

A borrowed heart.
A broken city.
A love they never expected.



BENEATH OUR FEET

JACK HARTLEY

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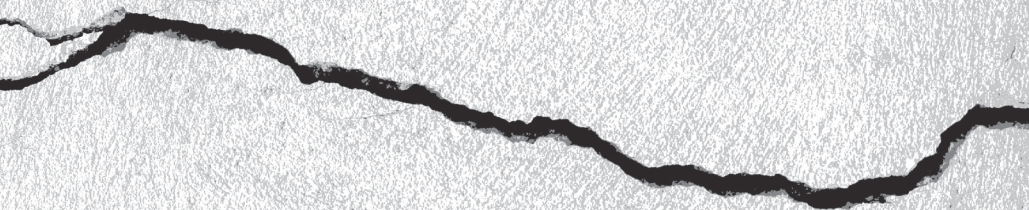
J A C K H A R T L E Y

SCHOLASTIC

SYDNEY AUCKLAND NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON MEXICO CITY
NEW DELHI HONG KONG BUENOS AIRES PUERTO RICO

"Our worst day"

The Press,
Wednesday, 23 February 2011



1

ALFIE

I feel the last remnants of my drug-induced sleep drain away from me and the colour in front of my closed eyes becomes brighter. I lose the battle to keep them shut and when they open, they burn from the fluorescent lights above.

I'm alive.

My eyes continue scanning the room, trying to register what the fuck is going on. The hospital room is filled with this god-awful beeping which feels like it's screaming directly into my eardrums. There are a whole lot of machines hooked up to me – endless wires connected to monitors and this tube that's rammed down my throat. I look over at my mum, whose eyes are glued to the newspaper she's reading. I see the front page headline: **Our worst day**. It sure is. I try to clear my throat, hoping it will make breathing easier, but it doesn't. Instead, my body rattles with the motion and the pain shoots to my chest. This alerts Mum and she drops the paper, tightly grabbing hold of my hand.

"You're awake," she blurts out with relief. "How are you feeling?"

I lift my arm and point at the tube, half smiling back at her.

"Right, of course. The doctor said the surgery went well. The heart was a perfect match."

I nod my head in response, still feeling drugged up and a little confused about everything.

"It's been a big couple of days, sweetie. We can talk more once they get that tube out of you. Just rest up. I'm not going anywhere, okay," she says. I squeeze her hand back to say thank you.

My eyes feel incredibly dry in this room, thanks to the overly efficient ventilation system. I shut them and try get some rest. Anything to make this recovery speed up so I can get out of here. But it's no use. My head is racing. I know a lot has happened, but I don't remember much of the day. Just fragments. Not knowing things makes me anxious. I can remember the sickening noise. The shaking ... like the earth was being thrown violently through space. Seeing dust fly everywhere. My legs giving way and Nathan falling with me.

As I try to cast my mind back, I can hear the sirens play in my head. I can see the sheer panic of everyone around me; I'd never witnessed anything like that before. *It was hell.*

We were running through the streets to get away from it all. Dodging the holes in the ground. The crumbling buildings. Desperately trying to get back home to safety. Then I hit a blank spot. I was on Cashel Street, just outside Shades Arcade ... then nothing.

It's as though that chunk of time has been cut from my existence completely. Nathan must have carried me, because the next memory I have of that day is lying on my back in this park, looking up at the sky as thick dust flies over us, covering all the blue parts that are left. In that moment I thought I was about to die. It felt peaceful. I wasn't scared. Maybe part of me already felt dead, which made that moment bearable. I guess that must have been the adrenaline and my heart fucking out on me that made me think like that. I was close to death. My heart didn't want to hold on much longer.

The paramedics lifted my body up onto the stretcher and piled me into the back of the ambulance. Nathan sat with me, his phone glued to his ear trying to get through to my mum. I looked up at the ceiling of the ambulance. This wasn't as peaceful. It felt like I was in the back of a hearse. In a coffin. I blacked out again.

