you are strong enough to leave. Do you understand?"

Brian nodded slightly. "Yeah."

A.J. flipped on the radio, feeling restless. He caught the end of a song, and waited for the next one to start. To his surprise, his own screech filled the room as 'Larger Than Life' came over the airwaves. Howie too looked up, surprised.

"Damn. The thought of doing that song right now is downright painful," A.J. remarked.

Howie flinched a little at the sound of Nick's voice as he took over his verse. "Do you think we'll ever be able to sing it again?"

"Of course we will," A.J. said, giving him an odd look. "Why wouldn't we?"

"No reason," Howie said listlessly. News of Brian's regression had sent him into a depression. "I want to go and see Nick," he said suddenly.

"Ok," A.J. agreed, surprising him. "Let's go."

A little while later, they were in Nick's room. They took turns chatting with him, telling him about what was going on, and lecturing him about letting Brian get so upset.

"Nicky, I'm telling ya, you'd better snap out of this and whoop B-Rok back into shape. He's causing more trouble here than I am, and that's just not fair."

Howie chuckled. "No kidding."

A.J. glanced up at him. "What do you think we should do?"

Howie was about to answer when A.J. held up his hand. He looked over towards Nick.

"What is it?" Howie asked, excited.

"Look," A.J. said softly. A small sound filled the room. A.J. and Howie stared at each other wordlessly, and then looked back at Nick.

"Oh my God," A.J. whispered.

"He's *crying*," Howie said.

"Quick, go get someone," A.J. hissed. Howie hobbled out of the room to find a doctor. A.J. reached over and took Nick's hand reassuringly. "Nick. Nicky. It's A.J. Wake up man, quit crying. I know you want to stay asleep but we need you to open your eyes. It's hard, I know. But you can do it," his voice was calm and comforting, far from what he was feeling on the inside. He wanted to take Nick by the shoulders and shake him.

"Come on, Nick. Do this for me. Do it for Brian."

Nick's crying was louder now. His face was contorted and he looked as though he was trying to wriggle away from something. A.J. thought he saw his mouth move, and leaned over to try and hear him.

"No," he murmured almost inaudibly.

"Come on, yes. You can do it," A.J. argued. "Don't fight with me on this one." His crying was louder still. Suddenly his eyes came open, and suddenly he was sobbing

uncontrollably. He gasped and moaned in pain. A.J. watched, helpless, as writhed in agony, trying to escape the hurt he was feeling, which only served to bring him more. A painful cry tore out of his mouth, tears wetting his cheeks. He gasped in anguish.

“God, somebody help him!” A.J. called over his shoulder.

Dr. Hite came in just then, and immediately saw to their friend. After several moments, Nick’s tears slowed down and then stopped. All that remained was a few hiccupping sighs.

“Congratulations,” Hite said to them. “Nick has decided to come back to us.”

Howie rapped his knuckles on Brian’s partially open door.

“Yeah?” Brian answered.

“Yo, B-Rok!” A.J. called. “Can we come in?”

“Sure.”

Howie entered, pushing A.J. ahead of him. “We’ve got something to tell you,” Howie said with a wide grin.

“What?” Brian asked, suddenly becoming interested.

“Nick’s back,” A.J. said

Brian’s blue eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. “What?”

“That’s right,” Howie said cheerfully. “He woke up a little while ago.”

“Sort of,” A.J. corrected him.

“What do you mean sort of?” Brian asked suspiciously.

“Well, he opened his eyes. He was crying when he came to. He didn’t say anything, but he was conscious,” Howie explained.

“So does this mean he’s going to be ok?”

A.J. and Howie exchanged glances. “Well, Dr. Hite seemed pretty happy. I’m guessing he’s going to be ok.”

Howie laughed. “We were so excited, we really didn’t ask!”

“When can I see him?” Brian exclaimed.

“Dude, you still look awfully pale. Should you be out of bed at all?” A.J. asked, raising his eyebrow.

“You’re not my doctor,” Brian muttered darkly.

“No, but I’ve watched you fall to pieces at least twice in the past few days. There’s no way and hell you’re putting me through that again.”

“I love the way you show your concern,” Howie said, rolling his eyes.

“Thanks,” A.J. replied.

“I just want him to know I’m there,” Brian said, frustrated.

“We’ll tell him,” Howie offered. “As soon as we get to talk to him it’s the first thing we’ll say, right Bone?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Brian still looked unhappy.

“It’s the best we can do. You know that Westin’s not gonna let you up. You really pissed him off after you almost passed out in your wheelchair.”

“How do you feel anyway?” Howie asked him.

“See that Jell-o?” he asked, pointing to the jiggly red substance in a cup that sat on the tray by his bed.”

“Yeah,” Howie said warily.

“Now I know what it feels like to be red Jell-o. We understand each other.”

Howie laughed.

“See?” A.J. said. “Just stay here and chill. Howie and I can come and harass you whenever you want company.”

“Thank you,” Brian said dryly. A.J. flashed a smile.

“Oh, hey,” Howie said. “Did you hear? They are moving Kevin out of ICU this afternoon.”

“Really?” Brian asked, looking pleased.

“Yeah,” A.J. chimed in. They are moving him onto your floor.”

“Can they move him in here?” Brian asked hopefully.

“I don’t know. Ask Westin.”

A.J. turned his head towards the hallway. “Hey, Westin!” he hollered. Howie groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “A.J...” he said. “Is that really necessary?”

“Brian had a question!” A.J. said defensively. A nurse poked her head into Brian’s room. “Can I help y’all with anything?”

“Yeah,” A.J. said. “My friend here wants to know if Kevin Richardson can be his new roomie since he’s moving out of the ICU.”

“I’ll go ask Dr. Westin.”

“Thank you ma’am,” A.J. said, tossing her a charming smile.

Dr. Westin agreed to the move, mostly because he thought it would help keep Brian in his room. Kevin was glad to have his company. He had been constantly calling in nurses when he had trouble remembering things, asking them to tell him what was going on. Now he had Brian there to help keep him on track.

“I need you to help me get my head back on straight,” he told him. “My memory is still a little out of whack.”

“I’ll do my best,” Brian said seriously. “But if you snore I’ll smother you with a pillow.”

Chapter 18

Remnants

Nick did not want to open his eyes. He wanted to sleep forever. The last time he'd opened his eyes it had hurt too much. It was definitely better to stay asleep. He could hear voices around him, familiar voices. He tried to ignore them and instead concentrated on keeping his eyes closed.

"Nick," one of the voices said. "Come on sleepyhead. You've been asleep long enough. Time to get up." Nick groaned a little in response.

"I don't have all day, Nicky," the voice continued. Against his will, Nick's eyelids fluttered open.

"There you are!" the voice said triumphantly.

"What..." Nick mumbled, his voice almost inaudible.

Another voice laughed in delight. "Nick, you have no idea how good it is to hear your voice."

"You heard that? How did you hear that?" the other voice demanded.

"Shut up, A.J."

"Who...?" Nick asked, confused.

"Hey, buddy," the second voice said kindly. "Welcome back to the land of the living. Do you know where you are?"

"Where's Brian?" It was the only thing Nick could think of to ask.

"He said to tell you that he wanted to see you, but the doctor said he had to stay in bed. He's thinking of you. He's been really, really worried about you."

"Where's Brian?" Nick asked again. "I need to... tell him to stop crying. I had to come back to tell him not to cry." He exhaled shakily. "He was hurting so bad... oh God I could feel it... it hurt so bad..."

A.J. and Howie slowly looked up at each other.

"Whoa." A.J. said, his eyes wide. They both looked back at Nick, who was on the verge of drifting off again. He continued to murmur.

"Brian, stop crying. I had to come back, but it hurt so much, and I couldn't breathe. God, I was afraid. So afraid... but I had to make it, I had to tell you it was ok..."

“Nick,” A.J. said loudly, putting his hand on Nick’s arm. “Nick do you hear me? Do you know who this is?” Nick’s eyes fluttered open again.

“A.J.?” he asked wearily.

“Thank God,” A.J. said, relieved. “Do you know where you are?” Nick shook his head ever so slightly.

“You’re in the hospital. You were in an accident. Do you understand me?”

Nick watched his face for a moment, and then nodded.

“I’m so tired,” he sighed. His face scrunched up for a moment, and he looked upset. “Why can’t I move?”

“You’re pretty weak, man. You had pneumonia on top of all of your other injuries,” A.J. informed him.

“Where’s everybody else?”

“We’re all here in the hospital. You were the last one to wake up. We’re all going to be ok. Don’t worry about anyone.”

“Brian is going to be thrilled to hear that you were awake and talkative,” Howie added.

Nick’s eyes roved around in a confused manor, looking for the speaker. “Who is that?”

“It’s Howie,” A.J. told him.

“Howie...” Nick murmured.

“Yup. You remember me, right?”

“Mmmm. Howie D.”

“Yeah,” Howie said with a grin. “That’s right. Good for you.”

“Where’s Brian? He was crying.”

“Brian’s not here, Nick. He’s in bed, probably asleep. He’s had a rough week.”

“I’m sorry I made him cry. I made him hurt.”

A.J. and Howie glanced at each other again. Howie cocked his head to the side, silently asking what he meant. A.J. shrugged. They turned their attention back to Nick. They were losing him again. This time they decided to let him sleep.

“I’m sorry I made him cry...”

“I don’t believe it,” Kevin said. “They gave you crutches?”

A.J. grinned and waved his crutch in the air. “A crutch. You’d better believe it. I would have two, but the broken hand makes it a little hard to use.” He examined it. “I think we should incorporate this into our next dance routine.”

“How about we not,” Brian said flatly.

“Canes, maybe?”

“How can you even think about dancing?” Kevin asked incredulously.

“We have to think about it sometime,” Howie pointed out. All four were quiet for a while.

“Yeah,” Brian said finally. “I guess we do.” A gloomy silence ensued. “Does anybody know how Nick is doing today?” Brian asked, changing the subject. He still hadn’t been allowed out of bed. He was getting more and more frustrated about not being able to see his best friend.

“He sat up for a little while today, didn’t he Howie?” A.J. said, looking pleased.

“That’s good news,” Kevin said.

“How’s his memory? Is he as messed up as Kevin is?” Brian asked, stealing a devilish glance at his cousin.

Kevin glared at him. “You’d better watch it, cuz.”

“You know I’m just playing witcha.”

“Right.”

“Well,” Howie said. “From what I’ve seen, he’s got some gaps here and there. He hasn’t forgotten anything major, except for the wreck, but we keep having to remind him about little stuff. Hite says that there doesn’t seem to be any permanent damage, and that it could be a lot worse. He’s seen patients where you tell them something, and then five seconds later you have to repeat it because they’ve already forgotten it.”

“He’s anxious to see you,” A.J. told Brian.

The smile left his face. “Me too,” he said quietly.

Howie and A.J. had decided not to tell Brian about the strange conversation they had had with Nick two days ago. He had not said anything since while he was conscious. While he was asleep however, they heard him muttering again about having to come back and tell Brian it was ok. They weren't sure what it meant, but they didn't want to risk upsetting Brian by telling him.

"He was awake for a full half hour this morning," Howie said, trying to cheer him up.

"That's great news," he said sincerely.

A nurse poked her head into the room. Her gaze settled on A.J. "I thought I'd find you here," she said sternly. "You were supposed to stay on your floor with those. I told you no wandering."

"Oh, Andrea," A.J. said with a dramatic shake of his head. "You worry too much."

"Dr. Westin could have my head for this," she warned him.

A.J. looked back at the others. "I think I just got this nice young lady in trouble. Will you help me make it up to her?"

"What do you propose?" Brian asked with a grin.

A.J. raised his eyebrow at them. Brian and Howie nodded at him. Kevin groaned and squeezed his eyes shut. He slowly opened one and nodded his consent. "Take it easy on me. Remember, my memory doesn't work quite the way I want it."

A.J. grinned. "All right." He went to rub his hands together, but was stopped by his cast. He sighed, and then cleared his throat.

"*Yea-a-ah.*"

He nodded towards Brian. Brian closed his eyes and began to sing.

*"You are my fire, the one desire
Believe when I say, that I want it that way.
But we are two worlds apart,
I can't reach to your heart when you say
That I want it that way. Tell me why,"*

The other three chimed in.

*"Ain't nothin' but a heartache."
"Tell me why,"
"Ain't nothin' but a mistake, tell me why,"
"I never wanna hear you say,"
"I want it that way."*

Their harmonies were a little loose, and their voices sounded a little rusty, especially Kevin's. But it didn't seem to matter. A.J. dramatically swung his hands out to the side to begin his verse.

*"Am I your fire, your one desire
Yes I know it's too late,
But I want it that way.
Tell me why,"
"Ain't nothin' but a heartache,"
"Tell me why,"*

*"Ain't nothin' but a mistake, tell me why,"
"I never wanna hear you say,"
"I want it that-a-way."*

Kevin raised his hand, signaling them to quit. "Sorry guys," he said coughing a little. "That's the best I can do. And besides, I can't think fast enough to get the words out right now." He looked down at his hands.

A sober silence filled the room. Nurse Andrea's smile slowly faded.

"Don't worry about it Kev," Brian said softly. "We've got plenty of time to worry about that."

"Do we?" Kevin asked bitterly. Brian said nothing.

"Well, Mr. McLean," Andrea said. "That was truly wonderful but you need to go back downstairs *now*. Ok?"

"Okay, okay. I'm going." A.J. made a face at his friends as he left.

Chapter 19 ***Shattered***

“The music world is rejoicing today as it had been made public that Nick Carter of the Backstreet Boys has finally regained consciousness. Carter along with fellow band members A.J. McLean, Howie Dorough, Kevin Richardson, and Brian Littrell were critically injured in a motor vehicle accident almost two weeks ago when their tour bus was sideswiped just outside of San Antonio, TX. Fans everywhere have been showing their support for the band, sending cards and letters, and gathering together to express their sympathies. The question now that everyone wants answered is whether or not the Backstreet Boys will continue as a group or go their separate ways...”

“Rumors are flying that the Backstreet Boys have called it quits. An inside source says that the members of the popular boy band have been leaning towards splitting up in the wake of a terrible highway accident that almost claimed the lives of two of them. The last to regain consciousness, Nick Carter, is said to suffer from memory loss and may never be able to perform again due to a leg injury. We are still waiting for an official statement on the matter...”

“The overwhelming question on the minds of thousands of teenage girls right now is whether the Backstreet Boys will choose to continue on together in the music industry. A motor vehicle accident that almost claimed their lives almost two weeks ago has left their fate up in the air. Local radio stations have been flooded with calls looking for updates on the Boy’s conditions and Carson Daly of MTV has said that that network has been bombarded with young girls looking for answers. No one is saying yet what they may or may not do...”

The next day, Brian was granted permission to get out of bed. He waited anxiously as the nurse got his wheelchair and helped him into it. His aches and pains had subsided significantly, and he was ready to be out of his room. They were careful not to disturb Kevin, who was sleeping, on their way out. Nick was still in the ICU, but Dr. Hite said that if he continued doing as well as he was, that he could be moved out as early as tomorrow afternoon.

When he got there, Brian couldn’t believe the difference in Nick’s appearance as he was carted into his room. Some of the color had returned to his face, although he was still ghastly pale. He still wore the bandage around his head, but the lack of machines surrounding him made him look more like Nick, and not some stranger.

“Nick?” Brian called hesitantly. Nick stirred and opened his eyes.

“Brian!” Nick said, a slow smile spreading over his features. Brian was surprised at how young and vulnerable he looked. He was a good four inches taller, but Brian felt so much bigger for some reason.

Brian grinned. "Boy am I glad to hear your voice."

"It's good to see you," Nick said sincerely. His memories of the dream and the crippling pain had almost faded away. "Where have you been?"

"Didn't they tell you?" Brian said with a flash of anger. A.J. had promised that he would tell him why he wasn't there.

"Who?" Nick asked.

"Howie and A.J."

"Oh. They may have," Nick said uncomfortably. "They just came to see me."

"They've been here everyday," Brian said, confused.

"Oh. That's right."

Realization struck him. "Right. Your head. They told me you'd be like Kevin."

"What's the matter with Kevin?"

"Well, he got his head banged around the same as you. I had to tell him what day it was about six times yesterday."

"What day is it?"

"Wednesday."

A chuckle from the door interrupted them. They both turned towards the door.

"Will you look at that. Frick and Frack together again! May God have mercy on our souls. The terrible duo will be up to no good in no time for sure."

"A.J., I thought you weren't supposed to be on your crutches up here," Brian scolded.

A.J. scowled at him. "Not so loud! Do you wanna get me in trouble?"

"You don't have to get in it. It finds you."

"Why are you on crutches?" Nick asked.

"Accident. Remember?"

"You were in that?"

"Yup. We all were," Brian reminded him. "We were still on tour, remember?"

“Yes. I do now.”

“Nick, I just wanted to tell you that Brian here has been an absolute basket case waiting for you to wake up. He was driving us, and not to mention himself, absolutely batty. So praise God that you woke up.”

Nick smiled, not entirely understanding.

“Well, I’ll let you two be alone for awhile. See ya!” He turned around and hopped slowly away.

“I think that’s A.J.’s way of saying he missed you and is glad you’re back,” Brian told him.

“Where did I go?” Nick asked, baffled.

Brian grinned. “You didn’t really go anywhere. But you were in a coma for over a week.”

“That long?”

“Yup. Scared the shit out of me. I thought we were going to lose you.”

“Is that why you were crying?” Nick asked him.

Brian was startled. “What did you say?”

“You were crying.”

“Yeah, I was. Kinda embarrassing, isn’t it?” He wasn’t sure what to make of what Nick was saying. Nick hadn’t seen him cry. Had the guys told him?

Nick smiled. “You never cry.”

“Not usually. I’m trying not to make a habit of it. What would the fans think?”

Nick chuckled. “Yeah. Pansy.” He frowned a little, looking uncomfortable.

“What is it?” Brian asked, concerned.

“I don’t know,” Nick said slowly. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Where?”

“My stomach. It just feels... I don’t know. Weird.”

“Do you want me to get a doctor?”

“No, I think it’s ok. It’s been acting up all day.”

“Are you sure?”

He was about to complain about Brian mothering him too much when a bolt of fire shot through his belly. His eyes went wide and it was all he could do to keep from crying out.

“Nick!” Brian cried. “What’s wrong?”

“Stomach,” he whispered. “Oh God, I feel like I’m on fire...”

“Hang on, I’ll get someone.”

Nick nodded, terrified. He did not want Brian to leave him. Brian could see the fear in his eyes, and rather than leave his friend, he reached out with one hand and gripped his hand while smacking the call button beside his bed with the other. It wasn’t really necessary. The machines that Nick was still connected to started to wail, alerting the nurses that something was wrong.

“Nick, stay with me man. Come on Frack, look at me.”

Nick tried to obey, but his body didn’t want to. Brian’s voice seemed to be getting farther and farther away.

Brian shook Nick’s arm, trying to get him to focus. His head had fallen back on the pillow, and he was sweating profusely. Brian couldn’t get him to snap out of it. In horror he watched as his best friend’s eyes fluttered closed, and hand Brian held onto like a lifetime went limp. Dr. Hite rushed in, and hastily moved Brian out of his way. Icy fear gripped his heart. He couldn’t lose him. Not now, when he’d just gotten him back. He tried desperately to see over the activity that was now centered around Nick’s bed. He wasn’t moving, but the alarms were going wild. They looked like they were preparing to move him. An orderly came to move Brian out of the way.

“What’s happening?” he demanded. “Is he going to be ok?”

“I need to move you out of the way, Mr. Littrell, let them do their job.”

“Nick!” he yelled. “Talk to me!”

“They’re taking him out of there, and back to the OR. Please stay calm, let them help your friend.”

“*Nick!*”

Chapter 20

Illusions

“You know what?” A.J. asked.

“What?” Howie replied, only half-paying attention.

“I actually kinda like hospital food.”

Howie whistled. “Man, you have been here way, way too long.”

“I’m serious. It is not that bad. Have you tried some of those cookies from the cafeteria?”

“You’re nuts.”

“That was never in dispute.”

Howie looked up to say something, and saw Denise McLean standing in the doorway. She looked upset.

“What happened?” he said immediately. A.J. followed Howie’s gaze to his mother.

“Mom?” he asked. She looked ready to cry. “Mom?” his voice was quiet and afraid. “Oh, God. Tell us. Tell us what happened.”

“Something happened to Nick,” said softly.

“What?” A.J. demanded. His voice began to rise as fear took over. “What happened to Nick?”

“They took him back to surgery. There was a complication with his last operation.”

“No,” Howie said, almost inaudibly. “Is he going to be ok?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a small shake of her head.

“Where’s Brian?” A.J. said immediately, just a nurse came in to see them. Mrs. McLean shook her head. “I don’t know, A.J.”

He swung his head towards the nurse. “Where is he?” His voice was becoming shrill.

“He was in the room with Nick when something went wrong. They’ve taken him back to his room, I think,” she said, a lone sob escaping.

A.J. swung his legs over the side of his bed and grabbed his crutch. Howie was hard on his heels, and just managed to snatch A.J.’s IV bag as he tore off in Brian’s direction.

When they got there, they found Kevin, looking ashen, out of his bed and sitting with his cousin. Brian was staring straight ahead, stricken with that same empty look that Howie had seen when he'd first come to visit him. A.J. and Howie quickly took over for Kevin, who was trembling with the effort of sitting up. With a grateful nod, Kevin made his way painfully back over to his bed with Howie's assistance. The older man leaned on him so heavily that Howie almost fell. He never did figure out how he'd gotten over to Brian in the first place. Surely no one approved of his movement, and Howie was fairly certain no one had been there to help him out of bed. With a broken femur it seemed almost impossible for Kevin to get around without help.

"I'm sure he'll be all right," A.J. said comfortingly.

