

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, criticizing 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 New York; so that was the last time I talked to him.

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

The Only Brother

It was my damn 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 parentals 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.

A gap in the family portrait

There was someone at the door.

“Andrew? You there, boss?” It was a heavy Jersey accent; tough and thick but still with a friendly tone. It sounded just like the people on MTV’s “Jersey Shore.”

It had to be Buzz. He was the only Chinese guy with a Jersey accent my brother knew. It’s what happens when you go to college 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