I woke up as they were transferring me into the back of a helicopter. My mum was there. I knew this meant they had a donor. I've been waiting for this surgery for a long time now. *Why did it have to take an earthquake for this to happen?* My ears tuned into someone talking about all the people who have died in the earthquake. It made me feel guilty to be fleeing the city on our way to get a heart from someone who's just died. The city was in ruins beneath us and we just got to fly away as though nothing was happening. There were still people there, trapped under the rubble, desperately trying to stay alive. The guilt took over, and it was enough to keep me awake during our flight, tormenting me. I felt scared, like a little boy. Mum never let go of my hand. It was the only thing that anchored me from completely spiralling away.

I didn't remember arriving in Auckland. Just lying on my back again, watching the ceiling tiles blur as I was rushed through the halls and into the operating theatre. The anaesthetist wrapped the mask over my face then I escaped into oblivion.

I wake up, like it's a dream. But it's not. It's a horrible nightmare that I've somehow managed to benefit from. This heart gives me another chance to live. A chance at a new life.

The next couple of days in the Cardiothoracic Intensive Care Unit are painful and boring. The nurses come in, they help me change position, check my IV lines, administer more painkillers, check my drainage tubes, let me nod or shake my head for yes and no, and I sleep. Mum doesn't leave my side.

After three days I'm transferred to the Transplant Special Care Unit and am glad to see the last of Intensive Care. The tube has been taken out of my mouth and throat and I'm feeling a little more human again. A big relief. Now that I'm in a stable, semi-conscious state – able to comprehend what's going on – I am

visited by the surgeon who operated on me. He's a big guy, with massive hands. I can't help but feel they would make doing this kind of surgery, or any surgery for that matter, bloody difficult. "Alfie, how are we feeling?"

"A box of fluffies," I reply with the voice of a smoker.

"You look a picture. You know, you're bloody lucky you got here when you did. That old heart of yours wasn't holding out much longer."

"I thought I was going to die."

"I think you had everyone worried ... but you're here now, and that's all that matters. It's not often there's a heart waiting for you the exact moment you need it. Something – or *someone*, should I say – was watching out for you," he says, as he pats my shoulder.

"It seems that way. Thanks."

"It's my pleasure. I don't think you'll be seeing me again. Well, I certainly hope not. Just wanted to check in. All the best, lad."

We shake hands and he leaves.

I get a bit emotional thinking about how lucky I am to be here right now. To have this new chance at life. I feel a tear run down the side of my face, but as I try to let myself cry, nothing more comes out. I think I'm too exhausted and dehydrated for that, so it's back to thinking. I get it into my head that I really want to have someone in my life I can talk to.

I've got friends, but they're my mates. Not the kind of people I can really talk to. About the big stuff, ya know? As I continue this thought, the painkillers kick in and I start to doze off. My daydreaming turns into sleep, and I feel like I'm somehow able to control what's happening in my dream and interact with it.

I see a blurry face with no features in front of me, but then it changes – her lips appear. Everything slows down ... she smiles

at me ... then turns away and starts walking off with her hand trailing behind her. As I look down at her hand, I'm holding it ... following her down a street ... and then everything turns to darkness. I lose all control over the dream and begin to sleep.

2

ALFIE

It's Day 21 and I've made some solid progress with my recovery over the past few days, so the doctors are happy for me to leave now. My chest wound still hurts like hell, but that's to be expected. The good news is that my body is accepting the new heart, and it looks like I'm going to make a full recovery.

I leave the hospital feeling a little more optimistic about life. It's a proper chance to live. As cheesy as it sounds, I do feel like a new person. More appreciative, I guess. Thankful to be here, which I think I needed to feel. Especially after everything that's gone on back at home.

Mum and I get off the plane in Christchurch, and as we drive back towards our house, the detachment that I've felt from being away from our broken city quickly leaves me, and I'm back to face our new reality. The death toll has now reached 166, with hundreds more still in hospital and thousands of homes too badly damaged to live in. The pictures on the news don't do the destruction any justice at all, and the further east we go, the worse it gets, until we're in the heart of it as we near the cordon that's now wrapped around the CBD. My eyes stay glued on it as we drive down Bealey Ave, taking in everything broken around me. I get flashbacks of that day. The loud rumbling plays in my head and I get this feeling of being helpless and lost in the one place in this world where I always thought I'd be safe.