Brian nodded listlessly. "Yeah," he managed to say. "I'm sure he will be."

"Have you heard anything yet?" Howie asked Kevin quietly so Brian wouldn't hear.

"No," Kevin said with a shake of his head. He looked absolutely grief stricken, and Howie realized that he had not really had to face the fear of not knowing if one of them was going to be ok.

"They haven't told us anything. It's already been half an hour."

"How has he been doing?" Howie asked, nodding towards Brian.

"He's terrified," Kevin said. "So am I. God, Howie, they brought him back in here, and he... he..." Tears came to his eyes, and he looked away.

Howie's heart went out to him. "Train, it's ok," Howie said. "We've all cried over this at one point or another."

"He was just staring ahead, at nothing," he choked out. "It was like he wasn't even there. I've never seen him... how could anyone hurt so bad?"

"I don't know," Howie said softly. Kevin was a wreck.

"I don't want this to happen," he said, his voice trembling. "Not to Nick. He's too young."

"Nick will be fine," Howie said, louder. Brian and A.J. looked up at him.

"He will be," A.J. concurred. "He's Nick. He's gotten this far. He'll make it the rest of the way."

An hour later, Dr. Westin came to see them. All four were still in Brian and Kevin's room, refusing to separate until they knew Nick's status. They looked up at him as he entered, hope scrawled across all of their faces.

"He's going to be fine," Dr. Westin assured them. They all breathed a huge sigh of relief. Kevin squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head toward the ceiling in a quick prayer of thanks. Brian had a mixture of shock and relief painted on his face. A.J. clapped him on the back.

"What happened?" Howie asked. "What went wrong?"

"There was a complication stemming from the surgery he had a few days ago. He got an infection. With his immune system as weak as it was, it's not all that unexpected, I suppose. We've taken care of it. It'll set his recovery back a little bit, but he will be fine."

"When can we see him?" Brian asked.

"You can drop by in a few hours. He's in recovery. When he's back in his room we will let you know."

"Thanks," Kevin said. They glanced at each other.

"I can't wait until we all get out of here," he muttered.

"Ok, Nick. We are going to take this slow. You tell me if you start to feel dizzy or if it starts to hurt."

"Gotcha," Nick said. The infection scare had ended. And scare it had been. He couldn't forget how terrified he had been when Brian's voice had faded away. This time though, he was really on the mend. He was being moved out of the ICU to another floor, and it involved him moving out of his bed for the first time. Dr. Westin was present to make sure that all went well. Two orderlies helped ease him slowly toward the edge of his bed.

"I need you to try and sit up now, Nick," Dr. Westin said.

"K," Nick said, drawing in a deep breath. He hoisted himself up into a seated position, and immediately felt dizzy.

"Wow," he said, lying partway back down.

"Too fast, move slower next time," an orderly said.

When he was ready to try again, someone placed a hand behind his back to give him a little extra support. When he finally made it into the wheelchair, he was exhausted.

“Tell me it’s going to get better from here,” he muttered.

“It will, don’t worry.”

By the time he reached his new room, his stomach was killing him. He told the nurse that had come in with them this.

“Ok, we’ll look you over. You may have bothered the sutures from your surgeries.” She had no idea how much this terrified him. The last time there had been a problem with his surgery...

Dr. Westin came in to look at him, and determined that no further damage had been done.

“It still hurts,” Nick said painfully.

“We’ll give you some morphine. Your body just objects to moving around a lot right now.”

“So how about I just lay here,” he said with a weak smile.

“Sorry. You need to be moving around a little and using your muscles. Otherwise, your recovery will be a lot harder.”

“So this means those stupid exercises with moving my legs and stuff that my mom and the nurses have been doing have to continue?”

Westin chuckled. “Well, perhaps not quite like that, but you will need to be doing some form of physical therapy. All of your other friends are. Howie has even been making trips to our little gym here in the hospital we have for just those purposes.”

“A gym?”

“That’s what we call it. It’s not like what you are picturing.”

“Well, I’m not all that surprised,” Nick said. “Howie lives in the gym. He’s downright obsessive about staying in shape.”

“Well that’s good. He’ll get back in shape quickly.”

Westin departed, and a nurse came back with some morphine to take the edge off of the constant ache in his stomach that wouldn’t go away.

Why does this all have to hurt so much? he thought. *It hurts too damn much.*

A disturbing thought had begun to enter his mind. It was more like a distant memory, or even a dream.

Brian? *No*, he thought, disgusted. *That's ridiculous. This is no one's fault.*

But the dreamlike memory wouldn't go away. Brian always seemed to be there when things went wrong. That meant nothing of course, normally when things went wrong Brian was the one he would want to be there. But something was still bothering him. Somewhere in the back of his head a memory was trying to surface. He kept seeing images from a tunnel, a tunnel that was filled with intense pain that offered suffering to all who dared enter it. And Brian... Brian wanted him to walk through it.

Stop it, he thought angrily.

But it still bothered him.

Chapter 21

Where Can We Go From Here?

Two days later, Howie called a meeting. Nick and Kevin were both still bed-ridden, but with a broken femur and a busted kneecap, not to mention the complication caused from the infection, that was not surprising. A.J. still had trouble walking on his own, but was determined to get around without the crutch. Howie still had his cane, but really only used it up and down stairs. His walking cast was working just fine. Brian also had been given a walking cast, and was able to make his way carefully around without the wheelchair for short periods of time. His arm and shoulder were still in a sling, but they were healing well.

Howie decided it was time for them to start talking about the future. A.J. was ready to be released from the hospital, which meant Howie had to leave as well. Besides, he was beginning to feel ridiculous paying for a hospital stay that he no longer needed. He asked for Dr. Westin to meet with the five of them in Nick's room. Dr. Westin granted permission for Kevin to get a wheelchair to join them.

“So this is what the hospital looks like,” he joked as he was taken out of the room.

Once they were all present and situated, Howie began to speak.

“Ok, everybody. This is the deal. Management has been on my ass as much as they possibly can while still trying to stay sympathetic. They want to know what we plan to do now. In other words, where do we go from here? I figured that now was an ok time to bring up the question to everybody.”

“The media is screaming for another press conference,” A.J. added. “More so now since Nicky came back from the dead.”

“Sometimes I'm not so sure,” Nick muttered. A.J. pretended not to hear him, but Brian flashed him a worried glance.

“So basically,” Howie continued, “I wanted Dr. Westin to tell us where we all stand, and then we need to start talking about what we want to do.”

“Well,” Dr. Westin said slowly. “I'm sure you are all anxious to go home. There is no real reason why Howie and A.J., and probably Brian can't do that. Obviously Kevin and Nick will still be hospitalized for a little while longer, but the next hurdle for all of you will be physical therapy. I am a little hesitant to let Nick and Kevin go all the way back to Orlando. Unless they have serious objections, I would rather them begin their therapy here in San Antonio. A trip to Florida is not in their best interest.” All five were quiet for a moment, taking in this information.

“I don't want to split up,” Brian said finally.

“Where the hell would we go?” A.J. asked. “We don't have any connections here.”

“I’m sure we could find something,” Howie said. “If we all decide to stay.”

“Well, whether you stay or go is up to you, but all of you will be needing therapy. Howie has already been doing some here at the hospital and he is coming along nicely.”

“Howard,” Brian said jokingly. “Are you working on your finely toned self?”

Howie straightened up proudly. “Yessir, that’s right. And I’m doing a damn good job of it.” A.J. snickered, and Howie reached over and grabbed his hat.

“Hey!” he yelped, trying to scramble after it. He was unsuccessful. Howie teased him with it for a moment, while A.J. shot him a look of pure poison. Kevin gave them both a warning look, and Howie offered the hat back to A.J., who snatched it while muttering under his breath.

“How long will all of this therapy take?” Kevin asked.

“Well, you and Nick have a hard few months ahead of you, if you want to get back up to the same level as before, which I am sure you do. I’m very confident you can get through this without any repercussions, but it will be hard work. Especially when it comes to strengthening your short term memories.”

“I see.”

“I’d like to keep you here in this city for a few more weeks.”

“Well, Nick,” Kevin said, glancing over at him. “I guess it’s just you and me.”

“Yay,” Nick said, void of any enthusiasm.

“I want to stay,” Brian repeated. He looked over at Howie and A.J. “Together.”

“I don’t mind staying,” Howie said.

“Well I’m not going back to Orlando by myself,” A.J. said, giving Brian a reaffirming nod.

“Well I guess that’s settled,” Westin said. “We can start working on some arrangements for you. We’ve started laying out programs for all of you. You can get started right away.” They all nodded in agreement.

“Do you need me for anything else?” he asked them. “I have a feeling you have other matters to discuss, and I will leave you alone.”

“Thanks, doc. We can take it from here,” Howie said. Once he had gone, Howie became very serious.

“Ok guys. Now here’s the big question. What about the Backstreet Boys?”

No one said anything for a moment.

“The fans are going ballistic speculating whether or not we’re finished. The press is printing everything they can think of. We’re almost a flipping controversy,” Howie said. “I think we need to start coming up with some answers, at least start to think about what we want.” Everyone agreed with him.

“I don’t want it to end,” A.J. spoke up suddenly. “Not like this.” The others turned their attention to him.

“We’ve come so far and overcome so much. This is by far the worst we’ve had to deal with, but I don’t want it to be the end. We’re stronger than that.”

“That’s my line of thought too,” Howie said quietly.

“Easy for you to say,” Nick spat. “You aren’t laid up in bed as a cripple with a memory that doesn’t work right.” Howie was startled by his sudden outburst. Nick hadn’t seemed exactly chipper for the last few days, but no one really expected him to be. This, however, was a tone they hadn’t heard before.

“We’re listening to you Nick. What do you have to say?” Brian asked him.

He looked around the room at them for a moment. “Nothing,” he said finally, directing his attention to the ceiling.

“Now is the time to tell us where you stand,” Howie insisted. “We said before that if one of us had something to say about their future in the group we would all sit down and listen to him and then talk about it.”

“We’re all here to help you, buddy. You’re not alone,” Brian told him.

“I know,” Nick said softly, looking as though he was about to cry. “I just feel all messed up right now. I don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“Neither do I, if that helps any,” Kevin joked. Nick smiled a little.

“I don’t know how things are going to go, but if we can stick together, I guess I want us to continue,” Nick said with a sigh.

“Don’t half-ass this one, Nick,” A.J. said. “You have to want to do this. If you don’t, that’s ok. We don’t have to decide today for sure. We’ll keep talking about it.”

“I am *not* half-assing anything.” Nick said sharply.

“Relax,” Howie said gently. “I just wanted to get a general feel of where we all stand right now. What about you, Kevin?”

“It’s all going to end someday,” he said slowly. “But I don’t think today is the day. I think we’ve all still got something left, and as long as we all feel that way we should keep it going.”

“Brian?”

“This is what I love,” he said simply.

“Ok then. For right now, it looks like we’re still the Backstreet Boys.”

Chapter 22

Pick Up The Pieces

Brian, Howie and A.J. decided to hold another press conference. Dr. Westin gave them the go ahead, so they contacted the Marriott to see if they were willing to host them yet again. Next, the three of them sifted through the local cards and letters they had received. They selected about fifty names and arranged for them to be invited to the conference. The suggestion had been Howie's.

“They've stuck by us through all of it, we may as well do something for them,” he had said. All three agreed to have a small meet and greet for the fans they invited, provided it was short and sweet. The date was set for the end of the week. In the meantime, the three found an apartment that they could stay in temporarily while they started their physical therapy.

When the day came for the press conference, all three of them were shuttled off to the Riverwalk. A crowd had gathered in front of the building in anticipation of their arrival. Extra security was present to make sure they were not hassled on their way inside. This was no small task, considering none of them were capable of moving very quickly. Brian waved his good arm at the crowd, and they began to scream. A.J. tipped his hat in greeting, and Howie waved as well. Once they were inside, they were escorted to the room where the conference was to take place. As before, someone went out first to introduce them.

“Ok, everybody. The Boys are here,”

An excited buzz went through the crowd, especially from the fans who were present.

“But before we bring them out, let me say a few things. One is that the same rules apply as last time. These three are very eager to answer your questions, but they are still recovering and need their rest, so this can't go on all day. Two, and this is for the fans that were personally invited by Howie, A.J., and Brian, they have told me to tell you that as long as things go well, they would like to do a short meet and greet with all of you.”

A cheer erupted from the small crowd. “They would just like you to remember to take it easy with them, ok? Well, I'll not take up any more of their time. Please welcome Howie Dorrough, A.J. McLean, and Brian Littrell.”

Howie walked out slowly towards his chair, with Brian and A.J. in tow. They took their seats while the audience clapped. Once they had quieted down, Brian leaned up to his mike.

“Hello everyone.” More cheers. Brian grinned at them, and nodded in greeting. “Wow, he said. That's awfully nice of y'all. Thank you.”

Once the noise had died down, Howie began to speak.

“It’s nice to see everyone again,” he said. “Well, as you can see, I dragged along a couple more with me today. We are here to answer your questions, so shoot.”

“I think the biggest question that everyone wants to know is: are you still the Backstreet Boys?” someone called.

“Well,” Howie began, “We sat down and talked about that about four days ago. We started talking about where we all wanted to go, and what we wanted to do now that everyone’s life was out of danger and we were on the road to recovery. We haven’t made a final official decision yet, but as of right now we are planning on sticking things out and trying to make a comeback.”

The noise level increased significantly for a minute or so, and then died back down. Brian began to speak. “Now remember, this is not an official announcement. This is the way we all feel right now, but we have a long way to go. We’re going to give it our best shot, but it may take awhile. We are all very aware of how wonderful the gift of life is, and we don’t want to push ourselves beyond our limits. Nick and Kevin are still not out of bed yet, and as for us, well,” he chuckled a bit. “You can see what we look like. We are definitely *not* at our best.”

“A.J. and Brian, tell us about your recovery.”

A.J. fielded the question.

“It has sucked.”

The audience laughed, and he grew serious. “It has been and still is really tough. Nothing can prepare you for something like this, and none of us knew quite how to deal with it. It’s very frustrating, especially for people like me who like to be up and active and running around all of the time. I don’t have that freedom of movement, and I do *not* like to sit still.”

“He has been a holy terror,” Brian interjected. “The nurses can’t stand him.”

“The nurses *love* me,” A.J. corrected. Several members of the audience smiled, and some light chuckles could be heard. The light banter between them was a relief to hear. The rumors that had been flying about them told of the Backstreet Boys hitting rock bottom physically and emotionally. Rumors of Brian’s breakdowns spread like wildfire, despite the hospital’s efforts to keep everything quiet. Brian was unaware of this.

“Brian, we hear that you in particular had a rough time during this ordeal. Could you tell us a little about that?”

“Well, that’s getting a little personal. But yes, I did have a very hard time with this. I’m not perfect, and, uh, it showed. I was very lucky to have these guys there with me. They really did a lot to keep me from going off the deep end.”

“We hear that Nick Carter may not be able to perform again. Is that true?”

“Absolutely not,” Brian said immediately.

“Nick had surgery on his knee,” A.J. broke in. “They had to replace the kneecap. He’s going to need a lot of physical therapy, but his doctor said he would be as good as new.”

“Is there any justification to the rumors that Nick and Kevin suffer from memory loss?” Howie glanced sideways at his two companions. A.J. indicated that he should speak.

“Both Nick and Kevin do suffer from some short term memory loss, it’s nothing serious. We have been told it is a temporary thing. They hit their heads pretty hard, and their brains got a little rattled around, but it won’t be long before they are back to normal.”

“Yeah,” Brian agreed. “It’s not that big of a deal. They still know who they are. I was there when Kevin woke up and he knew who I was right away. He even did a little singing with us, so I don’t think you have anything to worry about.” Brian did not mention that he had had trouble with the lyrics.

“Nick has been a little more out of things than Kevin,” A.J. added. “For the first day or so we had to keep telling him that he was in an accident, because he couldn’t remember, but it sunk in eventually. He knows now. They both forget little things, we have to remind them a lot, but they’re being really good about it. We’ve all been told not to worry.”

“You say you’ve done a little singing?”

Brian grinned. “Well, we’ve tried. Our voices are not exactly their best. But we’ve had to sing A.J. out of trouble, and I think that our caterwauling is what woke up Kevin.”

“You sure woke me up,” A.J. grumbled. “I can tell you for sure that those two in particular need to practice.”

“It’s kinda hard to sing well with broken ribs. You can’t take very deep breaths,” Howie added with a grin. More smiles.

“What effect has this tragedy left on you?”

“A big effect,” Howie said.

“We are all very aware of our mortality right now,” Brian explained. “We came very close to losing two of our members,”

“Three,” Howie interrupted, without thinking. Brian looked over at him, confused.

“We almost lost you too, Bri.,” Howie informed him quietly. Brian stared at him for a moment. “Wow. That’s news to me.”

“I didn’t realize that they didn’t tell you about that,” Howie said somewhat uncomfortably. He had turned away from the microphone to try and keep the reporters from hearing.

Brian recovered a little and glanced out at the crowd, who had fallen silent. “I’m always the last to know,” he said, trying to make light of it. He got a few smiles.

“Could you elaborate on your last statement, Howie?”

Howie glanced over at Brian, silently asking his permission. Brian was visibly upset, so Howie declined the question. “We’re just thankful that we all came through it as well as we did.”

A.J. decided to speak. “I think that this is undisputedly the biggest trial that we have had to face. I’m not sure yet what still lays ahead of us, but I think it’s safe to say we’re not done with this yet, and that there will be plenty more hard times coming our way. Hopefully what we’ve already been through will help us with that. We’ve been saying a lot of prayers, and we’ve had a lot said on our behalf, and I know it has made a difference.”

“Can we take a question from one of our fans?” Brian asked, scanning the small crowd of young faces. A field of eager hands shot up. Brian pointed to a girl he guessed to be about 19 or 20.

“I would like to say that we are so happy that you guys are doing so well. Everyone was so worried about you. Seeing you is such a relief. We were all so scared for you.”

“Well thank you,” Brian said. “We really appreciate that. Knowing that you support us the way you do means a lot to us. Do you have a question for us?”

“Yes I do. Do you think that what y’all have been through will come through on your next album? I know you had begun work on that before all of this happened.”

The three of them looked at each other.

“That’s a good question,” Howie said. “We haven’t really given any thought to the new album, actually. We did have a few songs in the works for it, and we all have been doing more writing for it, so I’d say it’s probably a good bet that some of this will come out on our next album. As for when we will continue work on that, I can’t tell you that right now.”

“Thanks,” she said, her eyes shining.

“Anyone else?” A.J. asked. He pointed to another teenage girl. This one looked about 16.

“Do you think that this tragedy has brought all of you closer together?”

“Another good question,” Howie said.

“It definitely has,” A.J. told her. “I don’t know where any of us would be without each other. Howie helped me out a lot when I was at my worst. The three of us had to really depend on each other when Nick and Kevin were still unconscious. We all had to come face to face with the possibility of losing one or both of them, which, needless to say was unthinkable. Let me tell you, we were ecstatic when they woke up.”

“I think the fact that Howie is still here when he could have been released and gone home to Orlando should tell you something about how tight we are, especially right now. We all realize we need to be together to get through this,” Brian added.

“I think that most of us can say that we have now seen each other at our worst, emotionally and physically,” Howie said. “That doesn’t happen to just anybody, and it is something we won’t be forgetting anytime soon.”

After a few more questions, Brian signaled to Howie, and then motioned to one of the people in charge. A.J. leaned up to his microphone. “I think that’s going to about do it for us today,” he said. “Thanks again for coming, thanks again for thinking about us. Peace.”

The press was excused and the fans that were present were asked to stay behind. Once the room was cleared, Howie spoke.

“Ok, everyone. We are very glad you could come today. You are here because we wanted to try and do a little something for some of our fans who have expressed their sympathies to us over the last three weeks or so.”

“We only wish we could do more,” Brian added. “Unfortunately, we aren’t much good for signing anything for you, but if you come up here one by one we would like to meet you. If you leave your names and addresses with Randy over there, as soon as we get some of this plaster off, we will get you taken care of and send it to you in the mail. Does that sound ok?” The answer was a resounding yes.

One by one, their guests came up to the podium. The three Backstreet Boys gave out hellos and hugs, and handshakes where they could be managed. They were all touched by the genuine love and concern that the fans all shared for them. They received more cards and gifts. One girl handed a package containing a small foam basketball and a net that could be mounted on a door.

“For you and Nick, until you can get out and play some real basketball,” she told him with a small smile. Brian almost cried. Once all of them had come through, they said their goodbyes, and Howie, A.J., and Brian departed.

“I think that went well,” A.J. said.

“I’ll say,” Brian and Howie said together.

Chapter 23

Grin And Bear It

“I’ll see you later honey,” Jane Carter said to her son. “I’m taking a plane back to Florida tonight. I’ll be back in a few days. Aaron is coming with me, and your dad will be here on the weekend, ok?”

Nick nodded listlessly. Mrs. Carter kissed the top of his head, which no longer sported the bandage. She smoothed his limp blond hair with her hand.

“Mom,” Nick said, annoyed. “Please don’t do that.” She only smiled at him. “I’ll see you soon,” she told him as she headed out the door.

Nick found himself alone with his thoughts. He still didn’t know how long it would be before he was released from the hospital. Not that released was the proper word. He was going to be transferred to a physical therapy complex over in the San Antonio medical center. At least Kevin and Brian were going with him. Brian wouldn’t have to stay as a live-in patient for more than a week, but Kevin would have to be there for about as long as Nick.

He frowned to himself when he realized he was glad that it was Kevin he would be spending so much time with, and not Brian. There was something about Brian all of the sudden that made him very uncomfortable, even unhappy. He didn’t know what it was.

