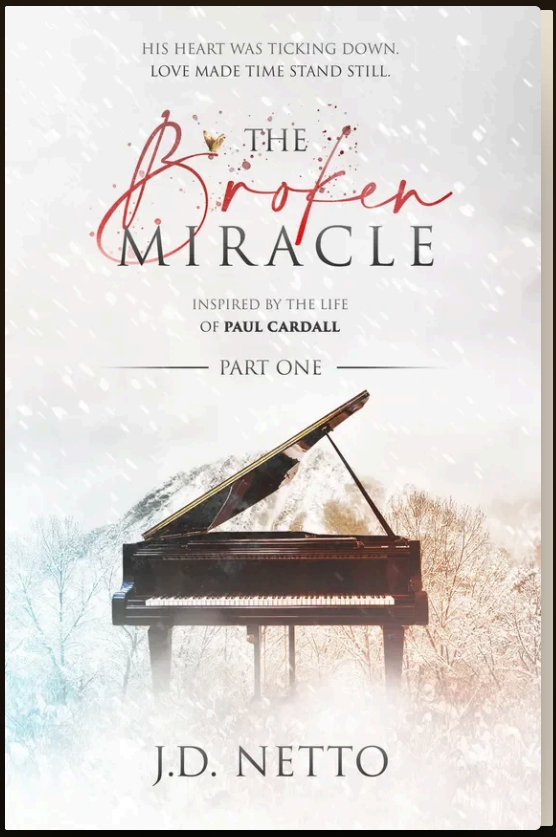

THE BROKEN MIRACLE

Part One · Inspired by the life of Paul Cardall

THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE

A BLUE BABY

I belonged to an exclusive club with only one membership requirement—be born with half a functioning heart. I felt like a lucky dog every time I removed the leash that was my oxygen tubes in the morning. Normal for me was waking up with two thick lines carved on my cheeks that sometimes remained visible throughout the day. I chose to see them as my reward for a good night's sleep. Or for just being alive.

My wife, Olivia, was in our bed beside me, eyes closed, her brown tresses strewn on the pillow. She had a beauty mark on her right cheek, right above her lips. Twelve-hour night shifts at the hospital usually kept her asleep until early afternoon.

I sat up on the edge of the bed, hand on my chest. "Well, you're still working." Tom Sawyer beat against my hand. Yes, I named my heart Tom Sawyer—Sawyer for short. Mark Twain would approve, Huck Finn would be jealous, and my favorite rock band, Rush, would be proud since, in my opinion, "Tom Sawyer" was their best song. Every time I listened to their drummer's patterns, I thought of Sawyer and how, against all odds, he kept on beating. After countless doctor appointments, procedures, and surgeries, I decided to give it a name so I could see it as a friend—a very broken friend.

Olivia turned over in her sleep, pregnant belly pointing toward me. The sight earned a wide smile from me.

Whenever I looked at her baby bump, I often imagined the despair my parents felt when they were told about my condition. It can't be easy knowing your newborn will need heart surgery a few hours after being held for the first time. Most people will never experience that as parents; I prayed to be one of those people.

For obvious reasons, I don't remember anything that happened at the hospital on April 24, 1973. From what I was told, my mom's labor and my arrival were pretty routine stuff until they saw me. I was a "blue baby," a nickname given to children born with a lack of oxygen in their blood. I'd like to think my lips were so blue that medical personnel thought I inherently belonged to some metal band, but considering the dire situation that day, I don't think they had much time for sarcasm.

Cardiologists at Salt Lake County Hospital transported me to the Primary Children's Medical Center, where I had my first heart catheterization.

Sawyer was diagnosed with double inlet left ventricle. A normal heart has two ventricles and two atriums designed to receive blood. Oxygen-poor blood flows into the right atrium and ventricle before being sent to the pulmonary artery, where vessels carrying the blood to the lungs pick up oxygen. The oxygenated blood returns through the left atrium and ventricle and is distributed to the rest of the body. The only functioning ventricle Sawyer had was the left one, forcing my two atriums to spew blood together like two chemicals never meant to be mixed.

The story goes that my dad and grandfather got permission to take me into a custodian's closet on the way to surgery, where they prayed for divine intervention. We want God to just wave His hand and work a miracle, but often times the miracle is God laying the puzzle pieces down and watching us figure out how to put them together. He's no wizard waving about a wand but, rather, an architect slowly revealing a blueprint.