Once we get home I go straight to my room. As I lie down

on my bed, I look over at my desk and my eyes lock onto the schoolbooks that have hardly been touched. It feels like a lifetime ago since I was at school, even though it's only been a few weeks. This year hasn't really felt like it's started yet, but we're now in March. And being drugged up this whole time has made me super drowsy. The days haven't really felt like real time at all. It's kind of like that odd bit after Christmas where you have no idea what day it is and there isn't really any reason to know anyway because nothing is happening.

Between the earthquake and school reopening it'll be about four weeks all-up – so not much longer now – and I've missed the same amount of school as everyone else, which my parents are quite happy about. We're lucky our school isn't too damaged. From what I've heard, it's pretty much all okay, except it's looking likely that we'll be sharing our school site with kids from another school. And it sounds like it'll be an all-girls' school, which I know Nathan will be frothing about – any chance to find himself “a little lovely,” as he says.

Over the past few weeks, I've hardly had any time to myself. I've either had Mum with me, or doctors and nurses and it has been doing my head in. I've felt so claustrophobic, even now I'm back home. I need to get out and breathe some fresh air that isn't tainted with all this bad stuff that's been happening. I'm supposed to limit any physical activity, take each day in little steps, allow my wounds time to heal, but I need to get out of the house now because I feel myself about to snap. I sneak out for a walk before that becomes a reality.

The streets have been cleaned up somewhat since the day the earthquake happened. There's less liquefaction and silt on the streets, and now there are road cones covering every single pothole. Spray paint marks out where speed bumps should be and hurricane fences border everything that we're not meant to reach. It doesn't

feel like home at all right now. Depressing, really.

I find myself drawn to the CBD cordon. I cross the road and follow the fence along Bealey Ave and head towards Riccarton. People have knitted flowers and red and black scarves – Canterbury colours – which are now wrapped around the fencing. This gives some life to the metal wires and framing that creates a window into this broken world that none of us are allowed to reach. As I look through this opening, in the distance I can see big diggers smashing down buildings and guys from the military driving through the streets, searching for looters and anyone who shouldn't be in there. It truly looks like we're in a warzone and behind these fences is where the military have cornered the last rebels in some sort of civil war.

I don't know if it's from looking through this fence, or the cold, or my heart, but I start to lose the feeling in me. Everything becomes slightly numb and stiff when I try to move forward. I start to breathe heavily and the harder I breathe, the more I begin to stress out about what's happening. All I can hear is my heart beating heavily, drowning out the sound in my ears as it rattles throughout me. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, it thuds in my chest. All the feeling I do have becomes concentrated on my wound and, with no strength left in me, I fall to my knees. They sting as they collide with the concrete below, ripping my jeans. The sudden fall to the ground doesn't snap me out of it though. Something isn't right. I panic, and my breathing gets worse until my head becomes so light that I—

My eyes open and I'm no longer where I was before. There's an oxygen mask over my face, and I can feel this weird vibration as my body wobbles, which makes it pretty apparent that I've somehow made it into an ambulance. I freak out and then feel the hands of a

paramedic press me back down onto the stretcher to keep me still.

“It’s okay.” The woman tries to reassure me. “Alfie, is it?”

“Yes,” I say faintly as I breathe.

“Great. Everything is going to be fine. You fainted and we’re just a little concerned because we can see you’ve just had heart surgery so we’re taking you in for a check-up.”

“How did I get in here?”

“We were driving and saw you face down on the ground. Gave us quite the scare. But everything is going to be okay. We saw your hospital bracelet and asked them to call your mum – she’s going to meet us at the hospital.”

I nod and immediately think about how angry Mum is going to be. I’m out of her sight for all of thirty minutes and I end up in an ambulance – *for fuck’s sake*.

The doctors run a bunch of tests. I feel fine. But landing back in hospital the same day you’ve been discharged is never a good look. Once they’re satisfied it was in fact a panic attack and not my heart giving up, they send me on my way.

Mum’s gonna be pissed. I can already hear her in my head getting angry at me for sneaking out. I can hardly come up with an excuse for this one, so I’m just gonna have to cop it. Smile and nod. When she sees me, she marches over. Absolutely fuming.