When he had first seen him, he had been happy. He didn’t remember their conversation, but he remembered the feeling of joy and relief that he had felt when he had been reunited with his best friend. Since then, however, things had been...different.

It was nothing in particular Brian was doing, at least as far as Nick could tell. He was doing exactly what a best friend should do. He came to visit him, sat and chatted with him, and made him laugh when he was feeling particularly miserable about his condition. Nick couldn’t put his finger on what he was feeling, but it seemed his injuries pained him twice as much when Brian was around. It was silly, he knew. But his discomfort around him would not go away. If anything, it grew stronger each time. It was also becoming obvious that Brian could sense what he was feeling. His smiles were beginning to look more and more forced, and he was trying harder and harder to show Nick his support. Nick remembered their “meeting.” Brian had been the first to leap to his defense when he’d had his outburst.

The others had begun to notice that the haunted look that had permeated Brian’s eyes in the days after the accident was slowly returning. Nick didn’t really care. He hated his hospital bed. He hated his room. He hated that he had to depend on everyone else for everything. He was terrified that with his new kneecap, he may not be able to perform as well as before. That was a fear he shared with no one. The doctors had told him everything would be fine, but he didn’t believe them. He couldn’t tell anyone because he was afraid no one else would understand, although he had a feeling that Brian knew.

Anger and frustration were slowly starting to get the better of him. If he were well, he would have had ways to deal with it. But stuck in his hospital bed, the only way to release it was to cry, and that only made things worse. Even now he fought back the tears that threatened to spill over. He was determined not to let them fall.

All of the sudden, he heard the sound of someone clearing his throat in the doorway. As he turned his head, a tear trickled down his cheek. He cursed himself. Brian was in his doorway holding a bag, pretending not to notice Nick's face. Damn it. Another battle lost. Brian shifted under the uncomfortable weight of the bag.

"I brought you something," he said softly, not making eye contact. "I thought it would give you something to do."

"What is it?" Nick asked, beating down the rest of his tears.

Brian set the bag down and opened it up. Inside, Nick was startled to see a Playstation.

"Where did you get that?" Nick asked, his eyes wide.

"I had Howie get it," he replied. He opened it up and went over to the TV and started messing with the connections, one handed.

"Thanks, Bri," was all he could think of to say. He began to feel horribly guilty for all of the things that he had been feeling. To make things worse, he still felt them.

"Well, I know how much you hate to be down and out, and I was pretty sure you were missing your video games." He finished setting it up and handed Nick the controls. "There you go, ready whenever you want it."

Nick smiled at him. "That was really cool of you, man."

"No problem."

"When are you getting out of here?"

"Ah, they are taking me over to that rehab place tomorrow sometime. Howie and A.J. offered to come with me."

"That's good." An uncomfortable silence came over them.

"Well, I guess I'll leave you alone so you can play your game," Brian said, getting up from his chair.

"Why don't you play one with me?" Nick asked hesitantly. Brian looked up, surprised.

"Sure," he said. "I'd love to."

They switched the game on and played a few. Brian did the best that he could do one-handed, which was cause for a few laughs, but neither of them got as into the game as they usually did. After awhile, Nick said he had had enough. Brian stood up quickly to leave.

“Brian,” Nick called out as he was leaving.

“Yeah?” Brian paused to turn and face him.

“Thanks.”

Brian smiled at him briefly, and headed back to his room. Kevin was waiting for him.

“How did it go?”

“He seemed happy to get it.”

“What did you get him again?”

“Playstation.”

“That’s right.”

Brian sat down heavily on his bed with his back to Kevin and stared at the wall. Kevin knew that something was bothering him, but he was hesitant to press him for details. Brian usually came forward on his own when something was wrong. This time though, this didn’t seem the case. This disaster had messed with all of them, especially him.

“Something the matter, cuz?”

“It’s nothing,” Brian said, waving his hand as if it would make it go away.

“Are you sure it’s nothing?”

“Yes,” Brian said, irritated. “I’m sure.”

“Is it about Nick?”

“Damn, you never give up do you?”

“My head may be a little whacked out, but I have known you your whole life. You cannot fool me. When are you gonna learn that?”

He realized that Kevin was right and gave in. “Yes, it’s Nick.”

“Are you worried about him still?”

“That’s part of it.”

“What do you mean?”

Brian sighed. “I almost feel like he doesn’t want me to be around. He’s fine when anyone else comes to visit, but when I come in the room...” He wished he could find the words to describe what he felt.

“That’s silly. He’s your best friend.”

“I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Don’t let it bug you,” Kevin said. “We’ve all been through a lot, and we all handle it differently. He’ll come around, you’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Chapter 24

Progress

By the time Nick and Kevin were ready to join the others, Brian was almost ready to move into the apartment with A.J. and Howie. All three had continued to visit the hospital daily after they had been released. Howie especially noticed a positive improvement in Brian's demeanor once he started physical therapy. He threw himself into it. A.J. and Howie had tried to spend as much time as possible with him at the facility. Their programs required them to be there for three hours a day, but they were present far more than that.

"Do you think Brian really wants to be alone all day in this place?" A.J. had asked their first day.

"I know I wouldn't," Howie replied.

"Well then to hell with relaxing in the apartment. Looks like we are going to have to live off of more hospital food."

"What is with you and the hospital food?"

"I'm telling you, I like it."

"You are absolutely insane, you know that?"

"Yup."

"Just checking."

"Hey, speaking of food, I have a great idea."

"Oh boy," Howie said under his breath. "And what might that be?"

"I say we sneak Brian some food from the real world. I may like what they dish out to us here, but there is no substitute for the greatest meal on earth."

"The McDonalds we saw on the corner?"

"Hell yeah. Let's go." A.J. dragged him out the door and leapt into the car that Howie had rented. He was the only one of the five who was fit to drive.

Upon their return, A.J. took great fun in trying to get the food in to Brian. Howie almost pointed out that no one cared if they brought him "outside food," but decided against it when he saw how much fun his friend was having. It was nice to see him happy and grinning again. He made a huge show of tucking the carry out bag under his shirt, which did nothing to hide it thanks to the huge bulge it created. He began humming the theme to "Mission Impossible" and pranced about the lobby, eyes darting back and forth

suspiciously. For someone in the sorry shape that he was in, he was getting around pretty well.

Howie followed behind with a wide grin on his face. He laughed at the strange looks they got from the orderlies and physical therapists, and other patients they came across.

“I don’t know him. Really I don’t,” he said jokingly.

They passed by their own PT, Anya, in the hallway, causing A.J. to squeal and dart away.

“Whoo!” he yelped as he rounded the corner towards Brian’s room.

“What may I ask was that all about?” she asked, amused.

“I think the doctors were wrong,” Howie said. “I am now most definitely sure there was brain damage.”

Howie entered Brian’s room and found the two tearing into the “contraband” with a vengeance.

“Oh man did I miss this,” Brian said between mouthfuls.

Howie chuckled. “You’d better slow down there, B-Rok. It would be a shame to see you get through all of this only to have you choke to death on a BigMac.”

Since then A.J. had found a pair of sunglasses to fit his tastes, and now lived in them along with his hat. He was thrilled to be back in control of his wardrobe, and had dragged Howie out shopping the first chance he got. The two went early in the morning to avoid crowds, and were escorted by their bodyguards. During their excursion, they talked about Brian and Nick.

“I don’t know what is up with them,” A.J. said with a shake of his head.

“Is there anything?” Howie asked, thumbing through a stack of shirts. “It’s so subtle I sometimes have to convince myself that something is wrong.”

“Nick just seems like he’s pissed off at the world. Maybe therapy will help him.” A.J. poked his head around a rack of clothing, wearing the most outrageous hat Howie had ever seen.

“I’ll kill you if you buy that.”

“Sold,” A.J. said with a grin.

“We are never going to be able to go anywhere with you dressing like that,” Howie complained.

“Who cares? I miss being mobbed by fans.”

“Well that hat and that outfit will take care of *that* problem.”

A.J. grinned. “It’s all good.”

Therapy seemed to do the trick at first. Nick finally seemed enthusiastic about something. He was anxious to get out and move around.

“He’s set a goal for himself,” Kevin said proudly, as he watched Nick with one of the workers. They were discussing his knee, and Nick was concentrating on everything she had to say.

“How’s it going for you?” Howie asked Kevin.

“It’s tiring,” Kevin said with a weary smile. He pointed to his arms, which had lost a great deal of the muscle tone that he had prided himself on. “I have a lot of work to do.”

Howie grinned. “Yes you do,” he said. “That’s disgusting.”

Kevin made a face at him. “Better watch it, punk. Looks can be deceiving. I can still take you.”

“You can’t even stand up without help.”

Kevin considered this for a moment. “True.”

Howie laughed.

Kevin sobered after a minute. “How’ve you been D.?”

Howie looked surprised. “I’m doing pretty well, I’d say.”

“You spend an awful lot of time in the gym.”

“I have to play catch up,” he said carefully, looking uncomfortable.

Kevin frowned. Howie had seemed cheerful enough for the last several days, but to him it seemed forced. He wondered if his friend was coping as well as everyone thought he was. “Are you sure you aren’t overdoing it?” he asked.

“I’m fine, Kev. Quit worrying,” he said, sounding somewhat short.

“I guess that’s just my job,” he answered, deciding to let the subject drop for the time being.

They sat for a moment, watching the activity around them. Nick and the woman he was working with had stopped worrying about his knee, and had started with some exercises designed to assist his memory. Kevin had done the same thing earlier.

“That stuff is hard,” he said, nodding toward Nick, whose brow was furrowed in deep thought. “He’ll probably hate it. It’ll just tell him how much work he’s got ahead of him.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“I don’t think that right now I could sing any of our songs without trouble,” Kevin said quietly. “I can’t keep the lyrics straight. I *know* them, but I just can’t think fast enough to sing them. I’m sure he’s having the same problem.” He tried not to look upset. The last thing he wanted was to burden the others with his worries when they already had so much to deal with.

Howie’s eyes were wide. He remembered their attempt to sing “I Want It That Way.” Somehow he’d forgotten about it. *How ironic*, he thought. “When is the surgery to remove the rod?” he asked after awhile. Kevin’s face clouded.

“A few weeks.”

“You worried about it?”

Kevin nodded, staring off over Howie’s shoulder. “Yup.” He said it very calmly. Howie could tell he was more than a little nervous.

“Don’t sweat it. After all the rest of this shit, that should be a piece of cake.”

Kevin chuckled. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

At that moment, Nick threw down a pile of cards he’d been holding. Angrily, he looked around for a way to get up and leave, but he found none. Instead he glared at the girl, who was trying to talk to him.

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “We’ve got a long way to go.”

Chapter 25

When The Bough Breaks

Progress was made slowly for Kevin and Nick. The work was not easy. Kevin was not the complaining type, especially when it came to hard work, but Brian could see how difficult it was for him. A.J. spent a lot of time with him, laughing and joking, determined to keep his spirits up. It worked well. Kevin maintained a very positive attitude, one that the others admired and looked up to. After all, Kevin was their unofficial leader. He had made friends with all of the physical therapists, his easygoing nature and determination to make a full recovery as quickly as possible made him one of their favorite patients.

Then there was Nick. His earlier enthusiasm quickly gave way to frustration. He almost seemed to resent Kevin's progress. He constantly let his aggravation get the better of him. It was confusing for the others, because Nick had always tried as hard or harder than all of them in anything that they did. No one could explain why he was acting the way he was. Brian tried relentlessly to help him and be there for him, but Nick just as relentlessly pushed him away. Kevin could feel it all coming to a head, and was worried that it wasn't going to be pretty. He was right.

Nick was working with his PT in a large gym-size area on getting the full use out of his new kneecap. His range of motion was not nearly what it had been before, and achieving his prior abilities had been something they had stressed hard with him. On this particular day, he was already frustrated from an earlier session that worked his memory, although he had settled down and seemed more determined than usual to get the most out of his therapy. Kevin was off in another corner doing some exercises, and Brian, Howie, and A.J. were relaxing across from Nick. They were singing quietly, trying not to let the others hear. They all knew it was important to keep singing as much as possible, but the three of them hesitated to do it much in front of Nick and Kevin, until they were comfortable enough to sing with them.

"Tell me why I can't be there where you are..." they chanted softly, the notes floating through the room. Anyone who passed by stopped to listen.

Nick was vaguely aware of what they were doing, but paid them little attention. He was concentrating too hard.

"You were missing in my heart. Show me the meaning of being lonely,"

Brian was feeling the music. His voice was starting to sound like his own again, and he let himself go. He launched into the note, completely forgetting himself.

"Being lonely," he crooned, his voice full of feeling. Nick was startled to hear Brian singing one of his leads, and lost all concentration. He lost his balance with his particular exercise, and landed hard on his knee.

“Shit!” he shouted. Stunned silence greeted his outburst. Brian clamored to his feet and made a beeline for him. His foot cast was gone, and without the impediment he closed the distance quickly. By the time he reached him Nick was already struggling to his feet, swearing mightily.

“God *damn* it!”

“Are you all right?” Brian asked breathlessly. Nick jerked his head towards him, eyes burning with anger. “No I am *not* all right!” he shouted. “What kind of a stupid ass question is that? I am *not all right!* Look at me! I can hardly walk! My memory is *fucked*, and I may never be able to get back to the way I used to be! Does that sound like fine to you?”

Brian was shocked, not so much at Nick’s sudden outburst, but at the hatred that he exuded, aimed directly at him. A.J. and Howie gaped at him open-mouthed. Kevin immediately sought the help of his PT to take him over to his band mates.

“Nick, take it easy,” Brian said softly, trying to conceal his panic. “I had no idea you were this upset. We’re all in this together, remember? I’m here to help you. So are they. Just talk to us. Talk to me.” His eyes were pleading. The friendship he had with Nick was one of the most precious things in his life, and he could sense that it was slipping away from him. He searched Nick’s eyes for any sign of the old Nick, his best friend.

Nick could feel Brian’s blue eyes bore through his own, slipping past his defenses and into his very soul. It enraged him. Hot tears stung his eyes as his anger raged unchecked.

“Talk to you?” he cried shrilly. “*Talk* to you? How about I tell you something.” His voice became low and dangerous, and Brian actually took a step back. “I have never hurt this much before. I hurt in more ways than I thought possible. And I can’t make it stop no matter *what* I do. And do you know what Brian? It is all your fault. Do you hear me? Yours. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be like this. *It is all your fucking fault!*”

Brian recoiled backwards as if he’d been slapped. He had never expected this. Not this. Anything but this. Despair, betrayal, hurt, anger, and fear swelled out of control, ripping mercilessly through his weakened body. The stress was so great, that he went completely numb.

Nick’s sides were heaving from his outburst, and his face was red and streaked with tears. He tried to blind himself to the torrent of anguish that gauged out an empty void in Brian’s eyes that had only moments ago been filled with concern, for him. He hated himself, but he couldn’t stop, and he couldn’t take it back. Silence reigned when Nick’s onslaught stopped, and everyone waited for either the apology, or for Brian to lose control. They got neither. The damage had been done.

Brian maintained his steady gaze for what seemed like an eternity, focusing only on bringing air in and out of his lungs. That simple act took all of his concentration. All of the sudden, he whirled around and began to walk away.

“Brian!” A.J. called, reaching out his hand to try and grab him by his good arm. Brian shrugged him off, hard, staring straight ahead. “Brian, stop,” he called desperately, but Brian ignored him.

Kevin reached them and went for directly for Nick, taking his arm and whirling him around.

“What the hell was that?” he yelled furiously. “What the hell were you thinking?” He whipped his head in A.J. and Howie’s direction. “Someone go get him, damnit!” It was unnecessary. Howie was already off.

“I’m gonna kill him,” A.J. seethed. “I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

Nick sat down heavily in the middle of the floor in a heap as his legs gave out underneath him, hot tears pouring down his face. His anger hadn’t yet abated, but was beginning to realize the true nature of what he had just done.

“Why did you say that Nick?” A.J. shouted hoarsely. “Why the hell would you do something like that to your best friend?”

Howie rushed up to them, out of breath and red in the face. “He’s gone. He’s fucking gone. He took off *running*, if you can believe it, when he saw me coming after him.”

“He left?” Kevin said in disbelief. “As in left the building? Left the facility?”

Howie nodded, and then turned his attention to Nick. “I hope you’re satisfied,” he said coldly. “Do you even realize what he’s gone through for you? He almost *died* over you!” Nick started to open his mouth, but Howie cut him off. “You never had to see him, did you? Well I did, Nick. I did and I have never been so scared in my whole fucking life. When we were lying in the street after it happened, you didn’t hear him screaming for you. You didn’t see him hyperventilate and almost stop breathing because he was so freaked out about you. You didn’t hear the things he said to me and A.J. when they took you off that respirator. He would have given his own life to save you! You don’t find a friend like that everyday. You don’t deserve his friendship. Do you hear me? You don’t *deserve* it!” Howie did not give him the chance to reply; instead he darted out of the room to begin searching for Brian.

“You’d better explain yourself,” A.J. said, his voice dangerously low.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Nick shouted back, his voice breaking. “I didn’t want to come back. I didn’t *want* to! I didn’t *have* to either. I had a choice! But I had to come back to make sure *he* was ok! I was scared to death of that damn tunnel. All I had to do was turn around and *walk away*. The only thing waiting for me here was misery. But I had to come back, for him. And now this. Oh, *God* it hurts so badly. Don’t you see? It’s all his fault. All this because he was fucking crying!” Nick’s voice was swallowed by enormous sobs that shook his body uncontrollably. “I had to help him,” he moaned. “It was

because of me. Oh God, it was all because of me. I had to make him stop. I couldn't stand to see him cry like that, not over me."

Kevin and A.J. stared at him, stunned.

"Jesus," A.J. murmured, white as a ghost. "Jesus."

Tears of sorrow, anger, and sympathy glistened in Kevin's emerald eyes. He knelt down onto the floor beside him. "Come here," he whispered hoarsely. He wrapped his arms around Nick, who sobbed shamelessly into his shirt. Kevin's touch forced him to open up and stop trying to fight off the support they had been trying to give him from the beginning, and now that he had it, he held on to it for dear life. Nick felt as if the world was falling out from underneath him, and Kevin was the only thing that kept him from falling with it. Kevin was startled at his reaction; the vise-like grip that Nick held him with was something he had not expected. He accepted it. Whatever Nick needed to heal, he would give.

"What did I just do," he choked out. "Oh God Kevin, what did I just do?"

Chapter 26

Have A Little Faith In Me

“It’s gonna be ok, Nicky. It’s all gonna be ok...”

Kevin looked up at A.J. “We have to find him.”

A.J. nodded tightly, and headed over to see if Howie had gotten anywhere in figuring out where he had gone.

“He couldn’t have gotten far,” Howie said. “Damn it, we can’t even go out after him. What happens if we’re recognized? We get mobbed and Brian gets further away.”

A.J. paced impatiently. “Which direction did he head off in?”

“He headed right when he got out the door.”

“Did he look like he knew where he wanted to go?”

“Are you kidding? Did you see the look on his face?”

A.J. cursed. The employees of the center couldn’t exactly drop everything and go out looking for one patient. Two people had left to go look for him, but that was it.

“We can’t call the police,” Howie reasoned. “At least not this soon. The publicity would be unbelievable. The press would have a field day, not to mention half the girls in the city would be after him, and he is not in a position to be able to get away.”

“No shit,” A.J. said, drumming his fingers on a counter top. “So what the hell do we do?”

“I hate to say it, but I don’t think that there’s much we *can* do.”

“We can’t just do nothing. He could get hurt, Howie. He doesn’t know where he’s going or what he’s doing!”

“I *know* that.” Howie said, exasperated. “Do you have any bright ideas?”

“No,” A.J. said angrily. “Damn it, I promised him we’d all be there for each other. I swore none of us would have to do this alone. And now he’s out there, *alone*.”

“I know you did,” Howie said quietly. “Let’s just concentrate on getting him back safe, okay?”

Before he could answer, Kevin joined them. “Anything?” he asked. They shook their heads. Kevin clenched his fists and looked to be trying not to cry. The strain of all that had happened to them could be clearly read on his strong features, which were slowly starting to crumble. Brian was missing, and Nick had fallen apart.

“How is Nick?” Howie asked, somewhat ashamed. A.J. had told him all that had happened after he had stormed off.

“They gave him a sedative to knock him out,” Kevin replied, rubbing the bridge of his nose wearily.

“I just can’t believe this,” A.J. muttered. “And things were going so well.”

At first, Brian had no idea where he was going. All he knew was that he had to get out. He had to put as much distance as possible between himself and Nick. The image of those blazing blue eyes loomed in front of him like a nightmare he couldn’t wake up from, and he had to escape it. *Don’t think, just go.* His thoughts had become such an overwhelming mess that he had just shoved all of them aside, feeling like they were about to smother him. Nothing made sense to him anymore, and he had taken as much as he was able to take.

When he had looked behind him and seen Howie coming after him, unexplainable panic had taken over, encouraging his feet to move more quickly, until he broke into an all out run. He hadn’t been able to sustain it long, and he paid for it dearly when a painful ache invaded his legs, preventing him from catching his breath and forcing him to take refuge on a nearby bench until the worst of it had passed. Fortunately, it had been enough. Howie was nowhere to be seen.

Sufficiently recovered, he took to his feet again, walking as quickly as his weary body would allow, not caring where he went or who saw him. Before long he wound up at the entrance to another medical office. They were everywhere; the medical center was huge. He pushed through the glass doors, unable to quell the heart that was trying to beat out of his chest. *Don’t think, don’t think, don’t think. Just get away from here. Think later, just get away...*

He found a payphone, and shakily pulled out the phone book underneath, not trusting himself to be able to call information. Forcing himself to calm down, he looked up the number for a cab company. After poking around to determine his location, he drew in a deep breath to steady himself and placed the call. He didn’t even hang up the phone as he made his way back outside to wait for the cab.