I underwent my first major heart surgery twenty-two hours after I was born. A gifted surgeon created a connection between my left ventricle and aorta, the large artery that supplies blood to the lower part of the body. This helped increase the oxygen in my blood as it flowed from my lungs.

Though the open-heart surgery was successful, my parents were told if I lived out my first year, I'd need several more surgeries at some point in the future. Luckily, after thirty-two years, Sawyer was still around, beating my life away. But the deepening dark circles around my eyes and waning weight were constant reminders of how sick he was.

After brushing my teeth, I walked out of our bedroom and was immediately greeted by the unpainted walls in the room across the hall. It was to be our baby boy's bedroom. Olivia had already picked the color for the walls, but I kept postponing painting them. I wanted to hold on to every moment of this pregnancy—especially after all our miscarriages.

Normally, I'd press play on my iPod and wait to see what song came out of the stereo speakers in the kitchen. But this morning, I was in the mood for Rush. I listened to "The Spirit of Radio" while eating my bowl of Cocoa Puffs and a slice of banana bread. The music brought me back to my teenage days, and even though much of it consisted of surgeons, nurses, and needles, there were still plenty of good memories mixed in.

My younger brother and I would listen to the trio all the time. Jonahs was the only other songwriter in the family aside from me. The difference was that to Jonahs, music was a hobby, but to me it was my whole life—my love and livelihood.

I went to the living room after breakfast and sat at the piano. It faced the window for a better view of Salt Lake City's most recognizable sight. The city had been built in a valley, separated by the Wasatch Mountains to the east and the Oquirrh Mountains to the west. Amidst the encircling mountain ranges, one could be seen throughout the entire city. For me, the landscape of Mount Olympus, set apart from other formations by its twin

peaks and outcroppings, always inspired new music. A songwriter couldn't ask for a better muse.

When I started performing, the mall was my usual venue. I'd play for hours and was lucky enough to sell most of my CDs. Those were the days when I began to realize my music could actually take me somewhere. And that night, I was performing at Assembly Hall on Temple Square, the most popular tourist attraction in Salt Lake City. For better or worse, I was about to experience one of the most monumental moments of my career. Whether it was a packed house full of fans or a handful of neighbors and my parents, it would be unforgettable.

I looked out at Mount Olympus for a few more seconds and got on with practice. My right hand lifted from my lap, fingers striking the keys. A melody echoed. My left hand joined in and the music rescued me. A close friend died when I was a teenager. It was his friendship that sparked the desire in me to play, but it was his death that actually got me to begin. The better I got, the more I realized music helped me cope with things like death. Like Sawyer.

Here I was doing it again. Me, the mountains, and my music. The music let me forget I was down to 150 pounds. It let me forget most of that weight was me retaining fluid. It let me forget I was losing oxygen in my blood. It was always this void—this lack— that I filled with each note.

I spotted Olivia standing in her light blue nightdress. Her shoulder rested on the doorway, pregnant belly in sight.

"Oh, sorry." My hands retreated to my lap, the last note, a C in the lower register, echoing around the room. "I didn't mean to wake you. Was I being too loud?"

She smiled. "Don't worry, I don't think I'll be able to get any sleep this morning anyway." She sat beside me, giving me a peck on the cheek.

"Sorry, sweetheart." I kissed her beauty mark, my attention shifting to her belly. "Good morning, you!" I caressed the baby bump with an unstoppable smile.

"Well, at least he gets to sleep," she said, making us both laugh.

"How was the hospital?" I asked.

"Just another day. I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing mothers say goodbye to their newborns." She shook her head in dismissal. "But I don't want to talk about that stuff." She took in a quick breath. "Nervous about tonight?"

"More like worried." I chuckled. "What if people don't show? Imagine how monumental it would be"—I held up my hands, forming the shape of a rectangle in the air—"Paul Cardall plays to an empty Assembly Hall."

"Knowing you, you'd still play your songs to an empty room."

"Like I was doing before you walked in?" I smirked.

She laid a hand on my shoulder. "Everything will be fine."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Of course it will."

"And listen, if you think the audience is getting bored, just play an Elvis cover on the piano and you'll be golden."

"Let me guess the song suggestion," I said behind a laugh. "'Can't Help Falling in Love?'"

She gave me a peck on the lips. "You are correct."

"I'll add your favorite song to the list in case of a concert emergency."

"Have you heard from Jonahs?" she asked.

"I did. He seemed better last week. But I suppose he's still getting back to normal. Hard to say."

"Is he coming tonight?"

"No." I cleared my throat. "It's too soon for anything like that."

She squeezed my hand. "Tell you what, you keep on playing, I'm going to shower and then run out."