“I’m sorry,” I say before she has a chance to get a word in.

“You scared the living shit out of me. Why would you do that?” she says, shaking her head.

“I know. I know. It wasn’t my intention to end up in here.”

“Well done. I’m glad you’ve got that much sense then.”

“Can we just get out of here? I’ve had it up to here with hospitals,” I say, measuring my height with my hand.

“Sure.”

We walk out the entrance and just as I think that might be the end of it, it isn’t. She’s still pissed.

“I mean, what were you thinking? You’ve just had fucking major surgery. You’re clearly not ready to be going out exercising. The doctor said you need rest – and what are you doing? The exact opposite.” She throws her hands up, really trying to sell the point that I was in the wrong.

“I felt fine. Honestly. I thought it would be good.”

“So, you’re a doctor now?”

“That’s not what I meant. I felt fine. Seriously.”

“You just don’t listen. You always know what’s best.”

I know from how worked up she’s getting that this grilling isn’t going to stop until I’m out of her sight, so I just zone out. My eyes look across the carpark in search of silence. I keep nodding my head to seem like I’m taking in whatever she’s rambling on about.

There’s a girl walking in our direction with a rugged looking man I’m guessing is her dad. She’s pretty. Like really pretty. The effortless ‘Zooey Deschanel’ kind of pretty, except with messy hair and an op shop wardrobe. I vaguely recognise her from school, but I can’t think of her name. All my attention is focused on her. I try to look away so I don’t seem like a creep, but my eyes are drawn back to her face. She locks eyes with me, so I smile and she smiles back. As we walk past each other, both of our heads turn back to look.

“Hello?” Mum says, shaking my shoulder. “Are you listening or just flirting with that girl?”

“Ahhh, yes, I’m listening.”

“What did I just say then?”

“Ummm ... you said that we’re going to get McFlurries and you’re no longer angry with me and, most weirdly of all, you’re not telling Dad?” I say with big round eyes.

“You little shit.”

“That’s a yes then, isn’t it?”

“Fine. Just don’t do this again. Okay?”

“Deal.”

3

DANI

It runs in our family. My mum, my grandma, my mum's aunty and probably my grandma's grandma and on and on and on. Everyone. It's like some sort of curse on the women in my family – a phrase that I have heard and understood from a very young age. I remember as part of my spelling homework in Year 2 having to write a word that starts with N, so I chose Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma – far beyond my spelling age, but something I was brought up to know far too much about.

That's how my teachers found out about it. It was then that I first encountered this kind of pity from people: the look in their eyes like they want to say more but can't because they're worried that whatever they say is going to offend you or isn't enough. So, they just give you that look – like a worried smile or something, nothing actually reassuring in it at all. It was a look that I always hated.

Growing up, cancer was normal for me, and I think it had been normal for my mum too. I didn't think it was a common disease, but the immensity of it never really registered with me. Mum would have bouts of it being bad, then she would get better – back to bad, then back to good. This went on for as long as I can remember. There are blocks in my memory of her being so fit: running with me, mountain biking at Bottle Lake Forest, and swimming at Taylor's Mistake in the summer. Then my mum would disappear from existence for a while, the long months when she was reduced to nothing, until she made enough progress to move like she used to, to be the mum she wanted to be. Despite

everything, she was the greatest woman I had ever known.

These months made Dad the saddest. He tried to act like it wasn't dragging him down, so he would disappear into the garage, into music, anything. It hurt him to see her like this: frail, broken, withered – far from the powerful soul she was. He loved my mum so much. The way he would look at her – even with all her hair gone and her veins pushing through the palest of skin – like she was the most beautiful woman on Earth. And to him she was.

I got diagnosed when I was ten. And it broke my family. Even though I was the one in pain, I think it hurt them more. But I got through it, went through chemo and everything – all the visits to Starship Hospital, the string upon string of colourful Beads of Courage that I got after every treatment, and, of course, the school mufti days for the Child Cancer Foundation on behalf of my family and countless other children with cancer. And for a while I thought that would be it, I'd be one of the lucky ones, but now – seven years later – I have the symptoms again, all of them. I try to be optimistic about it. But I know once we get to the hospital, run the tests and get the results, the cancer will be back, but this time more than likely to end me, and that scares the living shit out of me. It's not the dying, it's the pain. The heartache it causes. How my dad will deal with it – all over again.