Where would he go? Well, right now anywhere was preferable to here. He really didn’t care. But he had to have something to tell the driver. He just wanted to be alone. He didn’t know anything about San Antonio other than the Riverwalk Howie had been talking about. The man had been so bored he’d had someone get him a few books about the city, and he’d gone on and on about how unique it was: a separate world in the middle of downtown. It was a tourist’s dream, and therefore not the place for him. But hadn’t he mentioned something about an undeveloped section? Some part that usually only a few locals went for peace and quiet? Perfect.

Now he had a destination. All at once he froze, for the first time realizing he was about to venture out into the real world utterly unprotected. What was he doing? He set his jaw. It didn't matter. He had to do this. He had to get away. There was no way he could go back, not with Nick there.... He shuddered. *Don't think, just get away.* It was a Wednesday after all, not even lunchtime, and it was unlikely there would be many people there to spot him. His hat and a pair of sunglasses had been on the counter by the door, and he had grabbed them automatically when he made his exit from the clinic. Nervously, he reached up and pulled the cap down lower over his face. He felt for his wallet to be sure he had enough cash to pay the driver. Satisfied, he waited until the cab showed up. The trembling he felt was starting to spread, and his need to get away intensified. He was in danger of losing control completely, and he couldn't do that. Not yet. Not here. *Don't think, just get away.*

When the cab arrived, he climbed inside, exhaling with relief. "I need to go to the Riverwalk," he told the driver.

"Any particular spot?" the driver asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Somewhere quiet. The quiet part."

"King William district? Nothing on the river there. Just houses."

"Yeah. That's it. I want to go there."

He nodded and pulled away from the curb. After they had been driving for a while, the cabbie glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "You look like you've seen better days," he said.

"I have," Brian replied dully, gazing out the window. Even now, he refused to allow himself to think. He was afraid where his thoughts might take him. When the driver let him off, he tossed a \$100 at him. "Keep the change," he muttered as he slammed the door. He meandered down some steps that took him to the river. His foot had barely struck the bottom step when the trembling became too much for him to bear. Awkwardly, he sat down hard on the river's edge, staring into the lazy current of the water as it flowed serenely by him. His breathing was ragged, and he focused on the air coming in and out of his lungs until it became more regular. He didn't cry, and that surprised him. The tears weren't there. He just felt empty.

Here it was very quiet, hardly a building in site. Just as the driver had said, there was nothing but old large restored houses above the river. He reached up and removed his cap, gazing out across the water. A cool breeze ruffled his hair, causing him to draw his light jacket closer to him. Somewhere above him a bird hooted, alighting from its perch and sailing overhead before coming to rest in a tree that better suited him.

Peace.

For just a moment, the calamity that had picked all of them up and dumped them heartlessly into a world they could not control was quiet, and he felt safe. Protected. It killed him to know it couldn't last.

Sure enough, only moments later the realization of all that had just happened hit him and hit him hard. The tears that only seconds ago had been nonexistent were finally released from their dam, and they trickled slowly down his cheeks as he discovered for the first time that he was really and truly alone. There was no A.J. standing beside him as he had promised, and there was no one to blame for that but himself.

Before the tears could get the better of him he stood up and began to walk, not caring where he was going or how far he went. All that mattered was that the tears didn't catch up. Maybe if he went far enough, he could outdistance everything; the pain, the loneliness, the uncertainty, the fear, Nick...

He took in a harsh breath as the words Nick had said pelted him in the face over and over again. What could have possibly gone so wrong? He had seen it coming; although never in a million years had he expected the explosion he had received. The dim memory of that night on the bus surfaced briefly, and he fought back more tears. (*Don't start. If you start, you won't stop.*) It was little more than a hazy image, one that he could not define or truly recall, but he knew it was real just the same. The guilt and shame he felt over it was enough to convince him of that. Could A.J. have been wrong? He had said that Nick would forgive him, but Nick hadn't forgiven him at all. How in the world could he have been responsible for putting his friend through so much pain? In despair, he tried to remember the last time things had been normal.

I can't, he thought bitterly. *I can't even remember the show the night of the wreck.*

Would things ever be normal again? For a while he'd thought they might be, but now that looked impossible. Maybe trying to keep the band together was too much to ask. Maybe it was time to just let go, and salvage what little he had left before he lost that too.

Don't give up on us. Whatever you do, don't give up on us. We need each other, and you can't give up on us.

Howie's voice echoed in his brain and he halted in his tracks, putting his hands to his face as he choked back a sob.

We aren't going to abandon you, or him, no matter what you do or say. You can't give up on us.

"He's right," he moaned softly. "I can't. But how can I be there for them when I don't even know who I am?" It was true, he didn't know who he was. His very identity had been slipping away since the moment he had gone through that window, and Nick had stripped the last remnants of it away with just a few words.

A dull ache that had been brought on by his walking cried out for his attention, and he looked around for a place to sit. All he could see was the riverbank, so he found a clear spot and rested. An occasional person passed by him, and a few cast him curious looks, but he ignored them. His mind was still trying to look for answers, but all he found were the same questions, and the despair that was overpowering him merely got stronger.

After awhile, the pain retreated into the background and he got to his feet again. It was time to keep moving, though he had yet to determine if he was actually going anywhere. The aimlessness with which he wandered suited him well. It mirrored exactly what he felt. He had no place to go, no direction to move in, so he simply kept walking further nowhere, or he just remained where he was, waiting for... waiting for what? How was he going to find his way again?

Soon enough he was forced to sit down again. Damn his injuries. Damn his pain. Damn everything. It was the only thing at all that he was sure of anymore, and he was tired of it. He wanted peace, he wanted answers, and he wanted his life back, and as far as he could see, none of those things were within his reach.

The sound of nature's silence was broken by the soft echo of music drifting its way down the gently sloping land from one of the houses above. He craned his head around to try and determine where it was coming from, but finally shrugged and returned his gaze to the water. It wasn't important. What was important was discovering what it was he was doing here. He knew somewhere deep inside him that he hadn't yet found or accomplished what his heart was telling him he was supposed to, and it was critical that he did. He knew he would never again be able to face his best friend if he didn't find his feet, and this just might be his last chance.

I'm sorry, he thought brokenly. Nick, I'm sorry.

An unfamiliar melody floated on the wind from that house above the river, and though he tried to tune it out, it wouldn't let him. A voice that he recognized began to sing softly, gently, and when the words struck home his face went pale.

The clouds above you start to pour, and all of your doubts rage like a storm. And you don't know who you are anymore, let me help you find what you've been searching for.

Somewhere there's a field and a river, you can let your soul run free. Someday let me be the giver, let me bring you peace. Somewhere there's a break in the weather, where your heart and spirit go free. Someday it'll be for the better, let this bring you peace.

Stunned, he remained motionless as the song continued, every single word striking him with such clarity that he almost lost his balance. He wasn't alone. No matter how dark things were, he wasn't alone. All he had to do was open his heart, and He was there. This entire time he had pushed Him away. Brian closed his eyes and remembered the prayers he and Howie had said as they huddled in his hospital room. He remembered the letters from the fans. So many of them had offered their prayers up for all of them. It had saved their lives. Of that he had no doubt. And there was still time to save the rest.

He was ready to stop denying his heart the truth. Something terrible had happened to all of them, and the results had changed their lives. Things may never be the same, but now, for the first time, he felt that he could accept that. He had four brothers (Nick may have let go of him, but there was no way he was going to let go of Nick), a family that loved him, a legion of fans who had proven how much they cared, and God himself behind him. The road wouldn't be easy, but he had enough love behind him to take him down it.

No matter what happens, we stand together. If we do that, we can make it.

Yes. They could. And they would.

He called another cab, feeling freer than he had in a long time.

Chapter 27

Homecoming

Howie, A.J., and Kevin had tried everything they could think of to reach their missing band mate. Howie called Brian's cell phone, which they then discovered he'd left behind when Kevin was the one who had answered it. A.J. suggested that Howie go back to the apartment to wait and see if he showed up there. A.J. himself refused to leave the phone, just in case he called. In between keeping an eye on the local channels to see if he had been spotted, Kevin called Brian's parents to see if by any chance he had tried to contact them. He hadn't. Before the Littrells could panic, Kevin explained what had happened, leaving out many of the details, and promised them he would call back as soon as Brian had been found.

"Where the hell could he possibly have gone?" A.J. exclaimed for the umpteenth time. There was little else he could do to keep himself occupied, and the more time that passed the more vocal he seemed to become over the situation.

"I don't know," Kevin said with a sigh. "I guess we'll find out when he wants us to. I'm going to go check on Nick."

"How is he?"

"He was still asleep when I looked in on him last. I'd guess he'll be up pretty soon." Kevin leaned hard on his crutch, looking torn.

"What is it?" A.J. asked bluntly. Subtle had never been something he was good at, and with all the hell that had broken loose he was way beyond making any attempts at it.

Kevin leaned on his crutch, looking like a lost boy as opposed to a fully-grown man. "What do you think brought all of this on?" he asked softly. He had missed so much during his recovery that he didn't understand where any of this had come from. He was hoping, praying, that A.J. could shed some light on something that to him had seemed so utterly senseless.

"I don't know if I understand it," A.J. said, somewhat uncomfortably, "But I have a vague idea." Kevin waited for him to continue. "When Howie and I came to see him after he woke up, he keep going on and on about how needed to make Brian stop crying. He kept saying how sorry he was, and that he had to come back so he wouldn't cry."

"I don't understand."

"Well, when they took him off of that respirator, Brian just lost it. And you should thank your lucky stars you weren't there when they *told* him they were taking him off of it. God, the things he was yelling... he blamed me and Howie for not stopping them."

Kevin was silent.

“He kept flipping out, Kevin. It was bad. They wouldn’t let him see you or Nick because he wasn’t strong enough, and he just couldn’t take it. I swear it almost killed him. I was so glad when you woke up. You kinda brought him back for us.”

“I had no idea,” Kevin said softly, his heart aching.

“I wonder if Nick somehow knew. You know those people who have out of body experiences, or some shit? Maybe it was something like that.” He tossed one hand outward, brushing it off as ridiculous. “I don’t know. That probably sounds crazy. But it’s the only thing I can think of.”

“Maybe it’s not so crazy.”

“Do you actually believe in that kind of stuff?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“Not really. But I think that somehow he knew.”

They were interrupted by when one of the PTs stuck her head in on them. “Kevin,” she said hesitantly. “He’s waking up.”

Kevin immediately stood up and grabbed his crutches and headed for Nick’s room, leaving A.J. behind to resume his endless pacing.

God, if you’re up there, enough is enough, he thought. Bring him home.

Nick looked absolutely miserable. Kevin eased into a chair next to him, trying to figure out what the hell to even say. What he had done was unforgivable, but at the same time Kevin felt for him. He was lost and confused, and utterly ashamed.

“Is he back?” Nick asked, refusing to make eye contact.

“No, not yet,” Kevin said softly.

“This is my fault.”

Kevin allowed a tiny smile. “A little while ago you said it was all Brian’s fault. Make up your mind.”

“Why? Why did I do that? Why did I say it? I don’t even know where it came from. He’s my best friend!”

“Easy Nicky,” Kevin said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“What am I gonna do?” Nick whispered.

“I don’t know. We’ll figure it out when we find him.”

“What if we don’t?” He finally looked up at Kevin, fear in his eyes.

“Don’t even say that. We’ll find him. He’s kind of easy to spot.”

“How could I have hurt him like that? Did you see his *eyes*?”

“Yeah,” Kevin said gruffly. “I saw them.” They sat in silence for a while. “How long have you felt like that, Nick?”

“Almost since I woke up,” Nick said, guiltily. “I didn’t really know why, until today. I kept telling myself it was silly, but every time I was around him it got worse.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

Nick knew that Kevin was not angry with him, and that he could trust him. He would trust Kevin with anything, any of them would. But he couldn’t tell him. There was only one person he could tell, and he had driven that person away.

“No. I can’t. Please understand. I just can’t.”

“It’s ok. It’s ok Nicky. I understand. I just want you to know that if you need to tell me anything, I’ll be here to listen. No matter what.”

“I know. Thank you.”

Kevin wrapped him up in another hug, and Nick wiped his eyes before accepting the Kleenex Kevin offered him. “Do you still feel that way? About Brian?” he asked.

Nick shook his head. “No. I... I don’t understand it.” He blew his nose loudly.

“He went through an awful lot for you and me, Nick. This is going to be hard to fix. You kicked him when he was down.”

“I *know!*” Nick said, his voice rising. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Give him your hand and help him up.”

“I just want him to come back. God, I will never forgive myself if something happens to him.”

Howie sighed as he opened the door to their apartment. It was getting late, and still no sign of Brian. He had gone out again to look around, but to no avail. He was nowhere. Howie dropped his keys on the counter, wanting nothing more than a hot shower and a good night's sleep. He might get the first one, but until Brian was found the odds of achieving the second one were slim to none. Rubbing the back of his neck to try and relieve some of the tension, he headed over to the sofa where he had left his cell phone, wanting to check in with A.J. one more time. Upon entering the living room he stopped in his tracks, not quite believing his eyes. Brian was *there*, curled up on the couch, asleep.

He blinked in disbelief. Brian looked pale and weary, and very vulnerable as he clutched a pillow to tightly to his chest, but otherwise fine. Howie had a million questions to ask him, but decided to let him sleep, but forced himself to wait. Brian needed sleep, and Howie was determined to let him have it. He poked around for an extra blanket and carefully draped it over his sleeping friend before flipping off the lamp on a table beside his head. As soon as he located his phone, he hurried into his bedroom and dialed Kevin.

“This is Kevin.”

“He’s back.”

“He is?” Kevin exclaimed, almost dropping the phone. Howie grinned into the receiver as the other man fumbled with it. “How is he?” he asked breathlessly when he had regained control. “Where the hell was he?”

“I don’t know. I went out looking for him again, and when I came back he was asleep on the couch. He is *out*, man. But he looks fine. I have no idea where he could have been.”

“Well as long as he’s ok,” Kevin said with a sigh of relief.

“How are things there?”

“Nick’s put himself in the doghouse. He feels terrible.”

“He should.”

“Relax D. I’ll handle this one. You worry about him for now. We have got to put this behind us. If we can’t make this right we can kiss the Backstreet Boys goodbye.”

“You’re right,” Howie said, putting his fingertips to his forehead. “Where’s A.J. at?”

“He was gonna stay here tonight. That ok with you?”

“Yeah. That’ll be good actually. I don’t want to assault him with a group when he wakes up. I’ll try and talk to him, and then we’ll be over tomorrow, I hope. You may want to keep Nick out of sight when we get there.”

“No problem. Like I said, it’s under control.”

After he hung up, Howie crashed. The day’s events had sucked the life out of him and he was out like a light, but not before vowing to be the first one up in the morning.

When Brian finally stirred, he could smell coffee brewing in the kitchen. Opening his eyes, he sat up slowly, suppressing a groan when his stiff joints complained bitterly to the motion. He rolled his head around, trying to get the kinks out. A banging noise in the kitchen caught his attention, and he looked up to see Howie messing around with a assortment of pots and pans. Brian hoisted himself up off of the couch and stumbled into the kitchen to see what was up.

“Hey man,” Howie said, concentrating on the eggs he was scrambling.

“Morning,” Brian said with a yawn. “Smells good.”

“That’s ‘cause it is good. Sit down, breakfast will be ready in a minute.”

Brian sat. “Where’s A.J.?”

“He stayed at the center last night.”

“Oh.”

Howie finished with the eggs, and served them on two plates, along with some bacon. He then picked up a container with warm tortillas and set it in the middle of the table, winking at Brian’s dumfounded look. To top it off he brought over two mugs of steaming coffee and a carton of juice.

“Just like mommy used to make,” Brian said teasingly.

“What can I say?” Howie said with a grin.

“I knew you’d take advantage of all of this Mexican stuff while were here.”

“Don’t knock the breakfast taco. It is an art. Want some hot sauce?”

“Gimmie. Damn, you thought of everything didn’t you?”

“They don’t call me Latin Lover for nothing. Potatoes will be ready in a minute.”

“My name is Howie D. and this is how we do it,” Brian mimicked. “Bacon and eggs, pancakes, orange juice...”

“I have spatula and I am not afraid to use it,” Howie said threateningly, waving about the said spatula. Brian pretended to cower in fear before snickering.

Howie finally sat down and the two began to eat. At first he tried to wait and see if Brian would bring up the subject of yesterday on his own, but unfortunately he seemed in no hurry to do so. Clearing his throat reluctantly, he decided it was up to him to at least try and get some answers out of him.

“Look, Bri. If you don’t want to talk about it I understand, but I’m willing to listen.”

Brian looked up from his plate and smiled uncertainly. “It’s ok.” Howie scowled doubtfully. “Really, it is,” he insisted. “I did a lot of thinking yesterday.”

“Where did you go?”

“The Riverwalk.”

“And you weren’t *spotted*?” Howie said incredulously.

“I stayed on the quiet section. Not many people.”

“For eight hours?”

“Yeah. I guess it was that long.” He stared off into space, and at first Howie didn’t think he was going to continue, but eventually he drew in a breath and spoke again. “You know,” he said thoughtfully, “I’m almost glad it happened. I found a few answers I wasn’t even sure I was looking for.”

“Like what?”

Brian looked down at the table, fishing around his plate with his fork before returning his attention to his friend. “Something has been missing ever since it happened,” he said slowly, determined find the right words. “Nothing has been right. Not with Nick, not with anything. I.. I just haven’t been able to let go and admit that what happened might mean that things won’t ever be the same as they were before. I couldn’t see that, I *wouldn’t* see that, and until I did I didn’t have anything to hold on to. At first I tried clinging to Nick, but then when he let go... I didn’t know what to do.”

Howie watched him carefully, waiting for him to go on.

“You remember that day in the hospital, when they first told me Nick was going to come off of the respirator?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am.”

“Brian, don’t.”

“No, let me finish,” he insisted. “I never apologized to you and A.J. I couldn’t bear the thought of letting go of him. You and A.J. accepted what you knew was best for him, and I just couldn’t. And I couldn’t stand the thought that you were right. That’s why I said those horrible things. I didn’t want things to change. I was too afraid.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Howie said softly.

“I think that’s why everything was so hard for me. I tried to shut out all of the bad things that were going on, and refused to face and accept the consequences of what happened that night. It was too much, and I couldn’t handle it.” He paused and frowned.

“Does this make any sense?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think it does. What brought about the change?” Howie asked quietly.

“It’ll probably sound silly to you, but trust me, it had a big impact on me.”

“It won’t. You know that.”

“Well, I just sat and thought for a long time. When I was tired of sitting, I walked. When it hurt to keep walking, I sat again. I was an honest to goodness lost soul, Howie. I had no idea where to go or what to do. I had this insane notion that if I just got far enough away, I could leave it all behind.”

“That’s not so insane.”

“Maybe not. But when I was sitting there, I heard music from up the hill. The part of the river where I was is nothing but restored houses. I never did figure out which house it was coming from, but I couldn’t tune it out. Then I started hearing the words, and all of the sudden things just seemed to make sense. I still don’t understand what went wrong with Nick, and the thought that he blames me is one that I *hate*. I want so badly to be able to fix it, but I don’t know if I can. But you know what? That’s ok. Whatever happens next, I’ll be ok. I just have to keep going, and somewhere along the way, it will get better.”

“What was the song?” Howie asked curiously.

Brian gave him a lopsided smile. “You won’t believe this. I hadn’t heard it before, and when I found out where it was from I wanted to die, but I knew who it was right off the bat. Talk about ironic.” He cleared his throat and began to sing the words. Howie’s eyes slowly widened as Brian sang. When he hit the chorus, Howie almost fell off of his chair.

“Oh my God,” Howie murmured. Brian nodded, his eyes looking downward.

“Who sings that?” Howie demanded. “I haven’t heard it either.”

Brian hid a grin behind his hand, propping his elbow up on the table. He mumbled something under his breath.

“Who?”

“I said ‘NSYNC.’”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not.”

Howie laughed. “Is that on one of their Europe releases or something?”

“Nope. Worse.”

“What then?”

“Remember the soundtrack that Aaron got that song in not too long ago?”

“Which one- oh. Wait, no. Do not say Pokemon. Is it Pokemon? Come on, you can’t be serious.”

“I have never been more serious in my entire life.”

“Oh well,” Howie said with a helpless shrug. “Take help where you can find it, right?”

“I know, right? God works in mysterious ways.” He sobered all the sudden. “Someone was trying to chat with me,” he said softly. “So I let Him bring me some peace.” He stood up, looking more secure than Howie had seen him since this entire mess had started.

“I’m ready to go back now.”

Chapter 28 ***Finding The Way***

Kevin hopped into Nick's room and found him sitting on his bed staring out the window, his bad knee bent awkwardly in front of him. He looked as if he'd lost his best friend in the world. In a way, he had.

"They found him," Kevin said, startling him. When the words sank in Nick's blue eyes widened, and filled with hope.

"Really? He's ok?"

"He's ok," Kevin said with a smile. "Howie found him asleep on the couch at his apartment. They're going to be here in a little while."

Nick's smile faded. "They are?" he whispered. "What should I do?"

"Give him a few minutes. Steer clear of him for a little while, and when he feels more comfortable, go talk to him."

"How in the world would he ever forgive me?" Nick asked, looking away.

"What kind of a question is that? He's Brian. He's a sucker like that." Kevin reached up and lightly smacked the back of Nick's head. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself. That's all you've done. Get off your ass and do something, for heaven's sake. You're starting to get on my nerves."

"Sorry," Nick said sarcastically, allowing a smile to escape. "Wouldn't want the gimp to come whoop my ass or anything."

"Hey," Kevin warned him. "You are just as much of a gimp as I am, so watch your mouth, Blondie." Kevin made as if he was about to attack, but Nick threw up a hand.

