

The Only Brother

CAIAS WARD



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Series Editor: Peter Lancett

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CHAPTER 1

A gap in the family portrait

It's the quietest I'd seen him in a long time. Granted, the last time I *had* seen him was six weeks ago, at my birthday, and he was certainly loud then. His last words were, as always, criticising something I was doing rather than being happy and encouraging. So I just walked out. Walked out on my own birthday. When I came back, he had gone home to London; so that was the last time I talked to him.

And the worst part of it was that the olds yelled at me for leaving, rather than him for mouthing off at me. 'You should lighten up.' 'You need to relax.'

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It was my bloody birthday, I shouldn't have my brother slamming me for everything I do and everything I am.

I looked down at him in the hospital bed. Two blood flow tests, they said, and they'd determined that William Simmons was brain dead. The olds talked with doctors and nurses about organ donation and other arrangements. I just stared at the body and tried to say something.

'Didn't really hate you,' I pushed out. 'Just hated that everything *I* did well was expected and everything *you* did was rewarded.'

His hand was still warm; his chest moved up and down with the help of a respirator. William was calm, peaceful. He wasn't complaining about medical problems, wasn't struggling with everything, wasn't angry at me and angry at the world.

William was brain dead. Two blood flow tests, reaction tests... and nothing there.

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There was someone at the door.

‘Andrew? You there, boss?’ It was an American accent, New Jersey from what I know from television. Really easy one to pick up. It sounded just like that mob show.

It had to be Buzz. He was the only Chinese guy with a New Jersey accent that my brother knew. It’s what happens when you go to university in New Jersey; strange things happen, like becoming best friends with a former Buddhist monk turned Philadelphia nightclub bouncer.

‘Hey,’ I said.

Buzz stepped into the room, but not too close to me. Maybe my brother had told him about my personal space issues, maybe he could just read it. When my brother wasn’t yelling at me or telling me I was screwing up, Buzz was a big part of the conversations we’d had.

‘Namaste,’ he said, putting his hands together in front of his chest and bowing

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forward a bit. 'I wish we could have met under better circumstances.'

'So do I,' I tried to smile. 'Will made you sound like a superhero.'

Buzz smiled, wide and bright. 'Your brother really cared about you, you know?'

'I didn't know,' I said.

Buzz pulled his head back a bit.

'He never said a word like that to my face,' I said. 'Never acted like he cared, either.'

And then I waited for the arguments; 'Of course he cared about you, he was your brother!' 'You're just upset.' 'How can you say that?' Buzz didn't say any of those things though.

'I'm sorry he didn't find the words to express it in a way that you would understand,' Buzz said.

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That's new...

'Your parents are going to be busy, between forms and spending time in the chapel,' Buzz continued. 'They asked me to drive you back home whenever you are ready. I'll be outside the room; just let me know when you want to leave.' He turned to walk out of the room.

'Buzz!' I said, a little louder than I should have.

'Yes?'

'Don't you... don't you want to say goodbye to him?' I whispered.

Buzz sighed, looking over at my brother... my brother's body. He touched his own head with his right hand, and then brought his hand to his heart.

'In some ways, he's not gone,' he said. 'And the others, we'll work around. Take your time, and do what you have to do. I'll be outside.'

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Buzz hadn't really looked at my brother the whole time he was in the room. It was creepy, in a way; it was like my brother was just furniture to him, like the bed or the table or the lamp. Great friends, university roommates in America and fraternity brothers and... well, he wasn't freaking out or crying or even looking at him.

Buzz nodded to me, looked over at my brother, and stepped out of the room. He avoided a nurse as he moved a bit further down the hallway.

Confusing... just like everything. How the hell does my brother get through all the medical problems he had since birth, the recent brain surgeries, the recovery... and then go to a hospital for a pulled muscle and not come out? How do you dodge every bullet fired at you, recover, heal and go on with your life, and then get the plug pulled on you? How do you go from being a rising star lighting tech in the West End to... to here, in a bed, on a respirator?

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All I remember is the pain shooting through my hand, my knuckles bruised. I was in Buzz's rented car, loaded up with crisps and a Coke and with an ice pack from the hospital on my hand.

'Hell of a punch,' Buzz said as he drove. 'Right through the drywall and nearly into the other side.'

What the hell is wrong with this guy? I thought. The olds freaked out, nurses swarmed me, and he's making light of it?

I shot him a look. He seemed to understand and changed the subject.

'I can either get upset about what happened to William,' Buzz said, 'Or I can remember all the great stuff. I can't control what happened to him. I can control how I react, though.'

'You miss him?'

'Yeah,' Buzz whispered. 'Always kept in touch with him, as much as I could. Didn't

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expect last spring to be my last visit with him though. That was his first show in the West End...'

Yeah, William was damn proud of that, his first lead lighting technician job. Parents dug deep for opening night tickets, front row, even with all my brother's bills for the surgeries. He could have got them tickets, but they insisted on front row and 'hang the cost!', while at the same time we were choking on the loan payments for the medical bills. Even I went, and I hated going to Will's stuff. Theatre never interested me, and I was sick of how 'wonderful' everything Will did was, how great he was doing, how incredible...

'Incredible show,' Buzz interrupted my thoughts. 'Something to be proud of, really.'

'I guess.' I kept the ice pack on my hand, turning it from one side to the other. It kept the swelling down, even as I flexed my fingers. Stupid move on my part, putting my hand into a wall. Hard to hold a stylus

A gap in the family portrait

and tablet with a busted up hand, and I had paying graphics work coming up that week.

The ride took another hour of relative quiet before we finally pulled into my road at about three in the morning. Buzz parked on the street in front of the house, moving the car after he almost parked on the wrong side. It was my small chance to laugh, and then I pointed out the big driveway next to the big house where we lived. Buzz shrugged and pulled in. My hands were still full, so he helped me out of the car. He shuffled to the boot, drained and worn out, the first time I'd noticed him really tired in the hours since we'd met.

'Yay, jetlag,' Buzz said, shouldering his bag. 'I need to get some sleep. Just point me to your guest room...' He smiled weakly, looking like he was about to fall over at any moment.

'Sure,' I said, opening the door. He'd been on planes ten hours – his flight from Chicago to New York, then New York

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to London, then he'd gone straight to St Thomas Hospital. Then the hour drive here after an hour at the hospital, and all for my brother.

'To the right, up the stairs, second door on the right. There's WiFi if you need it, just turn on your laptop. You have one of those power adapters?'

'Yeah, I do, don't want to blow out the computer. And I'd better let my wife know I'm OK,' Buzz said as he shuffled up the stairs. He stopped halfway up and looked down at me.

'You want to talk, let me know. Otherwise, I'll let you be, OK?'

I tried to say something, but really couldn't think of much except 'OK'. He nodded at me and turned to go into the room.

I fell into my bed, checking my phone. Sara hadn't messaged me back. She'd said she was going camping that week; she

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might not have taken her phone with her. When Sara drops off the face of the earth, she drops off the face of the earth...

Damn.

I sent her another text and just lay in bed with the ice pack on my hand. The hand was cold and red and hurt a lot. All the same, I wanted to keep on punching things. Just keep on punching things, even if my hand broke a dozen times.