My stomach is in knots, and this adds to the abdominal pain I feel right now. I can already hear the doctor's words so clearly when I imagine the conversation, and I hate that they're expected. I see their eyes looking pained, squinting, and I can hear that lump in their throat begin to fold up as they try to speak. They look at my dad first, then turn to me; the message needs to register with me. The "I'm sorry" is genuine. They've said it many times before, maybe not as often to someone as young as me, but they're used to it. They know how this all goes.

I'm taken out of this daydream by my dad calling out to me. I

turn around and see the fear in his eyes. “Everything is going to be okay,” he says, trying to reassure me.

“Sure.”

We get into the car and head to the hospital. He rests his hand on my thigh as he looks at the road ahead, and I hear him say, “I love you, Dani.”

Dad parks the car and we start walking along Hagley Park towards the hospital. As we get nearer, my legs begin to slow down. Dad notices the drop in pace and when I’m unable to walk any further, we stop until this passes. He doesn’t say anything to pressure me. Instead, he just holds me. I realise this is just as frightening for him. But me not going won’t change anything, it just delays everything. This thought pushes me forward and we keep walking.

We get to the car park and now I can see the hospital in its entirety which makes this moment feel a little more real. The silver Christchurch Hospital lettering on the front. The ambulances racing through. I recognise a guy from school in the distance. Alfie, I think. One of the popular guys. Tall and very handsome, but not the cocky kind that knows it. As I get closer to him, he looks at me and smiles. Even with everything in my head right now, I manage to smile back. He doesn’t break his stare. So neither do I. We look at each other until our heads are facing the opposite way to our feet. I wonder why he’s here. I hope he’s not going through what I am – or his mother for that matter.

As we get to the entrance, Dad walks up to the reception and fills out the paperwork for me. I just sit, chewing at my nails. I don’t think I could move my hands enough to write anything right now anyway.

The doctor is an older man, just as I pictured: glasses, slightly curled darkish hair with hints of grey bursting through the short back and sides.

“Hi, I’m Doctor Aaron Polanski,” he says with a slight accent. That, I didn’t expect.

“Hi, I’m Terry, this is my daughter—”

I cut him off and introduce myself before he says my name. “Dani.” I reach out to shake his hand.

“Dani, tell me what I can do for you?”

“Well, I’ve been having these pains in my stomach, I’m tired all the time and I’ve noticed my lymph nodes are swollen.”

He looks concerned when I say this – maybe because of the confidence with which I recite my symptoms, not sounding like another teenage hypochondriac.

We talk generally at first, then go into more detail about my history and the duration of my symptoms. As he learns more about the cancer in my family and starts to see our reality, his face changes and he looks almost scared to keep asking questions, which makes me more anxious. I know what he’s thinking. I know the cancer more intimately than he does. The rest of the conversation becomes a blur and I retreat into my thoughts. I look over to my dad to see if he’s taking any of this in, hoping he will speak for us, but he’s already covered his eyes with his hands, so I can’t make eye contact. I can tell he’s starting to tear up by the sound of the short breaths he’s taking. I endure the rest of the conversation and then go through the motions of the tests that the doctor takes.

As I leave, I wish it could be the last time I would be seeing this place, the last time I would have to think about this, the last time I’d have to feel like shit. But everything in me tells me it’s going to be the news that I’m expecting.

Now we wait.

There’s a deafening silence when we get home. It’s a complete battle to think of anything but what has just happened. Normally, I’d go to my favourite spot under a big oak tree at the park in town,

but since the earthquake a few weeks ago, the cordon keeps me from going there – so I go for a walk instead.

As I walk along the streets, the dried liquefaction makes a dusty shape in the air, trailing with the wind, almost flying. It looks peaceful, floating amongst the chaotic landscape left behind by the earthquake. It takes me with it, helping to settle the war that's waging inside my head. As I drift along, I slip into a feeling of calm for a while.