"Surgery!" he yelled. "You tackle me and I swear to God, Kevin!"

Kevin grinned. "Excuses, excuses. Consider yourself lucky. But you'd better get that knee of yours working pretty quick, because as soon as this rod comes out and I am free to walk around, you're going to want to be able to run."

Nick sobered. "Are you scared?" he asked. "About surgery?"

"Yeah, I am, a little. Funny, isn't it? It's no big deal, especially considering all of the other stuff they've already done to me."

"I would be scared."

"That's because you're a chicken shit."

“Dude, you are *dead*. Do you hear me? I am *so* coming after you in your sleep.”

“Too bad I’d hear you clunking around a mile away.”

“Just you wait.”

Kevin chuckled. Someone knocked on the doorframe, and they looked up to see A.J. poking his head in the door.

“Yo,” he said. “They’re here. Just FYI.”

“Thanks Bone,” Kevin said. He looked at Nick. “You stay here, I’m gonna go see how he’s doing, ok?”

Nick nodded, biting his lip. It was time to face the consequences.

Brian looked a little nervous standing in the lobby. A.J. sauntered in to greet him, followed shortly by Kevin. Howie was off speaking to one of the PTs.

“B-Rok, what up?” A.J. said.

“Hey man,” Brian said, cracking a smile.

“Nice of you to decide to wander back our way.”

“My pleasure. Somebody had to be around to keep their eye on you.”

A.J. sniffled loudly, and wailed. “It is so good to be *loved!*”

Kevin rolled his eyes and reached out with one arm to shove him out of the way. A.J. turned his nose up indignantly.

“Better be thankful that I’m too nice to hit a guy with crutches.”

Kevin ignored him. “Come here, Brian, lemme look at you. I need to make sure that a night in old San Antonio didn’t leave any permanent damage.”

“Kevin, do not parent me,” Brian said warningly, his eyes smiling. “I’ll break your other leg.”

“Did you know that is an actual event here?” Howie asked, coming up behind them.

“What?”

“A Night in Old San Antonio. I read about it in a tour book I picked up. It’s some big fiesta. It sounds great.”

All three stared at him.

“What?” Howie exclaimed.

“Latin Lover,” A.J. said.

Howie grinned.

“He’s really going at it today. We had breakfast tacos this morning,” Brian remarked.

“Oh, dude,” A.J. said suddenly. “You have got to check this out. While we were waiting for the Lone Ranger to come back, Kevin and I did some serious work yesterday. You have to hear it.”

“Oh yeah?” Howie asked. “Let us have it.”

A.J. glanced over at Kevin.

“Why don’t we go sit down first,” Kevin said dryly. “Maybe y’all don’t have crutches, but I do.”

“Oh yeah,” A.J. said bashfully, forgetting in his sudden excitement. They headed over to a set of chairs and sat down.

“Ready?” A.J. asked anxiously.

“As I’ll ever be,” Kevin said. He tried to look relaxed, but Brian and Howie saw through it.

“*Ain’t nobody else but you...*” A.J. chanted in his low, mysterious voice. Kevin drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“*There is nobody who can make me cry. Nobody else can do it, nobody but you. Nobody but you.*”

Howie and Brian were grinning, and added their voices where it was necessary. Kevin sang the song with feeling, and only stumbled over the lyrics a few times.

“*Somebody tell me ‘cause I can’t eat or sleep when you’re not close to my body you’re a bittersweet delight, come and help me through the night...*”

When he was finished, A.J. was grinning from ear-to-ear, and patted him non-too gently on the back. Kevin grimaced, but returned the smile. “A.J.’s been helping me out with that the past few days,” he said sheepishly.

“So that’s where you two kept disappearing to,” Howie said with a laugh.

“Hell yeah,” A.J. said, tipping his hat down on his forehead, still wearing the grin.

“That was great, Kev,” Brian congratulated him. “Really great. We’ll be back at it in no time.”

“And that’s the way I like it!” A.J. belted at the top of his lungs while beating the tune out on his thighs.

Howie made a face and stuck his finger in his ear and twisted it around. “Ow,” he said, glancing sideways at A.J, who stuck his tongue out at him. A voice from the doorway caught their attention.

“Was that Kevin I just heard?” An incredulous Nick was standing there, lounging on his crutches. He stopped short when his eyes met with Brian. He immediately looked away and examined the floor with great interest.

Brian shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and said nothing. He looked ready to get up and leave again, but Howie caught his attention and shook his head. Kevin gazed imploringly at Nick, silently asking him to get on with it. No one said a word. Nick opened his mouth to speak, but then lost his nerve. He turned around and left.

“Son of a bitch,” Kevin swore. “I am gonna kill that kid.” He grabbed his crutches and swung off after him.

“You ok, Rok?” Howie asked.

“Yeah,” Brian managed to say. “Fine. Couldn’t be better.”

“Well, you have to admit it was kinda funny watching them chase each other out of here on crutches.”

Brian forced a laugh. “I guess it was.”

“He’ll come around. He felt terrible Brian, you know that.”

“Do I?” he spat.

“Yes, you do.”

Brian sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Here I claim to have found healing, and at the first test...”

“Give it time. Just stay positive. It won’t happen overnight.”

“Damn,” Brian said with a wry smile.

Kevin threw open the door to Nick’s room with a bang and shoved his way in, his face a mask of fury. “Damn it Nick! That was inexcusable. Do *not* put him through any more than you already have!”

“I’m sorry!” he cried.

“Why the hell are you telling me that? He’s the one who needs to hear it!”

“I know, I know.”

“So get the hell out there and say it.”

Nick jumped at tone of Kevin’s voice. He had never heard him so angry and upset. “It’s not that easy,” he said weakly.

Kevin glared at him for a few seconds and then whirled around, almost fell when his body didn’t quite follow him, and slammed the door with a vengeance on his way out. He sat down in a chair in the hallway and placed his head in his hands.

Chapter 29

Stand By Me

Nick paced his room (slowly, which only added to his frustration), wringing his hands. Why hadn't he said anything? He was dying to; the words had been right on the edge of his lips. He just couldn't push them out. Some force was holding him back.

You never had to see him, did you? Well I did, Nick. I did and I have never been so scared in my whole fucking life.

He stopped for a moment in the middle of the room, completely oblivious to his surroundings.

Maybe the reason he couldn't do what he so desperately wanted to was because he just didn't understand. From the moment he had woken up he had been trapped in a bubble, one that confined him even more than the one he already lived in. For him, all that existed was his own hurt, his own pain. It was his, it belonged to him and it was a part of him. He couldn't run from it, and no matter how he tried he couldn't hide from it. Brian had tried to enter that bubble, and Nick had been so afraid that it would pop that he had struck him down in the worst possible way. He had *seen* the hope die in Brian's eyes. Not only that, but he had been the one to kill it.

And instead of trying to make amends, what had he done? Nothing. *Nothing!* Howie was right. He didn't deserve Brian's friendship. He was so concerned about hiding from his own demons that he had refused to raise his head and see the nightmare that faced the rest of them.

What had happened to Brian? What had happened to all of them? That night had been stolen from him, and until now he had been too terrified to ask for it back. Now he needed it back. He had to know what it was that had put them all down this road. It terrified him, but he needed to understand it. It was the only way.

There was only one person who could answer his question, the one who had raised it in the first place. He left his room and went to find Howie, and discovered him lifting weights in the gym with his back turned. As he stretched up he noticed Nick's reflection in the wall mirror in front of him. Instantly he paused, and averted his eyes uncomfortably, busying himself with adjusting the weight level he was using.

His face was unreadable, but there was something about him that was a little different from the others. It could only be seen by someone who knew him as well as Nick did. Hidden deep within those caring brown eyes of his was a man who had aged years in a matter of weeks. Some of the happiness, the carefree spirit that typically lived in those eyes was missing. None of them were the same as they had been before the accident, but some extra weight rested on Howie's shoulders, one that was starting to become too much for him to carry. Perhaps his unrelenting devotion to his fitness, which had increased significantly, was his way of trying to make sure that he was still strong enough to carry that weight. Whatever it was, Nick had to know.

“D?” he asked hesitantly.

Howie watched him in the mirror for a few moments before putting down the weight and turning to face him. He said nothing, only waited for Nick to continue.

“I need you... I need you to tell me what happened.”

“You know what happened Nick,” Howie said softly, a heavy cloud descending upon his already tired features. Deep down he knew what Nick wanted to know but was unwilling to admit it.

“No.” Nick said, closing his eyes briefly, convincing himself that he couldn’t put it off anymore. “I need to know what happened to you. To him. To them.”

“You don’t want to know Nick. I don’t want to know. I wish I didn’t.” He busied himself putting away the equipment he had been using.

“You’re right. I don’t want to know, but I need to know.”

Howie said nothing.

“Damn it, Howie. You can’t hide it from us forever. You know what I don’t, and until I understand what the three of you went through I won’t be able to get Brian back. Look at yourself; it’s tearing you apart! I can see it in you, D. I know you need to tell.”

Slowly Howie raised his head to meet Nick’s gaze, his eyes brimming.

“Come on,” Nick said softly. “I need you D. I know you may hate me right now. I hate me right now. I’m not asking you to forgive me, but here I am. Right in front of you. I’m right here.”

Howie sank down to the floor, the cold floor providing some relief to his sweaty body. He hung his head between his knees, resting his arms on his kneecaps while breathing heavily. Nick slowly sat down next to him, stunned at the sight of Howie looking so broken. Tentatively, he reached out and touched his friend’s arm. Howie jerked his head back up, his eyes flashing. Nick pulled his hand away, and brought it to rest with his palm on the floor, helping to support his weight.

“Please?” he whispered hoarsely, willing himself not to cry.

“Why me?” Howie demanded, his red-rimmed eyes burning a hole into Nick’s heart.

“Because you’re the only one who really knows. Physically, you wound up much better off, but mentally I think you took the worst of it.”

“No, Brian did,” Howie spat. “I was the one who got to sit there and watch him fall apart.” With a heart-wrenching gasp, Howie found himself spilling his guts to Nick right there on the floor, reliving every moment while he told it. A.J. flipping out and nearly killing him, his first visit to see Brian, in which the man had looked one step away from death. Uniting in the trip to visit Kevin and Nick, and how it ripped them apart. Brian’s anxiety attacks, and how each one took a little bit more of his strength away. Singing by their band mate’s bedside, using their broken voices for all they were worth, because it was all they had. Then he told about being present when the respirator was removed, and Brian’s horrible reaction to the possibility of Nick’s death changing from nightmare to reality.

At this Nick closed his eyes, fighting the urge to get up and run away from it all. Brian had nearly destroyed himself over him. And what had he done? He had gone and pinned all of the blame, all of the misery, all of the pain on his shoulders, when he already well beyond what he was capable of bearing on his own. Instead he should have been there to reassure him, and returned the friendship Brian had given to him.

“Don’t make him suffer anymore, Nick,” Howie begged. “It’s killing him. I know it is. If only you really knew what he went through. I’ve never been so scared in my life. I would have killed you where you stood when you yelled at him. But how could you know? Only A.J. and I saw him.”

Nick was speechless. Howie had sat back and watched one by one as each of his brothers came completely unraveled, forcing him to be the one to hold them together, a task that was far too much for one man to carry alone. Howie had stuck by all of them, unfailingly, no matter what the cost to himself. A.J. owed his life to him. Brian owed him his sanity. He’d been there for all of them, but none of them really saw what *he’d* gone through.

He was sitting now, his tearstained eyes on the floor, not quite sure what to do next. Nick exhaled harshly, hating what had happened to make him this way. He hated it. With a small snuffle, he crawled over to his friend and wrapped him up in a hug, much the way Kevin had done for him yesterday. Howie accepted it gratefully. Nick patted him on the back and pulled away.

“Thanks, man,” Howie said, attempting a smile.

“I’m sorry. For what I did and for everything else that happened.”

“The accident wasn’t your fault, Nick.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “But I’m still sorry. You’re too good of a person to have to go through this.” Howie laughed through the tears that were still trickling slowly down his cheeks. “I mean it,” Nick told him.

“Thank you, Nick.”

“Do something for me.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry anymore. We’re going to get through this. All of us. We are going to stick together and be better than ever before. I know it.”

Howie nodded his head. He believed him.

“Okay. Now I have to go. I kicked a very good friend of mine when he was down, and now I need to help him get back up, if he’ll let me.”

Nick got up off the floor and gave Howie a reassuring wink. Joyfully, he saw that some of the weight that had been threatening to crush his friend’s weak shoulders was gone.

Brian had gone into one of the rooms and lost himself in the one thing that could still bring him solace-music. It was like a protective cocoon that hid him safely away from the world around him. When he was singing, nothing mattered but the music. Each note resonated throughout his body and lifted him up out of the darkness that surrounded him, giving him wings that let him fly. It was the greatest natural high he had ever felt, and it allowed him to find a calm center in the middle of the hurricane that had become his life. He purposefully sat with his back to the door, not wanting to be disturbed by anything going on outside. One of their instrumental CDs was in the stereo, as he sang along to the music he forced himself to forget about everything else. Time passed without telling him, and he was completely unaware of the figure that eventually appeared in the doorway.

*But my love is all I have to give,
Without you I don’t think that I can live
I wish I could give the world to you but love is all I have to give.
But my love is all I have to give,
Without you I don’t think that I can live
I wish I could give the world to you but love is all I have to give.”*

He stopped singing as the music started to fade out, but a voice in the doorway made him stop cold.

*“My love is all
I have to give,”*

Brian whirled around at the new but familiar voice, and came face to face with Nick. He stared for a moment, and then found himself singing with him. The harmony their two voices created at that moment was one they rarely used when performing the song, but Brian had always thought that it was the best part of it.

“Think I can live

*Without your love,
The world is for you
But love is all I have to give.*

When they had finished, Nick wiped his eyes with one fist and let his gaze falter to the floor.

“That was good, Nicky,” Brian said softly, with a sad smile.

“For someone as rusty as me, I guess it was ok.”

A few minutes of silence passed. Brian looked at him solemnly, not quite sure what to do next. Nick looked a way for a moment, and when he turned back, his eyes were bright again. Brian stood up from the couch and went over to him.

“I didn’t mean it Brian. I didn’t mean it.”

Brian said nothing.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know if you can forgive me, but I am *so sorry*.”

“Talk to me,” Brian said, in a broken whisper. “How did I hurt you?”

“Brian...” Nick said, nearly choking on the lump in his throat. “No. You didn’t. You never did. I don’t know why I said those horrible things. Just... God.” He looked away as his voice failed him, leaning all of his weight on his crutches.

“Why?”

That small, wounded voice did him in. He gave up trying to hide the fact that he was crying, and did it openly. Wordlessly, Brian helped him over to the couch and laid his crutches down on the floor. Brian sat down at the opposite end, watching silently. Nick stared at him, wiping away the last of the tears, unable to believe that even now, Brian would help him without question. He ran his fingers through his hair nervously, and then held his hands out in front of him as if he wasn’t sure what to do with them. After a few false starts, he finally began to pour his heart out, just as Howie had done.

“I felt it Brian. I felt what you felt. I could hear you crying, and I knew how to get to you, but I was too afraid to go. I thought for sure that Howie and A.J. and Kevin would be there to take care of whatever was wrong, but they couldn’t could they? They couldn’t because what was wrong was me. It was me you were crying over, and once I realized that I had to find you. I had to let you know I was okay. Then after I woke up, the world seemed to have just been dumped upside-down, I had no idea what to do. I needed someone to blame for it all, even though there was no one to blame. I blamed it on you.” He drew in a shaky breath.

“Nick...”

Nick held up his hand. "If I don't finish this now, I never will."

Brian nodded slowly. He could see that what Nick was trying to tell him was almost impossible, since all he had to draw upon were his shattered nerves and broken confidence. *Fight for it*, he thought urgently. *We can fight for this*.

"When I was in the hospital," he said haltingly, "I wanted to be able to talk to you so bad. I needed to talk to someone, and you were the only one I wanted it to be, but I was so mixed up, I'm *still* mixed up, that I couldn't do it. I was in my own little bubble, and I was terrified to let someone else in. I didn't think there was anything anyone could do to help me."

"We were always there, Nick. I was always there."

"I know," he whispered. "But I was so scared. I have never been that scared."

"Of what?" Brian asked, leaning forward. "Tell me now."

"Of what would happen next. What the future would be. I was terrified my knee wouldn't heal and I wouldn't be able to be with you guys. You four have been my life. I can't imagine growing up without y'all. Especially you. I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to make the cut anymore. You'd go on without me and I'd be left alone. I was terrified that nothing would ever be the way it was. I was... scared. Just scared."

"Oh God, Nick," Brian said, his voice breaking. "We would never have let that happen. Ever. You can't break us apart. Don't you see that? A.J. said it too, no matter what gets thrown our way, we will deal with it together. Together. You weren't the only one who was scared. I was petrified of what was going to happen. Waking up and wondering if you were dead or alive, wondering if the next time I had an anxiety attack that they wouldn't be able to help me."

Nick raised his eyes to look at him. All at once he saw the frail, weak Brian that Howie and A.J. had seen. He looked so fragile that Nick was scared that if he so much as touched him he would splinter and crack into a million pieces, and be gone forever. Brian looked right back at him, seeing Nick as someone who was utterly lost, and looking for someone to help him find his way home again.

"I want to show you something."

Nick gave him a curious glance, but was afraid to nod. Brian turned his back to him and pulled his shirt off over his head. Nick gasped in shock. Brian's back was covered with a mass of healing gashes and lacerations. Some of them seemed to have been healing on their own, while others had clearly been sewn back together with sutures. All of them were jagged and terrible, a permanent reminder of the night that had changed their lives. Against his will, Nick found him extending his hand to touch the marks that tattooed his friend's skin. Brian jumped a little in surprise at the coolness of his touch.

“How...?”

“From the window. I went straight through it. Dr. Westin said it was really tricky to try and remove all of the glass from it. It was bad. I wound up lying on my back when everything finally stopped, driving it further into my skin. That and they said I got so violent when they brought me in, that Westin said it was almost a blessing that I flat lined, because I stopped thrashing.”

Nick gaped at him. Even Howie hadn't told him that.

“Howie doesn't know,” Brian added, reading his thoughts. “Howie knows they almost lost me, in fact he was the one who told me. But I asked the doctor to tell me everything, and since then you are the first one I've told.”

Nick exhaled sharply. “Oh my God.”

“I'd say that pretty much scared the shit out of me.”

Nick nodded. “That would do it.” They were both silent for a while.

“Brian?”

“Yeah?”

“You know I haven't sung a note until just a minute ago when I came in here?”

“Really?” Brian was surprised. Nick looked so depressed by it.

“I really miss it.”

Brian smiled kindly, and opened his mouth to sing again.

*“When the night has come, and the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see.”*

Nick's eyes began to fill up again. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve a friend like this. But he vowed never to let him down again.

*“No I won't be afraid, no I won't be afraid.
Just as long as you stand, stand by me.”*

Nick jumped in at the chorus.

*“So darlin, darlin stand by me, ohh stand by me
Oh stand, stand by me, stand by me.”*

Their voices intertwined in the harmony that brought their young fans to their knees. Each embraced the sound, because deep down inside each had secretly wondered if it would ever be heard again.

*“If the sky that we look upon, should tumble and fall
Or the mountains should tumble in the sea.
I won’t cry, I won’t cry, no I won’t shed a tear.
Just as long as you stand, stand by me.
So darlin, darlin stand by me ohhh stand by me.
Whoa stand now, stand by me, stand by me.”*

Nick stopped to let Brian continue, and then rejoined him at the chorus.

*“Whenever your in trouble won’t you stand by me,”
“Whoa stand by me. Oh stand now, stand by me, stand by me.”*

Their eyes locked once again, and Nick saw the forgiveness he sought in Brian’s face. The two friends embraced. Brian had forgotten how tall he was.

“You know,” Brian said thoughtfully, after they had pulled away. “A.J. left his hat on that chair out there.”

Nick stared at his friend, baffled at the comment. Baffled that is, until he saw the mischievous light that glinted in his eyes. A slow grin spread across Nick’s face. How could he have ever thought that Brian wouldn’t understand?

“Did he now.”

“Yes. He did.”

“We should... get it for him.”

“Yes. We should.”

“Has anyone seen Nick or Brian?” Howie asked A.J. as he passed him in the hall.

“Nope. Right now I’m more worried about finding my hat.”

Howie snorted. “Some friend you are.”

“I’m serious. I’d better find the damn thing. Let’s see, the last time I saw Brian, he was singing. I haven’t seen Nick since earlier.” A.J. looked over to see his hat resting bottom side up between the arms of a hat stand by the main door.

“There it is,” he said cheerfully, wandering over to it. Howie turned to walk away.

“What the *fuck!*”

Howie spun around in alarm, and then began to laugh so hard he had to grab on to a counter top to stay on his feet. A.J. was standing by the hat stand, hat on his head, holding its brim with both hands, his head and shoulders covered in flour.

The sound of snickering off to his right made him turn. Brian and Nick cowered in a doorway, barely controlling their laughter. They stopped when A.J. saw them.

“Oh shit,” Nick said, trying to keep a straight face.

“Go, go! Get out of here!” Brian squealed. They scooted away as fast as Nick could manage.

A.J. continued to stand there, watching their retreat, absolutely dumbfounded.

“Well, I think this crisis has passed,” Howie said, getting control of himself again.

“Well that’s good, because I think I feel another one coming on,” A.J. muttered.

Chapter 30 ***Moving On***

After his reconciliation with Brian, Nick threw himself into his physical therapy. Nothing was going to stop him now. He and Brian were back to spending all of their time together, and causing general hell for the orderlies and PTs that worked with them. On one occasion they snuck into their break room and creatively rearranged all of their belongings, moving purses and bags all around the room. They also enjoyed wreaking havoc during therapy. In one particular session, Brian, as usual, had joined Nick and his therapist, a young woman named Audrey. In the middle of one of their exercises, Nick stopped cold and began to stare at her.

“Nick?” she asked anxiously. “What’s wrong?” His reply came in the form of a completely deadpan expression.

“Am I original?” he asked, his voice low and husky. His bright blue eyes bore directly into her. She blinked in surprise at the question and looked over to Brian for help, only to find that he was wearing an identical look.

“I-I don’t know,” she stammered. “Sure. You are very original Nick.”

“Am I the only one?” Brian asked, sounding desperate and needy.

Audrey looked back and forth between the two of them, completely baffled. “What the...Brian, are you ok?” They had both gone off their rockers.

“Am I sexual?” Nick said seductively, leaning in towards her just slightly.

“*What?*”

“Am I everything you need?” they said together, still speaking with that same eerie voice.

A.J. passed them at that moment, reading a sheet of paper. Without even looking up, he finished for them. “You’d better rock your body now.”

Realization dawned on her, and she gave her patients a dark look. “Funny,” she said flatly. “Very amusing.”

“You know you love us,” Nick said cheekily.

About three days after Brian and Nick made up, A.J. found them in the gym with a basketball. Nick had been freed of his crutches, and was trying to get along without them. Unfortunately, he was terrified of trusting his own legs to carry him, and wasn’t making the progress his therapists wanted him to. Brian had taken it upon himself to try and take his mind off of his fear by challenging him to a game of Gimp Basketball. A.J.

gaped as he watched them mess around the court, shooting baskets (missing most of them) and hobbling around after loose balls. The entire time they hollered insults at each other, pointing and laughing as one or the other screwed up, and having a blast with their utter failure to play their favorite sport. Every now and then, A.J. caught words of encouragement, as each tried to get the other to do their best. To his delight, Nick gradually seemed to forget he had ever been so dependant on crutches, as he became more and more sure of himself. His confidence grew before their very eyes. A.J. smiled at the sight.

“Frick and Frack,” he murmured to himself.

During the last few days of their stay in San Antonio, Brian sat everyone down to talk. They had been content to let events unfold without questioning, and it was time to acknowledge a few things.

“Okay everybody, I have something I need to share with all of you. Howie knows about this, because he was the one who was there when I came back after... sightseeing.”

Nick shifted uncomfortably, but Brian went on.

“I’ve kept what happened to me that day kinda quiet, but now I am going to show you what brought me back. As far as I was concerned, I wasn’t going to come back. The only thing I wanted was to get as far away as possible. I discovered though, that no matter how far I got, I couldn’t get away from what I was running from, because it was right in front of me.” A.J. reached over and put a supportive hand on his shoulder. Brian smiled at him briefly before getting up to drop a CD into the small stereo nearby, and selected a track. The chords for “Somewhere Someday” began to play, and A.J., Kevin, and Nick carefully listened to it.

“Hey, this is ‘NSYNC,” A.J. observed.

“Yes it is. Listen to the words.”

When the song was done, there was silence.

“Oh man,” Kevin said finally. “I can’t believe how perfect that is.”

“I couldn’t either,” Brian replied. “I just wanted to share this with y’all, because for me it made the difference.”

“You bet,” A.J. said quietly. “I think we all needed that.” He hummed for a moment, and then echoed the words that were in everyone’s minds.

“Let this bring you peace...”

When the time came for Kevin to go back to the hospital to remove the rod from his leg, a little of the anticipation he had felt before was gone. Now that things seemed to be going so well for all five of them, there just didn't seem to be as much to worry about. They were all optimistic and upbeat. In fact, the day after Kevin's surgery, the other four were scheduled for a private interview for MTV. It was their first appearance since the press conference a while back, and Nick's first appearance period. It was also their last day in San Antonio; after Kevin was released they were going to fly back to Orlando.

All four were present when Kevin went into surgery and when he came out. It went smoothly, and no complications were anticipated.

"Is he going to have any problems with that leg after all of this?"

"Nope," the doctor replied. "After enough physical therapy to build the muscle back up and get back in shape, you won't notice a difference."

John Norris of MTV greeted the four Boys as he was brought in for the interview. The physical remnants of what they had endured had nearly faded. Their cuts and bruises had all but vanished, Brian no longer had his arm in a sling, and A.J. had had his cast removed. The most visible sign of what they had been through was the cane that Nick still used. There were still scars, and would be for a long time, but clothing easily concealed them. They were seated comfortably, and seemed ready to talk.

"Good to see you guys," Norris said cheerfully. "Glad to see you doing so well."

"Thanks, man." A.J. said.

"So how have you all been? The panic has died down a little bit, you got a little room to breathe and time to recover, so how has the healing gone?"

"Well," Brian started. "As you can see we all look a lot better from last time. We are still not our old selves, but we're getting there." He pointed to Nick with both hands. "I'd say the fact that we have him here today, when you consider what kind of shape he was in not too long ago, says that we have done really well."

Nick grinned.

"Any dancing yet?" John asked with a smile.

Brian chuckled. "No, no dancing yet. We're not quite ready for that."

"Where is your fifth member? What is Kevin up to today?"

Howie answered the question. “He just had what we hope is his last surgery. He had to get a rod taken out of his leg that was put in after the accident. He’s been doing really well.”

“That is great to hear. Nick, tell us what all of this has been like for you. This is the first time the world gets to see your face since this accident.”

Nick feigned fear. “That’s right, this is the first time. I hope I don’t scare anyone. I’ve been avoiding mirrors.” He grew serious. “Well, as they have all told you, this has been quite an ordeal. The recovery has been tough. I was not always the most cooperative of patients, but these guys are getting me through it.”

“So how is it coming?”

“Pretty good. I’m working on getting the full use of my knee back, I shattered the kneecap in the wreck and they had to give me a new one, so that’s been kinda tough. My surgery incisions have healed over well. I’m really happy about that, those really hurt.” He smiled a little. “My short term memory is a lot better now, but still not perfect. I’m still pretty forgetful these days.”

“But he does remember he is a Backstreet Boy,” Howie interjected with a straight face. “So, have no fear.”

“Thank you Howie,” Nick said sarcastically.

“Do you guys have any goals that you have set as far as a return to your career?”

“We haven’t set any dates or anything,” A.J. said. “But we are more actively looking into working towards a comeback, especially since we are going back to Orlando tomorrow morning.”

“How long of a period do you estimate it might all take? A few months? A year? Longer?”

“Well, it will be a while,” Howie admitted. “Don’t start getting excited yet. We have a lot still to do, and that doesn’t even start until we are physically back up to where we were before all of this, and we are all still far from that. *Then* comes the work on the album that we’ve started, the work on our singing, then rehearsals, and just trying to get back in the game.”

“To do the kind of work that we do, you have to be very physically fit, and this accident took all of that away,” A.J. said. “We have to work ourselves back up to that point, and believe me, that’s not gonna be easy.”

“We’re just hoping that the fans are willing to wait it out with us,” Brian added. “They mean so much to us, and we don’t want to let them down, but when we do get back on that stage, we want to do it right. We want to be able to pick up right where we left off,

and that is going to take time.” He reached over and batted Nick’s head. “Poor Nick here can hardly remember the words to half of our songs.”

Nick made a face. “I can too.” He grinned sheepishly at the camera. “I do slip up a lot though.”

“Have you all done any singing together?”

“You know,” A.J. said thoughtfully. “We have, but not all together. Brian, Howie, and I have messed around with a few songs here and there, Kevin and I did a number together not too long ago.”

“Yeah,” Howie interrupted. “Kevin was so worried about remembering words that A.J. sat down and coached with him for a few days until he was ok with getting up and singing for us.”

“And what did he sing?”

“Umm, ‘Nobody But You,’ right, A.J.?”

“Yup. It was pretty cool. So we have done some, but we haven’t really had all five of us sit down and work on anything in particular.”

They spoke for a while longer, and then called it a day. Kevin was ready to be released from the hospital that afternoon, and the following day they had a plane to Orlando.

“Now the work really starts,” A.J. said.

Once they reached Orlando, the five of them decided to take about three weeks to themselves. Brian and Kevin flew to Lexington for a few days to be with their families. Howie, Nick, and A.J. also decided to visit home.

“You miss one day of physical therapy, and I will FedEx Kevin down there to kick your ass,” Brian warned Nick when they said goodbye.

An idea had been forming in Brian’s head, and once he was home he began looking in to putting it into action. He made a few telephone calls to their management, and was delighted to get a green light from them to proceed.

“Do you want us to start making the phone calls that can make it happen?”

“Naw,” he said. “I want this to be more personal. I’ll do it, just give me his phone number. I want to ask them myself.”

Once he received the number he wanted, he hung up the phone, wondering if this crazy idea would actually work. The next day, he picked up his phone as he studied the number on the sheet of paper he held in his other hand. Drawing in a deep breath, he dialed it. After several rings, a deep voice picked up on the other end.

“Yes?”

“I’m looking for Lance Bass,” Brian said.

“You found him.”

“Hey, Lance, this is Brian Littrell. I have something I need to ask you and your band mates.”

Chapter 31

Duet

Lance stared at the phone in surprise. Brian Littrell? That was not someone he was expecting to hear from, especially in light of recent events. He glanced quickly around their tour bus and caught Justin's eye as he was on the verge of tossing a piece of popcorn into his mouth.

"Who is it?" Justin mouthed, noticing the strange look on his face.

Lance held up a finger, telling him to wait. Justin shrugged and went back to his popcorn. "Wow, hi," he stuttered. "Sorry, you took me off guard there for a sec."

"Sorry."

"No, no big deal. How are all of y'all doing?"

"Much, much better."

"Good to hear, very good to hear."

Brian smiled into the phone. The wariness in Lance's voice was hard to miss, but he couldn't exactly blame him. It wasn't that the two bands disliked each other, but they tried not to cross paths too often. "Where are y'all at right now?"

"Umm, that's a good question. I think we're going through Arkansas."

"Tour going well?"

"Yeah, tour's going great."

Justin was curious now. "Who is it?" he asked aloud.

Lance ignored him. "We keep hearing about you. Saw the MTV interview last week."

"Oh really?"

"Yup."

"Well, thanks for the cards and the flowers and stuff. We all really appreciated it."

"Least we could do," Lance said, touched by the gratitude in his voice. "We don't exactly see each other very much, but when something like that happens..." he shook his head. "It hits you. Hard. We were stunned to hear about it. I can't tell you how good it was to hear all of you were going to make it."

Justin was dying of curiosity now, so he got up with the intent to find someone else to suffer with him. Joey was fixing some food, but he was wearing his headphones. No good. Any attempt to distract him would prove futile. Chris was nowhere to be seen, so that left him with J.C., who was trying to steal a nap.

“You did not just wake me up,” he muttered as Justin shook his leg.

“Dude, you have got to listen in on Lance’s phone conversation with me. You won’t believe who I think it is.”

“Justin, I don’t care if Lance is talking to Elvis. Go away and leave me alone.”

Justin rolled his eyes, but left him alone. J.C. had one hell of a temper when it came to sleep. Further investigation revealed Chris up front chatting with their driver.

“Chris, man, come here.”

“Whatsa matter Curly?” he asked. “Did Joey eat the last of your Cheerios?”

“Not to my knowledge. But if he did, I’ll beat him with a sledgehammer. I think one of the Backstreet Boys just called Lance.

“Really? Why?”

“I don’t know. Come on, we have to go listen.”

It was Chris’s turn to roll his eyes. “Freak.” Justin pouted. “Okay, okay!”

They both went over to where Lance was still sitting, looking deep in thought.

“Well thanks, that’s awfully nice of you to say. Glad it was of some help to you.” He paused, his forehead wrinkling. “Really?” he said in surprise. “That sounds interesting, actually. It would sure throw the media for a loop, wouldn’t it?” He cackled a little, and Justin almost hit him, he was so curious.

Joey wandered over to join them, minus the headphones. “Who is Lance talking to?” he asked, seeing his other band mates watching him like a hawk.

“Shhh!” Chris said, waving a hand at him.

“I kind of like that idea. I’ll run it by the guys here. They are all staring at me as if I’ve grown a second head. Well, if it means so much to you, I’m sure we can work something out. I’ll talk to them and get back to you on how they like the idea. Sound good?” Lance nodded. “Great. Good talking to you. Later.”

He hung up the phone, and found all three of them waiting anxiously for an explanation. J.C. chose that moment to rise from his bunk, complaining bitterly.

“Justin, I am gonna kick your ass. I can’t get back to sleep now, *thank* you!” Then he noticed the expressions on everyone’s faces. “What is going on?”

“Lance just got off the phone with one of the Backstreet Boys.”

“Oh,” J.C. said with a strange look. “What’s up?”

“I talked to Brian Littrell. He called me.”

“It was him? Not their management?”

“Nope. He said he wanted to talk to us personally about this.”

“About *what*?” Justin said, exasperated.”

“If you shut up for a second, I’ll tell you.” Justin mimicked him with a goofy look and then grinned. Lance shook his head.

“*Anyways*,” he said. “He told me that one of our songs helped him out a lot during their little ordeal.”

“Wow. I’m feeling special, I don’t know about you guys,” Joey said cheekily. “No really,” he said when he saw the exasperated looks. “That was really nice of him. Is that all he had to say?”

“Nope He had an idea.” Lance said.

“What song?” J.C. asked, becoming interested.

“Somewhere Someday. He wants to know if we would be interested in a collaboration between the ten of us for that song.”

“He does?” Justin looked doubtful.

“He said that the song really meant a lot to him, and he really wanted to be able to do something with it.”

“Interesting,” J.C. said, deep in thought.

“Do we have time?” Justin quipped.

Lance pulled out his planner and began flipping through pages. “I think we could squeeze it in. We have a week off from the tour a month. We could snag some time in the studio then. We don’t have much else going on.”

“Lance. The omnipotent force in our lives,” Justin said in a deep voice.

“Omniscient, dumbass,” J.C. corrected with a grin.

“Whatever.”

“So you think we could swing it?” Joey asked.

“His management has okayed it, Jive has okayed it. They just need a go ahead from our end, it seems,” Lance replied.

“I don’t know, that is an awful lot of country boys for me to have to deal with,” Chris said with a straight face.

Lance pulled a hacky sack ball out of the pocket of his jacket and chucked it at him. “None of that, please,” he ordered. “Us Mississippian’s might take offense.”

“All those from Mississippi say ‘Aye’” Chris called out.

“AYE!” Lance yelled into his ear.

“Okay, now prove you’re a bumpkin and try and spell it.” This time, Lance smacked him on the forehead with his planner. “Ouch! Damn it, Lance! That’s a big book!”

“Your whole life is in it,” Lance informed him. “And after that *page*, ours fill up the other three hundred.”

“I kind of like this idea,” J.C. said slowly, bringing them all back to the topic at hand.

“Me too,” Lance agreed.

Joey shrugged. “I don’t mind. Whatever you all want to do. It would be different, and it would give the media a new bone to chew on.” Justin and Chris agreed.

“Great,” Lance said. “I’ll call him back and tell him.”

Almost a month later, the five Backstreet Boys sat around the studio, taking a break from their latest recording session. Work on their album had resumed three weeks ago, and although a lot had been done, they still had a lot more to do. No release date had been set, and work on a tour hadn’t even begun. Physically, they were almost ready to begin rehearsals, but neither Kevin nor Nick was sure if they were ready to be back on the road.

They had roughly put together about half the album, and had picked out material for the other half. All five had a hand in writing a large majority of the songs. It was important to all of them to be as involved as possible for this album, because it marked an

achievement that many thought they would never be able to make. The media had all but written them off, and the five of them were determined to prove that assumption dead wrong. They would accept nothing less than the absolute best they could possibly put forth, so every decision was weighed carefully and every aspect of it was painstakingly done. Nothing less than perfection was permissible.

In their eyes, this album would be their crowning achievement. Even if it failed by any or all other standards, and even if the public had moved on from the “Backstreet” phenomenon, for them it would be their greatest accomplishment. They would prove to themselves they could fight back from the greatest odds they had ever faced, and come away from it better than they had ever been. There was still a lot of work to be done, but things were starting to come together. Brian wasn’t satisfied.

“We’re missing something,” he said suddenly.

“What do you mean?” A.J. asked.

“The songs here are great, and a lot of them reflect us, but there’s not one that *really* speaks from the heart. Don’t you think we need that? That the fans need that? I mean, we’ve already done “Larger Than Life” and “The Perfect Fan.” People are used to us expressing *ourselves* in our music, and these songs don’t quite do it. Not for... not for *that*. Does anyone know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Kevin said slowly. “You want something that acknowledges what we’ve been through and shows how far we’ve come.”

“Something that tells everyone where we stand now,” Howie added.

“And thanks everyone who helped us get there,” Nick finished.

“Yes. That’s it.”

“Well,” A.J. said. “Let’s write one then. Straight from the heart.”

“Just the five of us,” Brian said. “No one else. This is just us. Everything about it has to be just us.”

“Okay,” Kevin said. “Let’s brainstorm.”

They cancelled what was left of their recording session that day, and devoted the rest of their time to Brian’s suggestion.

The five of them began to bounce ideas around. Kevin tinkered with the piano and plinked down a few notes, trying to find a suitable melody to work with. They all began to throw out the thoughts that were on their mind.

After awhile, they concluded that what they were coming up with didn't address the whole picture of what they were trying to say.

"We're either too personal, or too specific, or we're missing completely," Brian said. "We need to come up with something that can mean something to anyone, but can have special meaning to us and anyone who went through it with us."

"Kinda like "Show Me The Meaning," Nick supplied.

"Yes. Like that. It means an awful lot to us, and people recognize that the song is about what happened to us, but at the same time anyone can use it as a song that is personal to them."

Howie frowned. "I think I have an idea."

"Let's have it," A.J. said.

He told them what it was, and a light bulb seemed to click on over all of their heads.

"That's it!" Brian said excitedly. "Okay. Let's see what we can come up with."

"Kevin, get your ass back to that piano and play us something," A.J. ordered. "Let's play around with lyrics."

The five of them were soon hard at work, and stayed that way until late in the evening. Something had inspired them, and they were determined not to leave until they had achieved what they had set out to do.

By the time they had put it together and made a demo, they were grinning from ear to ear.

"I cannot wait to record this," Nick said excitedly.

"You know how we were thinking about releasing "Will You Be There" first?" Howie asked.

"Screw it," A.J. said. "It's gonna be this one. And it's gonna turn some heads."

Chapter 32

Forgotten?

“Almost ten months have passed since the terrible accident that knocked the Backstreet Boys temporarily out of the music business, and despite their early assurances that the popular boy group would be doing everything within their power to make a return, many people say that their reign as the most popular music group of the day is over, and the Backstreet Boys are finished. Their names have all but dropped from the headlines, and the Backstreet mania that flooded the country has slowed down to almost a trickle. Critics say that even if they do make it back to the stage, there won’t be anyone to greet them...”

Rolling Stone

Backstreet Won’t Be Back

Ten long months have gone by since the world first heard about the horrific automobile accident that threatened the lives of what was then the most popular boy group in America. Almost a year has gone by since we’ve seen them dancing on the stage, singing a tune, or promoting the new album they promised us all those months ago.

Will they make a comeback?

Hardly a sound has been heard from the Backstreet camp in the last six months. There have been even fewer public appearances. No one seems to know where they are, what they are doing, or what they have planned for the future of the group.

Jive Records, the Backstreet Boys’ record label, insists the five group members, Nick Carter, Howie Dorough, Brian Littrell, A.J. McLean, and Kevin Richardson, are still together. “The Backstreet Boys have not disbanded. They still plan to return to recording and performing, but their recovery process is long and they do not want to rush anything.” Despite these assurances, the five Boys have avoided the spotlight like the plague, and probably with good reason.

Richardson, 28, and Carter, 20, have been reported to suffer short term memory problems, which would make singing onstage and public appearances more than just a little difficult. The big question that Jive or anyone affiliated with the Backstreet Boys is not answering is not whether or not they want to return to the stage, but whether or not they can.

In addition to these problems, does the public still want to hear them? Backstreet Fever has bombarded the music business for the past six years, and now that they are suddenly silent, perhaps people are beginning to wonder what all the fuss was about in the first place. "People are starting to see what a lot of us in the music business have been saying since the beginning of [the Backstreet Boys]. They were never going to last. It may have ended sooner than it would have if [the accident] hadn't happened, but the end result was the same. When all the hype is gone, there's nothing left to support them. That's all it was, hype from the media and teenagers," says music critic Mike Phelps.

No one questions that the Backstreet Boys have a lot to overcome if they want the spotlight back. They will also have longtime rival 'N Sync to contend with, who now has a stranglehold on record sales and is the solidified center of the teenage pop frenzy. It seems pretty safe to say that if they do make it back successfully, their critics will be forced to eat their words and finally submit to that phenomenon that is (was?) called the Backstreet Boys.

"The failure of the Backstreet Boys to return to the public eye just proves what people have been saying all along, they were just a craze, they wouldn't last, etc. They haven't returned, and I'm sure it's because they know what will happen. The music world has moved on, and they don't have a place here anymore. It is exactly what people have been predicting since the beginning of Backstreet Mania."

Entertainment Magazine
Instability threatens Backstreet Return

The Backstreet Boys went silent ten months ago in the wake of a freak highway accident that almost killed them. Hardly a peep has been heard since.

Sure, there have been reports of their attempt at a comeback. But will it ever happen? Doubtfully.

There has been no contact from the famous pop group with the media. No photo shoots, no interviews, and no word of a timeframe they are working with. It is like Kevin Richardson, Howie Dorough, Brian Littrell, A.J. McLean and Nick Carter have all dropped off the face of the earth.

Is there a reason? Here is a possibility.