When I'm in the right space, I begin planning what I'm going to do. Self-diagnosing is never a good idea, but I'm not exactly a hypochondriac when I've been through this before. And I saw the way the doctor looked at me ... like, it's here again. There are options, some with better success rates than others. But that all depends on how long I've had this and what stage I'm at.

If it's early, there's chemo. It fucking sucks, but it can work.

If it's bad, well, there's less that can be done. More intensive treatment plans, but that all depends on how aggressive it is. Mum fighting it was horrible to watch. The worst thing I've ever seen.

Do I want to go through that? I'm not sure. It's too early to tell.

4

DANI

School starting back up will give me the sense of normality that I desperately need. A distraction. Waiting for these results feels sickening and it's making time move so slowly. I just want to know. But the sooner they come, the sooner reality will hit, and I know how the rest goes. The thought eats away at me.

Because of the earthquake we have to share schools with Avonside Girls' High, which is a bit of an odd concept; two schools sharing different halves of the day. We get the morning, which initially I didn't like the idea of because I'm a night owl, so getting up earlier seems a burden. But when I think of how damaged their school is and what their families have lost, I get over the selfish thought quickly. The boys at school are quite excited with this arrangement: a small window of opportunity each day when they can try it on with other girls for a change. And good for them. I couldn't care less.

We'd only been back at school after the summer holidays for a couple of weeks before the earthquake shut everything down. And even though it's been barely any time at all since, it feels like a lifetime ago that the school year started. But so much has changed. Christchurch is truly fucked. And I might be dying.

Wonderful – two things I didn't think I would be saying at seventeen.

And to top it all off, my best friend since forever, Keri, has gone to Aussie to stay with her uncle and aunty while her parents figure out if they're going to pack up everything and move over there for good.

With shorter periods in class, the day goes faster. Fortunately, that means less time in Calculus and Biology; but unfortunately, less in English too, which I actually enjoy. I don't understand why everyone is so stressed about failing this year. We've only missed four weeks and we'll miss a tiny amount of class time each day, but every other year we've left everything to the last minute to get through anyhow. Though I guess emotions are heightened at the moment.

I'm not normally one to hide away from people, but that's all I feel like doing right now. At interval, I head to the library and sit in the most hidden corner I can find. If Keri were here, then maybe I could put up a front – talk to people – but right now it's the last thing I want to do. I try to eat my food, but my mouth struggles to chew anything as this anxious feeling goes through my stomach and into my throat, depriving me of anything but the small amount of oxygen I need for a breath. The more anxious I get, the smaller I feel, until I could swear I was just a head floating in this room, looking out at everything but taking in nothing at all. Luckily, the bell ringing snaps me out of this and in an instant I'm back to myself, moving towards class.

My not-wanting-to-be-here carries into this period so I sit at the back. We're reading *Animal Farm*, quite possibly one of the most boring reads of my life, but Mr Peters seems to think it's God's literary gift to Earth, and we should be able to see the dire warnings against fascism beneath the allegory. I can see them. But it doesn't stop the book from being shit.

While everyone else is busy with their heads down, writing their essays, I find myself thinking about death. Instead of writing about prominent motifs in the book, I begin writing a bucket list of what I want to do before I die. A bit cynical, but death is on my mind, and if I'm going to die, then there's a few things I want to do before my time is up:

BUCKET LIST



- Travel. ANYWHERE!!
- Feel alive.
 - Go drifting.
 - Get arrested.
- Start a band.
- Fall in love. 
- Lose my virginity.
- Buy a house.
- Leave my mark.
- Write about my experience.

As I write, my cheek burns as a tear runs down my skin. Is this how Mum felt? I never really thought about her sadness and the things she would have wanted to do on her own. I only thought about how much pain she was in, how hard it would be to say goodbye, how she wouldn't be there for me or Dad. I never thought about her. The tears soon turn to full-on sobbing, and I've got to leave before people notice me like this.

"Dani?" I hear from behind me, and realise it's Mr Peters.

"Sorry, I just needed to get out."

"I can see. I picked that up from the moment you sat down today. Take as much time as you need."

I wipe the tears from my cheeks and take a seat on the bench outside. He waits for me to speak, but I remain silent.

"Look, I know I'm probably the last person you want to talk to about anything personal, so I won't take any offence at all – but I've got to ask – do you want or need to talk to someone?"