Since the accident that almost killed Richardson, 28, Carter, 20, and Littrell, 25, and put all five young men in the hospital, there have been rampant rumors of the complete mental breakdowns of Littrell and McLean, 22, and permanent physical problems that would prevent Carter from performing again. Both Carter and Richardson are also said to suffer from memory problems. No wonder they haven't sought public attention.

Jive Records, the Boys record label, and The Firm, who manages the group, are staying very tight-lipped about the situation, and of course, there has been no word from the Boys themselves.

Is the band responsible for mega-hits "I Want It That Way" and "As Long As You Love Me" finished? Time will tell for sure, but for now it doesn't look like we'll see them again any time soon. RIP, BSB.

"Here at MTV and TRL, we have been receiving a lot of mail in regards to the Backstreet Boys. Critics lately have been saying that their fan base is gone and any

comeback they might make is futile, and that didn't seem to sit well with a lot of people, because I have bags of mail and even more e-mail saying how absolutely absurd that is. There are some girls out there who are really not happy about all that, let me tell you. So I would like to say that according to this response, the Backstreet Boys shouldn't have a worry in the world. I actually hope they hurry up and get back to doing their thing, because it seems like half of the stuff we get here is asking about them for one reason or another. Ok, well on to the number three video of the day..."

"The rumors that have been flying about the music industry about a possible duet between the 'now' boy band 'N Sync, and the Backstreet Boys, who have yet to return to the public eye following a horrible automobile accident, are now reported to be untrue. Leaks of this possible collaboration hit the public last week and have ignited a wave of hope that the Backstreet Boys are nearing a return to the stage. There has been no official word from the 'N Sync or Backstreet Boys reps about this rumor, but industry insiders say that it is not going to happen..."

Backstreet Duet?

The rumor mill is at it again. Just when everyone was convinced that the Backstreet Boys had gone the way of the Dodo, there is hope.

An information leak from an undisclosed source hints about a possible pairing of the Backstreet Boys, the world-renowned pop group who has been absent from the public eye following an auto accident ten months ago, and 'N Sync, the hottest boy group of today.

No other information is known, but if this rumor is true, it could signify the return of the Backstreet Boys, meaning the comeback they promised would happen might finally be taking place.

How did 'N Sync get involved? No one seems to know. The two groups have been major rivals ever since 'N Sync stepped on their turf with their breakthrough debut album, *N SYNC*, in 1996.

"The longer we wait, the harder it's going to get," Howie said.

In two days, they were going to meet with 'NSYNC to record "Somewhere Someday" together. Brian had come just short of working a miracle to make it happen, but all was

working as he had hoped. 'NSYNC had even offered to perform it live together on an ABC special they were filming with a handful of other pop acts. Whether or not to accept was the current debate.

"We need to let the public know we are still here," Howie insisted. "You've seen what's been written all over the place."

"I'm still not too wild about being on stage right now," Kevin said doubtfully.

"Why?" Nick asked. "You're solid as a rock."

"I'm just not totally comfortable."

"We won't be doing any dancing," Brian pointed out. Dancing while singing still flustered Kevin a bit.

"It's not just the dancing. I've done fine remembering lyrics when it's just us, but being in front of a crowd is totally different." Nick bit his lip. That hadn't occurred to him. He had enough trouble in front of cameras as it was.

"We've got time to work on that, Kev," Howie said gently. "And besides, you should see yourself. You've made an amazing comeback already. You're doing a lot better than what you think."

Kevin sighed, not quite convinced. "What do you think, Bone?"

"I miss the stage so bad it hurts," A.J. confessed. "I want to do it."

"Kevin?" Howie asked, his eyes pleading. "It'll be the perfect way to kick things off. It doesn't mean we will all the sudden be thrown into touring. We've already talked about it. We're gonna take as much time as we need, and the first one will be short, and not until the album has come out and we've seen how it does."

"I sent a copy of the demo we did to Lance," Brian added. "I'm hoping they'll want us to perform it. This could be the perfect chance to see what people think of the new single."

"We need this, Kev," Nick added. "Howie's right. We can't pass this up. You know what everyone has been saying about us."

"We can't let this finish us, not after how far we've come," Howie said quietly but firmly.

"Ok," Kevin said finally. "Let's do it."

"Hell ya!" A.J. whooped.

“Ok,” Howie said, looking excited. “The ABC date is in a month. The way things are looking, we can start promotion for the new album not too far after that, and release the single right around then.”

“If we do it like that,” Brian said carefully, “That puts us at a potential tour kickoff of about mid-summer.”

“Almost a year and a half,” A.J. said.

“That sounds like long enough, if you ask me,” Nick said.

“We’re not,” A.J. said.

“Ha ha.”

“Is everybody in on this one?” Howie asked, looking around at all of them.

“We’re in.”

Chapter 33

Crossover

“There’s no place like the studio!” Justin said cheerfully, bouncing through the door ahead of his four band mates. Today was the day they were to meet with the Backstreet Boys to record their song together.

“Justin?” Lance asked, rubbing his temples.

“Yo!”

“Just how much sugar did you *have* before you came here?”

Justin grinned at him and patted his head. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

Joey appeared behind them, with a contemplative look on his face. “Hey Chris?” he asked.

“What?”

“Do you think if we watered that boy’s fro, it would grow? I mean seriously, he just looks too much like a Chia Pet. I swear, he must be like, some lab experiment gone wrong. Really, *really* wrong.”

“Oh, and you’re volcanic head of hair is a fashion marvel, right” Justin retorted.

“At least I don’t have to cut it with a hacksaw.”

“We could change that,” Justin suggested.

“Not on your life, poster boy.”

“Poster boy?” Justin placed a hand over his heart. “I knew it. You are jealous of the booty. I *knew* it. You want my body.” He put a sympathetic hand on an incredulous Joey’s shoulder. “I hate to break it to you buddy, but not everyone can be the very image of perfection. I hope this won’t change our friendship.”

Joey glanced over at Chris, who nodded. Together they pounced on the youth, grabbing his arms and feet and hoisting him up into the air. He started screeching in protest.

“Guys? Fellas? Holy shit, don’t you dare drop me. Lance! Cut it out, I’m *not* kidding. Oh for- J.C.! Help me! What the hell did I ever do to you?”

At that very moment, Brian and Nick walked through the door. Nick raised his eyebrow at the scene before him. J.C. noticed their presence, and gingerly stepped around the fighting trio to greet them.

“Don’t mind them. Tour’s getting to them.” He cracked a grin. Brian smiled back at him and offered his hand.

“It’s been awhile. Good to see you J.C.”

“Same to you. I’m glad we’re doing this.”

“Come off it, J.C.,” Lance said with a groan. “You just love the studio. You don’t care why you’re here, as long as you’re here.” He offered his hand to Brian and Nick, who both shook it.

Kevin showed up a moment later with Howie and A.J. in tow. The latter two looked deep in conversation about something that, judging by the pained look on Kevin’s face, was very, very trivial. By that time, J.C. and Lance had managed to separate the other three, and hellos were said all around.

“Well, we’ve got today and tomorrow to do this if we need it,” Lance said once they got down to business. “So there’s no need to rush this. We’ll keep at it until we’re satisfied.”

“Great,” Brian said.

“I’ve come up with a few ideas if y’all want to hear them,” J.C. spoke up.

“Why does that not surprise me,” Justin said with a grin.

“Let’s hear what you’ve come up with,” Kevin said.

“Well, I’ve been listening to your stuff a lot, trying to get a really good feel for your voices and what might work best with this song.”

“We have kinda agreed that all of us want to sing lead at one point at least during the song,” Brian said quickly. “We want this to be a unifying thing for us.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured you’d want something like that when we started talking about it a little bit. This is actually a very nice song to incorporate all of us.”

Lance and Joey both snorted.

“I’m not gonna say anything. Are you, Lance?” Joey said, looking innocent.

“Nope not a thing,” Lance replied.

J.C. shot them a dirty look.

“What?” they both exclaimed. “We’re not complaining,” Joey continued. “I for one am more than fulfilled after singing lead on ‘This Is Where The Party’s At.’ I don’t need to do it again.”

If J.C. had had something to throw at their grinning faces he would have. He contemplated hurling Justin, but it was too far to reach. “Well, I think that as far as the verses go, whatever we keep for lead, we won’t change.”

“Toldja,” Joey said mischievously. He and Lance high-fived. “Useless!” they shouted in unison.

J.C. shot them a killer look. “You are not useless,” he said flatly.

“We know,” Joey said fiendishly. “But you should see the look on your face right now man. It’s classic J.C., and we just seem to find this perverted pleasure in seeing how many ways we can get it out of you.”

“Dude, Joe. If looks could kill,” Lance said solemnly. “You and I would be under a whole garden of daisies. We need a camera. It’s the best one yet!”

J.C. chose to ignore them. Chris and Justin seemed to think it was funny as hell.

They began discussing how they wanted the harmonies to work, and after a brief warm up they began to tinker with their voices, deciding what worked and what didn’t. All were surprised at just how well the song seemed to fit them. Brian was ecstatic, although not surprised, to discover that ‘NSYNC’s work ethic was as strong as their own. They weren’t satisfied until it was perfect. If at all possible, J.C. was even more of a perfectionist than Kevin.

“Justin, you’re flat,” J.C. said.

“I am not,” he said indignantly.

J.C. responded by playing back what he had just sung.

“Ooooh, ouch!” Joey snickered. “Slam! You weren’t just flat, you were...”

“Okay, shut up,” Justin said.

J.C. smirked. “What do you have to say now, JuJu?”

“That’s it. Screw you guys. Chris, I’m switching groups. I’m now a Backstreet Boy.”

“I dunno man,” Nick said cautiously. “If you’re a Backstreet Boy that means you gotta accept Kevin as your almighty High Commander and kiss his feet and stroke his ego. It’s the price we pay, anyway.”

“Whoa,” Lance said. “J.C., Kevin just outdid your ‘Eat-Shit-And-Die-Face!’”

“You’re slipping man!” Chris hooted.

“Kiss his feet, ‘eh?” Justin mused, considering his options.

“He doesn’t make me do that,” Brian said innocently.

“Me neither,” Howie agreed.

“Don’t look at me,” A.J. said with a shrug. “Methinks it’s just you, Kaos.”

“And you ain’t seen nuthin yet,” Kevin said with a look of pure evil.

They broke into laughter.

“All right y’all, let’s do it again,” J.C. said once they had calmed down. Justin sang his lyric a few more times until everyone was satisfied. Then they moved on to part of the chorus.

“I’m not so sure about that one,” A.J. said, his brow furrowed. “The sound isn’t quite right. Howie, you take it. See what you can do with it.”

Howie obliged with the lyric, and J.C. clapped his hands.

“That’s it. Good, let’s go with that. I like it.”

“Okay, let’s try it again,” Justin said. “From the chorus.”

“We’re missing something. Joey, you and Nick try that section there together. Let’s see what it sounds like,” J.C. said. He and the others listened carefully, and had them try the lyric in question several different ways. After playing it back a few times, a broad grin broke out over J.C.’s face. “This is going to be really good,” he said with a chuckle. “Really good.”

During a break for lunch, Joey found himself sitting beside Nick, watching the blonde youth pack away the food. He thought for a moment about whether or not to ask the question that had been tugging at the back of his mind, and then decided the hell with it.

“So Nick, was it true about replacing your knee cap?” he asked suddenly.

“Yup,” he said with a nod, as he shoved another bite of food in his mouth. “I completely shattered it. They said the surgery to clean it all up took forever.”

“Wow. And the new one it works just as well?”

“Well, I’m still in therapy to get my range of motion back up to what it was. I’m almost there, but the dance practices we’ve done have been murder. There is so much I have to do to be able to keep up and make sure that I take care of it. It’s a pain in the ass, but soon I shouldn’t notice a difference. At least that’s what they say. God, it’s hard work.”

Joey nodded slowly. "That would freak me out, having to have something like that done."

"Oh, it did."

"So what exactly did they do?"

Nick began to tell him about the process that had gone into repairing the damage done to his knee. He pulled his foot up to his chair and pointed to a few things, and used his hands to demonstrate what he was describing. Brian watched him from another table, and was delighted to see how freely he spoke about it. He had come such a long way since that day in the clinic when he had finally confessed his fears. Brian was proud of him.

Following another recording session, the ten of them took a quick break. Chris and Howie were about to wander off when some familiar music played over the speakers followed by a voice that neither of them was suspecting.

*"I'm doing this tonight, you're probably gonna start a fight
I know this can't be right hey baby come on.
I loved you endlessly, then you weren't there for me,
So now it's time to leave and make it alone."*

Justin's voice picked up where A.J. left off.

*"I know that I can't take no more, it ain't no lie
I wanna see you out that door baby bye bye bye."*

As the others listened in disbelief, the two sang the entire song.

"Oh boy. Curly's at it again," Chris said with a burst of laughter. Howie groaned.

"I think this is going to be a long day, don't you?"

At the end of the day, the song was just about done, and only a few finishing touches needed to be taken care of the next day.

"Hey Brian," J.C. said thoughtfully. "Have y'all done any more work on that demo you sent to Lance?"

"Yeah," Brian answered, suddenly excited. "We've done a lot of work on it. We're gonna lay it down next week."

“Do you want to perform it during the ABC thing?”

“We would love to,” Brian declared.

“Cool. Would you mind a quick performance right now? We’d like to hear it.”

“Fellas?” Brian asked, looking around him.

A.J. nodded, looking pleased. “Sure thing. We’ve got it down.”

“I don’t mind,” Howie said with a smile. “Not at all.” Nick nodded in agreement.

“Kevin?” Brian asked hopefully. “This okay with you?”

He looked uncomfortable for a moment, but then he shrugged. “Why not?”

The five of them stood together in a half circle. “Ready?” Brian asked.

“Take it away, B-Rok,” A.J. replied.

Brian began to sing, and they performed the song a capella. They didn’t miss a beat. When they finished, the other band was quiet for a moment.

“Wow,” Justin said, breaking the silence.

“Yeah,” J.C. echoed. “Wow.”

“I hope you don’t mind me saying, but I do believe that is your best yet,” Lance informed them.

The five of them grinned. “Thank you. Whew,” Kevin said with a nervous laugh. “You have no idea how worried we are about this comeback.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Chris said. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Thank you guys,” Brian said. “I mean it. Thank you.”

They called it a day in the studio after that.

“Anybody need to unwind?” Nick asked as they gathered their things.

“What did you have in mind, Kaos?” Howie asked.

“There’s a basketball court real close to here.”

“Hell yeah!” Brian yelled, jumping to his feet. “I need to play me some b-ball.”

Four out of five 'NSYNC members groaned loudly. The fifth looked miffed.

“What was *that* for?” Justin said, exasperated.

“We are really in trouble now,” Chris said. You said the ‘B’ word around Justin. Big, big mistake.”

“You’re just mad ‘cause I can toast you,” he said smugly.

“Not a chance, brother. We’ve had this argument before.”

“I don’t know about y’all,” Nick interjected. “But B-Rok here didn’t get his nickname for nuthin.”

“Oh ya?” Justin said, standing toe to toe with Nick. “You are ON.”

In record time, the ten of them gathered on the court, and prepared to pick teams.

“Ok, how are we gonna do this?”

“Nick and Brian play the best out of us. They are monsters out on that court,” Kevin informed them.

“Justin’s the best we got,” Joey said.

“Please don’t feed his ego,” J.C. muttered.

“Then whichever two wind up on the same team gets Lance too. That should even things up,” Chris said.

“Hey!” Lance yelled, smacking him upside the head. “That was uncalled for.”

After some friendly bickering, the teams were picked, and they got around to playing a game. The rush that Brian got from it was one he hadn’t had in awhile. He was very aware of what a gift it was to be able to play at all anymore. None of them were as slick as they had been before the accident, but they were close to it. It was a refreshing feeling, and seeing Nick running around with his huge grin slathered all over his face made him want to laugh out loud.

When they finally departed, all of them were happy, but exhausted. A.J. noted it was the greatest feeling he’d had in a long time, and the other four agreed with him.

Chapter 34

The Power Of A Prayer

The performance date was approaching swiftly. Not a word was said about the Backstreet Boy's appearance. It had been announced that ABC's pop music special was going to have a huge surprise, but a tight lid was kept on what it was. Rumors flew, but it was all speculation. The word that it could be the Backstreet Boys was spread, but no one knew for sure. Most were convinced the rumor was false, as Jive had maintained virtual silence in regards to Backstreet's timetable, or if they even had one. None of the band members could be reached for comment. It was as if they had vanished. Still, it was just enough of a hope to get fans talking. The media was all over it, determined to discover just what this 'secret' was. They were unsuccessful.

When the night came, the Boys waited anxiously as Britney Spears and Destiny's Child performed a few songs. 'NSYNC came next, and played off of the anticipation of the audience, who were anxiously waiting to see what the fuss was about. They tore up the stage with their latest single, along with Bye Bye Bye.

Even A.J. was nervous as they warmed up together before they were due to come out. As soon as 'NSYNC finished, they were going to introduce Backstreet, and invite them onstage. Together they would perform "Somewhere Someday," and then 'NSYNC would vacate the stage, where Backstreet alone would perform their new song.

Justin completed their last song flawlessly, working the crowd like a pro. Backstreet waited in the wings patiently. The electricity was unbelievable, and the anticipation of what was to come was almost unbearable. The knowledge that thousands more were watching at home only added to the frenzy.

"Man, we'd better deliver," A.J. muttered to himself.

Justin took the mike again, drawing a roar from the crowd. "Hey y'all!" he hollered. He was greeted with screams and yells. "Well, as you all know, we've got something pretty cool planned for all of you tonight. He cast a sly look out over the audience. "Are ya excited?" Deafening screams greeted him.

"I don't know, that was kinda weak," he said, sounding disappointed. The crowd got louder, if that was at all possible. "All right then! I am not gonna say anything more." He leaned out towards them with a devastating grin. "Here it comes."

All of the lights went out. The stage was totally dark as the five members of the Backstreet Boys walked calmly on stage. They all stood side by side, 'NSYNC to the left, and Backstreet to the right. Several moments passed, allowing the anticipation to build to a head.

Breathe, Brian thought. Just breathe.

The lights flashed on, bathing the stage in sudden brilliance. A hush fell over the spectators as they took in the sight before them.

“For everyone here tonight, and for everyone watching at home,” J.C. said as the crowd exploded. “We brought some friends over for a visit. I don’t think you’ve seen them in awhile.”

“And you know what?” Lance said. “They would like to know if they can do a little singing for all y’all.”

“These fellas have gone through an awful lot to get here tonight,” Justin said loudly. “Would you please welcome them back to the stage for the first time since we almost lost them just over a year ago? Ladies and gentlemen, the *Backstreet Boys!*”

The screaming slowly died away, as all those in attendance rose to their feet one by one, clapping furiously. The five singers looked on in amazement as everyone present stood to acknowledge what they had accomplished. And they had yet to utter a word. A.J. glanced to his left, where he saw Brian fighting back tears. Howie looked absolutely stunned, and Nick’s mouth was actually hanging open. Even Kevin’s eyes were glistening. None of them had expected this.

Brian managed to step forward to his mike.

“Hello everyone,” he said, his voice raw with emotion. The audience began to quiet and take their seats again. When it had calmed down, he continued. “I don’t know how to thank you. What you just did just now has made every step of the long road we have been down worth it. Every step. Thank you. I guess I should explain what we’re doing here. You see, I came to Lance here one day a few months ago and asked him if he and the rest of ‘NSYNC would be willing to get together with us and do a little duet with a song that has meant an awful lot to me and the rest of the guys when we were in trouble last year. Things got really rough for us, and this song reminded me that everything happens for a reason, and as long as you have faith you will come out a stronger person. Well they said yes,” Cheering erupted. “And we are going to perform that song for you right now.” As he finished, the other members of the band stepped up.

Justin picked up a microphone. “Y’all ready?” he asked.

“Let’s do it!” A.J. replied.

The chords of the song began to play, and the audience slowly quieted.

Justin sang out softly.

Justin: *The clouds above you start to pour*
 And all of your doubts rage like a storm
Nick: *And you don’t know who you are anymore*
Brian: *Let me help you find what you’ve been searching for*

All: *Somewhere...*
Howie: *Somewhere there's a field and a river*
You can let your soul run free
All: *Someday...*
Howie: *Someday let me be the giver*
Let me bring you peace
All: *Somewhere...*
Justin: *Somewhere there's a break in the weather*
All: *Somewhere...*
Justin: *Where your heart and spirit go free*
All: *Someday...*
Brian: *Someday it'll be for the better*
Let this bring you peace
J.C. *Girl I know you think no one sees*
The weight on your shoulders, but you can't fool me
Nick: *And aren't you tired of standing so tall*
Let me be the one to catch you when you fall
All: *Somewhere...*
A.J.: *Somewhere there's a field and a river*
All: *Somewhere...*
A.J.: *You can let your soul run free*
All: *Someday...*
JC: *Someday let me be the giver*
Let me bring you peace, baby
All: *Somewhere...*
J.C...: *Somewhere there's a break in the weather*
All: *Somewhere...*
J.C. *Where your heart and spirit go free*
All: *Someday...*
Brian: *Someday it'll be for the better*
Let this bring you peace
A.J.: *Let me bring you joy*
All: *Bring you joy*
A.J. *Let me bring you peace*
Justin: *Take these tears that you cry*
Brian: *And trust them to me*
Kevin: *Let me give you heart*
All: *Give you heart*
Kevin: *Let me give you hope*
All: *Give you hope*
A.J./Kevin: *Be the one constant love*
J.C.: *That you've never known*
All: *Somewhere*
Kevin: *Somewhere there's a field and a river*
J.C.: *You can let your soul run free*
All: *Someday...*
Nick: *Someday let me be the giver*

J.C.: *Let me bring you peace baby*
All: *Somewhere...*
A.J.: *Somewhere there's a break in the weather*
J.C.: *Where your heart and spirit go free*
All: *Someday...*
Nick: *Someday it'll be for the better*
Brian: *Let this bring you peace*
Justin/J.C. *Somewhere*
Chris: *Somewhere*
Howie: *Somewhere*
Brian: *Somewhere*
A.J.: *Somewhere*
J.C.: *Someday*
Justin: *Let me be the one*
Howie: *Let me be the one*
Brian: *To catch you when you fall*
Brian: *Let me bring you peace*

As Brian's finished the note, the audience was silent. As soon as it ended cheering exploded, ringing in their ears with a sound that was sweeter than the music they worked so hard to put together.