"I'm not sure." I don't know what to tell him. Everything that's inside my head right now only exists there. Nothing is confirmed,

so there isn't really anything to tell ... yet. I realise it's the 'yet' that's making me like this. "Just one of those days I guess."

"Okay, well, I don't want you to go back in if you aren't comfortable. And I would love to say you can just leave for the day, but I have a duty of care and if anything happens to you, then I'm in the shit. However, what I can do is send you to the nurse. Say you're sick and they'll let you go home. How does that sound?" he says, with a reassuring smile.

"Thank you."

He places a hand awkwardly on my shoulder in an attempt to comfort me, but not in a creepy way. He's not exactly the warmest person, so this is big from him. It means a lot.

When I get home from school, Dad's work truck is in the drive. I drop my keys onto the hall stand and yell out to him. No reply. I walk down the hall and find him sitting at the dining table, head bent, with his face in his hands. I know immediately what this means.

"Dad?"

He looks up. I haven't seen him this broken since Mum. His eyes are red and swollen and his lips are trembling as he tries to say my name. We both stay silent. Because he hasn't said anything yet, the gravity of all of this hasn't quite sunk in properly, which I think I need it to.

"What did they say?"

He grabs my hand tightly. "I'm so sorry ..." He pauses, desperately trying to pull himself together, pushing back the pain to get the words out. "It's not good, darling."

"Is it the same as Mum?" I start backing away.

"Yes," he says, feeling all the guilt in the world in just three letters.

I feel my head start spinning as my chest begins to thud so much that I feel like I can hear it inside my head. “How long do I have?”

He shrugs his shoulders, shaking his head.

“What stage is it?” I snap.

“I’m so sorry, darling. It—it’s terminal.”

All that sadness I have quickly turns to anger. I hit the wall in the kitchen and break the plasterboard, leaving my hand covered in white dust and throbbing from the pain. Dad stands up, grabbing hold of me as he tries to calm me down and stop me from screaming. Now I know how Mum felt when she found out. It’s a type of anger that I never thought was possible to feel: pure burning inside.

“He wants to start treatment right away. Things are different now. This doesn’t mean your time is up yet.” I push him away.

“I don’t want to.”

“What do you mean you don’t want to?” he argues back.

“I can’t. Not after what Mum went through. It clearly didn’t work for her. It won’t work for me.”

“You still have a whole life ahead of you. You can’t just give up!”

“Mum had her whole life too. All the treatment did was hurt her and give her false hope that she might get more time.”

“I can’t lose you too, darling,” he pleads. “You’re not thinking straight. You need to at least look at your options. If not for yourself, then for me.”

The conversation ends there, and I go to my room to think, to clear my head, to try and settle the racing that’s going on inside of me.

For some reason I feel the need to see Mum’s face. I get my scrapbook out and look at all the pictures of her when she was my age. I’m the spitting image of her. I flick through the tattered pages and see her out partying with her friends. Her arm draped around

her best friend Louise, singing into a mic. When she first met Dad and they travelled around Asia. And when she had me, holding me in her arms at the hospital. She looks so happy, so ... full.

Then, when I get to the pictures of her during treatment – and after – she's a completely different woman. You can see it in her eyes. The life has been sucked from her; that fullness isn't there anymore – like the cancer was taking tiny pieces of her soul each time she went through the chemotherapy, taking away the things that made her *her*. The cancer took her body, but the chemo took away her soul. It was so horrible to see her like that and it went on for so long: fighting, ruining precious days, suffering to gain days that weren't the same, days that were borrowed time. I don't want that life for me; I can't bring myself to do it.

If there is a God, then he will let me into heaven because *he gave me cancer*. This was his decision. He doesn't have to make anyone sick, but he does. All the time. And I hate that people think he's good because if he is, why does he hurt so many innocent people? And let so many bad people live long, healthy lives? What kind of sadistic asshole puts people through that much pain? Those brainwashed believers say it's because afterwards there's an eternity of happiness ... but why create a world to hurt people in the first place?

I want to live in the now because that's the only thing I know for certain. I can't bank my life on some made-up story about a world that no one can even prove exists.