"Well," Justin said, flushed and grinning, looking at Brian. "I guessed they liked that." He turned back the audience. "You aren't gonna let them get away with just that are ya?" he shouted. The crowd screamed in response.

Chris shrugged and looked at the Backstreet Boys. "I don't know, it looks like you guys need to do another song or something to make these people happy." He shook his head and spoke to the audience. "You people are a tough crowd! Do you hear me? A tough crowd!" he yelled. He cocked his head back to the other band members. "Imagine, demanding another song from the Backstreet Boys like that."

"Well, what do you think A.J.?" Nick asked. "Can we do another?"

"I think we can arrange that. You guys think it's ok?"

"Yeah, we can do that," Kevin said.

"Sure," Howie said agreeably.

'NSYNC bowed out gracefully as Brian, Kevin, Howie, A.J., and Nick all sat down in chairs that had been provided for them. Kevin leaned forward to speak.

"I want to thank all of you here tonight and all of you watching at home. We have been working very hard for the past year, and you can't possibly imagine how excited we are to be here right now. We want you all to know that we are not going to just disappear,

we *are* still here, and we can't wait to be back doing this full time. We're getting closer, so keep your eyes open."

Howie stepped in. "We also want to thank 'NSYNC for giving us this chance to perform with them tonight, and ABC for taking a chance on us. We really, really appreciate this."

"Peace!" A.J. shouted.

"Okay fellas," Nick said. "Are we ready for this?"

"What we are going to do for you now is going to be our new single," Brian said. "All of you are the first ones to hear it." More cheering. He grinned. "The five of us wrote and produced it. Anything that was involved in the creation of this song was done by us. It means a lot to us, and I hope it will mean a lot to all of you out there as well. It's called 'The Power Of A Prayer.' Ready y'all?"

"Ready," they all chimed.

The music that they were already so familiar with began to play, softly at first. From the first note, despite the huge audience, you could hear a pin drop. And then Brian's voice could be heard throughout the crowd.

*Authors note: These are lyrics that I wrote. It is not an existing song. It is my song. Imagine "The Perfect Fan" crossed with "Like A Child" crossed with "When You Come Back To Me Again." (By Garth Brooks)

Brian: *The power of a prayer*

Kevin: *Now I know that dark days are a part of life
Tears and fears will try to take your dreams away*

Brian: *But as long as there is someone left to care
You won't be left standing there*

All: *The power of a prayer
Be it one voice singing silently
Or a million crying out up to the sky
It's like a beacon in the night
Showing you the way*

Brian: *Oh the power of a prayer*

Howie: *At times you think the heavens just don't care
If they did then why would you be where you are*

Nick: *But all you need to do is open your heart and see
And let the power of a prayer set you free*

All: *The power of a prayer
Be it one voice singing silently*

*Or a million crying out up to the sky
It's like a beacon in the night
Showing you the way*

Nick: *Oh the power of a prayer*

A.J.: *When it looks like hope is gone
A prayer will keep you hanging on*

All: *Oh the power of a prayer
Be it one voice singing silently
Or a million crying out up to the sky
It's like a beacon in the night
Showing you the way*

A.J.: *Oh the power of a prayer*

Brian: *When you're weak*

All: *(Just a prayer)*

A.J.: *You can be strong*

All: *(With a prayer)*

Brian: *Lift your head and carry on*

All: *(Ohh a prayer)*

A.J.: *Can you see it*

All: *(Ain't it beautiful)*

Brian: *Can you feel it*

All: *(So much love)*

Nick: *It's just the power of a prayer*

All: *The power of a prayer*

Howie: *So here's a thank you oh so true*

A.J.: *For all the love that pulled us through*

Brian: *And for the power of a prayer that comes from you*

The performance was flawless, all five of them pouring out their hearts and souls into the words and giving it everything they had. As Brian's voice died away there was silence, which soon broke away to a tremendous roar as the audience hit their feet and began to scream. The sound rushed through them, shaking up their souls and bringing banishing whatever fear still remained. The ovation lasted for over ten minutes.

"Thank you," Brian said breathlessly when they had quieted a little.

A.J. grinned, and spoke into his mike. "Keep a lookout folks, because Backstreet's back."

The following day, news of the comeback was all over the place. There were news articles, clips on MTV and other news programs. The Boys were bombarded with phone calls requesting interviews and looking for statements. The announcement of their album release ignited a fury of excitement. The five of them worked nonstop to get ready for the release of the single and the album, and the kickoff of their tour. Nick paused in the middle of it all, taking a moment to praise God for giving them the strength to unite with each other and overcome all that the world had thrown at them. This was a testament to their courage, will, and friendship. They had seen the darkness, crawled through it on their knees, and rediscovered the sunlight.

Chapter 35

One For All, Five For One

“Come on y’all!” A.J. hollered. “We got to get this right. Let’s do it again.”

Kevin groaned. They had been working all day on a new dance routine. Fatima, their choreographer, rolled her eyes.

“Take a chill pill, A.J.,” she called.

“Yeah, who died and made you dictator?” Howie demanded.

“Sorry!” A.J. said defensively. “I just can’t wait to get back on stage, that’s all.”

“You’re not kidding,” Howie muttered. As a protest to not being able to perform, A.J. had dyed his hair gray. He said not being able to get up onstage was driving him prematurely gray.

“Well go easy on the rest of us here,” Brian said with a grin.

“Okay, okay. But we still need to do it again, don’t we Fatima?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Well then?”

“All right, lets take it from the top,” Kevin said, hauling himself back to his feet.

“Nick, you ok?” Brian asked.

“Yeah,” he said wearily. “I’m coming.” He forced himself back up and headed to the dance floor. He was exhausted. They had been working non-stop on their dance routines, both old and new, for the last several days and it was beginning to tell on him. But he was not about to quit. A.J. was right, they didn’t have it yet.

They took their positions, and as the music played began their routine. About halfway through, Nick started to feel dizzy. He shook his head a little and forced himself to continue dancing. Brian just so happened to glance over in his direction when he started to fall. Brian dove for him.

“Whoa!” he shouted. He grunted as Nick’s body fell into his, and he almost lost his balance.

“A.J.!” he shouted. “Help me!”

A.J. was by his side in an instant, and helped Brian lower him to the floor.

“Shit he’s heavy,” A.J. muttered. Brian didn’t pay any attention to him. They set him down, and Brian placed his head at his knees. Nick’s face was drained of color. Even his lips were pale, and he had broken out in a cold sweat. Howie and Kevin stood over him, worry etched on their faces.

“Fatima, get a doctor,” Kevin ordered. She nodded, frightened, and took off.

“Nick,” Brian called. “Nick, can you hear me?” Brian looked up. “Someone get a wash cloth or something for his forehead.”

“Kaos, come on man, wake up,” A.J. said anxiously. Nick’s eyes fluttered open.

“What happened?” he asked breathlessly.

“You passed out,” Brian told him.

He tried to sit up. “Easy,” Kevin told him. “Stay down for a sec.”

Howie came back with a cold cloth, and Brian laid it across his forehead.

“Is that really necessary?” Nick complained.

“Yes,” Brian said firmly. “How do you feel?”

“Woozy,” he replied.

“You pushed yourself to hard,” Kevin scolded. “You should have told us if it was getting to be too much.”

“Sorry,” Nick said, trying to get up again.

“Stay *down!*” Brian cried.

Nick gave him a dirty look. “I’m fine.”

“I don’t care.”

Nick grunted unhappily.

After a short time had passed, an ambulance pulled up and paramedics rushed inside.

“You can’t be serious!” Nick yelled when he saw them.

“Sorry, Frack. We take no chances,” Brian said.

“I don’t believe this,” he muttered as they put him on the stretcher. “I’m *fine.*”

“Well,” the paramedic said. “Your blood pressure is low, you’re sweating in a cold room, and you look awfully pale to me. Will you humor us and come along?”

Nick shot a look over at Brian. “Only if he comes with me. It was his idea.”

Wordlessly, Brian got up to follow him.

“Well what’s the verdict?” Kevin asked.

“What we thought. His blood tests came back ok. He was dehydrated and just over did it. They gave him some fluids and he’s fine. We’re gonna leave in a few minutes here.”

“Good. Is he going to need some time off?”

“A day or so, the doctor said. And he just needs to take it a little easier. We all do. I think this was a warning we need to slow it down a little.”

“No problem. I think the only one who might complain is A.J., but he’ll live.”

“Do you think this will set us back any?” Brian asked. “We’re due out in a month.”

“Probably not.” Kevin detected the worry in Brian’s voice. “Relax, cuz. We’ve come this far. We’re not going to give up now, that’s for sure.”

A.J. did his best to keep himself from bouncing off the walls. It was happening. It was finally happening. They were going out on tour. He couldn’t believe it. The last month seemed like a blur. They had pushed back the start of their tour only two weeks to provide them a little more rest. It was exactly what they needed. They were excited and anxious, and finally ready to get back onstage. It was not a long tour, just under two months with only four shows a week, but it was the triumph of all of their hard work.

It may have been a small tour, but it was one of the biggest events the music industry had seen in quite a while. The tickets had sold out in record times and the critics who had said they wouldn’t be able to make it back were silenced, at least for now.

We still have to live up to expectations, A.J. thought nervously.

And they had a lot to live up to. Their new album flew off the shelves almost as fast as it could be shelled out when it was released and was hailed as yet another success, even among critics. “The Power Of A Prayer” was their biggest single yet, true to Lance’s prediction. Their fans were starved for Backstreet, and after a long and painful wait for both the fans and the five singers, they were finally getting them back.

A.J. looked around at all of the commotion that was going in to getting the buses ready, and he had to fight to keep from laughing out loud. He could not keep the grin off of his face.

“A.J., you look like a clown,” Kevin said, coming over to him. “What is your deal?” The smile was infectious, and Kevin found himself grinning right alongside him.

“This. This is going to be so damn awesome. I really thought we’d never get to do this again.”

Kevin followed A.J.’s gaze. “You know, even if the Backstreet Boys ended, you could have made it solo without breaking a sweat.”

A.J. turned to look at the older man. “Maybe,” he said after a moment. “But I didn’t want to. I wanted it to be us. Maybe eventually I will be solo. It’s always been in the back of my head. But after all this, if it wasn’t with y’all, I didn’t want to be up there.” He turned his attention back to the chaos. “I wanted to be with y’all,” he said firmly.

“Me too.” Kevin patted A.J.’s shoulder, and let his hand rest there. “Me too.”

Brian walked through the parking lot, and noticed Howie sitting inside his car, feet hanging out the open door.

“D.? You ready?” he asked.

“Yeah,” he said uncomfortably. “Sure.”

Brian gave him a funny look, sensing something was amiss. “Well come on then. How much crap you got? Need help carrying any of it?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I’ve got it.” He got out of the car and pulled out his bags and followed Brian over to the buses. A few feet away he stopped and let his things pile around his feet. He watched Brian and Nick load some of their bags, laughing and joking as they did so.

“How close are we?” Nick hollered from the doorway. “We’re supposed to be out of here in fifteen minutes.”

“We’ll make it,” said Kevin, striding over to the bus. “Hey Howie. All set? We should be ready to head out pretty soon.”

“Ummm, yeah.” Kevin nodded brusquely and continued his rounds. Howie began to fidget with the strap of one of his bags. He jumped out of his skin when A.J. suddenly appeared out of nowhere, yelling his name.

“D! Howie! Whoa, lay off the caffeine bro. I told you to drink decaff. Man, good to see ya!”

“Hey Bone,” Howie said weakly.

“What’s the matter?” he said sternly.

“Nothing, he said with a weary smile. “I’m tired. Get the hell away from me, you are way too cheerful for this early in the morning.”

A.J. whistled. “Yikes. You are cranky. As you wish, *Sweet D.*”

He went about helping the others load, but was snagged discreetly by Brian. “Something’s up with Howie.”

“Oh yeah. I’m on it,” A.J. replied. He wandered back over in Howie’s direction. He was still standing in the same place, looking around him apprehensively. He was definitely freaked out about something.

“D.? We need to load your stuff. C’mon, I’ll help you.”

Slowly, Howie reached down and grabbed one of his bags. A.J. grabbed another.

“You know, you can talk to me if you need to,” he said as he did so. Howie said nothing, and A.J. headed to the bus. He was poised to go up the last step, when he turned to see that Howie had stopped several feet away.

“Howie?” he asked.

Howie’s hands began to shake and he dropped the bag. A.J. was already half way to him when he swiveled on his heel, ready to bolt. A.J. reached for his arm and pulled him to a halt. Howie was breathing hard, and looked like he had seen a ghost.

“Howie?” A.J. pleaded. “Talk to me bro, you’re scaring me.”

Howie drew in a shaky breath. “I can’t do it,” he said finally. “I can’t do it. I’m sorry.”

“Do what?” he asked, his eyes wide. “Go on tour? Why? What’s happened?”

“No, not go on tour.” He jerked his head away and inhaled deeply.

“What then?” A.J. asked. His worry was completely unmasked. Howie looked scared to death.

“I can’t get on the bus,” he said, ashamed. Then his voice rose to an angry shout. “I can’t get on the damn bus!”

He pulled out of A.J.’s grasp and jogged away. It took half a second before A.J. was off after him. Brian was watching them with a look of horrified shock. A.J. signaled to him

to give him to stay put. Howie did not look like he was in a state of mind to deal with a group.

“Howie, whoa. Stop. Come with me. We need to go talk.”

Reluctantly, Howie gave in and allowed A.J. to steer him over to a quiet corner where they could be alone.

“Now,” A.J. said quietly. “Talk to me.”

Howie shrugged miserably. “I can’t get on the bus. I thought I’d be able to, but I can’t.” He cursed under his breath and stared at the ground, kicking a rock.

“Take it easy. We’ll work through this. Understand? Howie, look at me. Do you understand? We will work through this together.”

Howie looked up and found himself face to face with A.J.’s intense gaze. A.J. wouldn’t let him down. He knew that. God, he knew that. “Okay,” he said finally.

A.J. nodded. “Good. Now, did this happen just now or has it been bugging you for awhile?”

“Ever since we started making plans for the tour,” he admitted with a sigh.

“God. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I thought I could do it!” Howie cried, his voice rising.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry.”

He gave a disgusted shake of his head. “It scares me to death. I can’t be in there. It’s stupid, but I’m scared to death.”

“It’s not stupid,” A.J. said forcefully. “Do you hear me? You almost got killed in one of those buses, being afraid of them is *not* something to be ashamed of.”

“Then why am I the only one?” he asked angrily. “Tell me that. You’re not afraid.”

A.J. thought for a moment. “Howie, none of us remember anything about that night except for you. You were the only one who was really conscious at all after it happened. You are the only one who remembers anything. This part of it is bound to affect you more.”

Howie considered this. “But I know the odds of anything like it happening again are almost none. But I still can’t make myself get on it! I mean, it’s ridiculous.”

“No it’s not. Not at all. It’s a perfectly legitimate fear. It doesn’t matter if it could happen again or not. It’s okay.”

“It’s not ok!” Howie said angrily. “How the hell are we supposed to get around this? We live on that damned tour bus!”

“We’ll find a way,” A.J. told him, his tone leaving no room for argument. “I said I’d get you through this, and I meant it.”

Howie smiled weakly, giving up the fight. “Thank you A.J.”

“No reason to. As I recall, you did the same for me not all that long ago.”

They were both quiet for a moment.

“We have to talk to the others. Are you okay? Or do you want me to handle this?”

“Would you? I just can’t face them with this.” He put his hand to the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

“Yes you can,” A.J. said calmly. “And you will. But I will tell them if you want.”

Howie nodded.

“Okay. Stay here. I’ll be back in a few.”

A.J. gave him a supportive pat on the back, and then scampered off to find the others. He gathered them around and told them what was going on.

Kevin folded his arms and then rested his forehead in one hand. “Why didn’t we see this coming?” he asked. “There’s no way we should have missed this.”

“Well, we did, and there’s nothing we can do about that,” Nick said. “Let’s concentrate on how to help him. He was there for every single one of us when we needed him most, and the least we can do is help him when he needs us.”

“Good call, Nicky,” Kevin said with an appreciative nod.

A short time later, while the others were still talking and working out some sort of plan, Brian shuffled his way over to Howie. Howie looked up at him, and flashed him a halfhearted smile.

“I really screwed us over, didn’t I?”

Brian shook his head. “Nope.”

Howie sighed. “We’re so close.”

“I seem to remember a certain Latin Lover telling me that no matter what I did, I couldn’t give up. We needed each other, and I couldn’t give up,” Brian said softly. “Those words probably saved my life, and I think it’s only fair I offer them back to you.”

Howie sniffled a little, and stared at the ground. “I look at that bus, and I see you, lying in that field, screaming, all that blood everywhere, I can feel the rain and the mud, I can see it all, and it’s so vivid I could swear it’s real.” He began to tremble, and Brian wrapped him up in a hug.

“I’m right here Howie. We’re all ok. We’re all still here,” he said softly. “And you are not going to go through this alone. I promise you.”

Howie managed a tiny laugh. “That’s what A.J. said.”

“That Bone’s a smart man,” Brian said seriously.

“Just don’t tell him that,” he replied. “He’d become unbearable,”

“Become?” Brian asked with a raised eyebrow. The two of them began to laugh, and the sound it created was one of healing and love between friends who had survived something that few people in this world ever had to endure. Kevin heard it from his place around the corner, and felt the moisture come back to his eyes. He thanked God for the countless time that he had these people in his life. He had no doubt they would not have been able to pull through with out each other.

Kevin, Nick, and A.J. joined them a short while later. Howie looked around at the concerned faces of his brothers, and was suddenly sure that things were going to be all right.

“It’s taken care of,” Kevin told him. “We’ve got you and A.J. on a plane to the first city. We’ll meet you there. If we can help you get to a point where you can get back on that bus, great. If not, I don’t give a damn. It doesn’t matter.”

Howie stared at them. “You mean this?”

“Of course,” Nick said with a funny look.

“A.J. doesn’t have to go. It’s going to be a huge hassle. I’ll just meet you all there. It would be stupid for two of us to fly.”

“No,’ A.J. said forcefully.

“We said we were together in this.” Nick said firmly. “And together we shall be.”

“Wow. Have you ever said the word shall in your life?” A.J. asked suddenly.

Nick shot him a dirty look, and Howie had to cover a snicker.

“When A.J. doesn’t go, I’ll go with you,” Brian informed him. “Either way, you’re stuck with one of us.” He grinned impudently. “And who knows? If we get all gooey and mushy and sentimental here and there, we’ll all five crowd up a plane and have the bus meet us there.”

Howie looked around at all of their faces. There was not one trace of any annoyance, exasperation, disgust, or anger. There was nothing but brotherhood, and at that moment, Howie knew that there would be no stopping them. As long as they were together, they could not be broken. They had proven that.

“Let’s go D.,” A.J. said, tugging at his shoulder. “We might miss our flight.”

Two hours later, Howie was gazing out the window of the plane that would take them to their first city stop of the tour, with A.J. right beside him, just as he’d promised.

Epilogue ***Standing Tall***

A.J. drew in a deep breath, trying to relax. Nervousness was nothing new to him, but near-paralysis was. He crept closer to the stage, straining his ears to pick up the chant of the crowd, and a new feeling crept in to the pit of his stomach, one of delirious joy.

The opening acts were done, and the crowd was ready and waiting. They had picked up a steady chant, demanding to see their Boys. They had waited long enough.

“You ok, Bone?” Howie asked, putting his hand on the back of A.J.’s shoulder. A.J. jumped.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He broke into a smile.

“What is it?”

“Will you listen to that?” he asked, pointing toward the stage and the screams of the audience. “That is for us.”

“I know,” Howie said with a laugh.

“Damn,” was all he said.

“Whoohoo!” Nick hollered, running up behind them. “Are we ready to rock this house?”

Brian watched his best friend for a moment, with a far away look in his eye.

“Brian?” Nick asked questionably.

“Do me a favor,” Brian said.

“What?”

“Don’t ever let me see you in a hospital bed again. I like you this way much better.”

Nick grinned, and punched him affectionately on the shoulder. “Deal.”

“BSB what time is it?” Kevin yelled.

The spark in their eyes was infectious. The small crowd backstage began to clap in rhythm.

“It’s time to go to work y’all!” they shouted.

“What kind of work?” Kevin hollered.

“*Hard* work!”

The determination of five young men swelled together, creating a confidence that was unbreakable. They lined up together and prepared to take the stage.

“Lets do this!” A.J. yelled.

They ran out onto the stage to the thunderous cheers and yells of the packed arena.

“Hey everybody!” A.J. screamed. “Backstreet’s back *all right!*”

Feeling the rush of the crowd crawl its way through shaking up his heart and soul, and the love that seeped in from all around them, Brian threw his arms out to the side, welcoming it. They had made it. They were back. They had stuck by each other, and they had survived. The joy that flooded every pore of his body was a feeling he never wanted to let go of. He felt his voice fill his lungs, and when he let it go, it reflected the long road they had been down, and instilled the firm belief that they weren’t afraid to travel the rest.

“Everybody...”

The End