"Want me to come and inspect your work?" I asked, hoping to get my mind off the concert with a little romance.

"Ha-ha very funny." She raised my chin with a finger. "You'll be great tonight."

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Not even a two-minute make out session?" My brows arched up.

"Let's focus." She pecked me on the forehead and, defeated, I watched her retreat upstairs.

I returned to the piano. Seeing Olivia pregnant had inspired some of my best melodies. I imagined what my days would be like with a little boy around. I had never heard his voice, but lately I was combining notes I imagined would sound like his laugh. I pictured tiny soul-piercing eyes and how much of an honor being a dad would be.

But we'd already had two miscarriages. There was no way to look forward without remembering where we'd been.

Olivia was five months along. I knew the risk she took when she decided to build a family with me. Her father advised her not to. He said he didn't want her life turning out like his. He'd cared for her mother when she fell ill with cancer. I once overheard him say that no matter how much she loved me, choosing me would leave her walking toward the same cliff he had.

Her mother's cancer was the downfall of her siblings. Many resorted to drugs and alcohol for comfort, leading to years of suffering and misery. I'm sure she feared the same fate awaited our family if I didn't make it—a life full of cracks and holes and questions.

A dark progression of notes turned the light song I played into a somber hymn. For a moment, the music showed me my son mourning his father's early death. Olivia beside him over my graveside, regretting the decision to have ever loved me, wishing her heart could've loved someone else.

I didn't fear death. I only worried about its aftermath for my family.

I've learned how limited our time on Earth is over and over since childhood. When I was nine, a kid in town named Spencer died of cancer. Before he passed, we prayed, raised money, fasted, and did all the godly things we were supposed to do. He still died.

It was funny how this “curse” of mine had the power to inspire me. Sawyer was broken. Badly. My clock ticked a little differently. And it was the constant reminder of the shortness of my life that motivated me to defy the odds.

Even if death whispered in my ear every once in a while, I refused to be remembered as the one who was defeated by Sawyer. I wanted to be remembered as the one who fought the good battle. That was the hopeful spirit I was going to play with at my concert. That was the life I needed to live.

CHAPTER TWO

DEEP WATERS

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"Ready for the big day?" Mom asked, hands on the steering wheel, the top of her freshly permed hair in view from the backseat. "Fly by Night" by Rush played on the stereo now that she had finally allowed me to choose the music.

"I mean, I'm ready to surprise any stranger who asks why I have a scar under my right armpit," I replied with a grin.

I thought Dad had believed in me a bit too much when he signed me up for the National Scout Jamboree and got me started with this whole Eagle Scout business. Dad claimed he had such a great time when he did it that I should also get to experience it. Of course, I said yes to the whole thing. A part of me was afraid of what I had gotten myself into. If it was already hard for the other guys, imagine how it would be for me.

"I'm serious," Mom said, rolling her eyes. "You've trained so hard."

"Not just trained." I counted off with my fingers. "Trained, suffered, and almost drowned."

"Oh, please." She smiled. "You loved every minute of it. But if you don't survive, we'll just give all the records and cassettes you bought with your paper route money to your siblings."

"No, no. If I don't make it, you'll give them all to Jonahs. And that's my final wish," I said. "I'm sure he'll appreciate my collection more than the

rest of them."

She laughed. "Done."

"But seriously, they had me jumping in the deep end and then they told me to make a flotation device out of my clothes," I said, scratching the back of my neck. I loved my Goonies t-shirt, but the tag always felt like sand rubbing on my skin.

"But you made it through, didn't you?" Her diamond eyes glanced at me through the mirror.

"I knew I would And honestly, I think Coach Dave enjoys watching us struggle in the water."

"Why do you say that?" She lowered the volume of the music as a frown appeared on her face.

"Because a whole bunch of boys making flotation devices out of their clothes in the deep end of a cold swimming pool is a classic example of a corny summer camp movie." I shrugged. "He gets to watch us suffer while getting paid for it."

"You do remember he's a friend of ours, right?"

"Then that makes him our lazy friend," I said snidely.

"I'll be sure to tell him that." A laugh followed. "Your dad is very proud of you. You're setting such an example to your siblings and cousins. They see what you do and want to do the same."

"Gee, thanks, Mom. Just remind them I still have to survive today. And even if I do, I won't even be an Eagle Scout yet. There's still a long journey ahead."

"You'll be fine," she said with a wave of dismissal, turning the radio back up.

Mom was the honorary driver and disc jockey to all my destinations. She made the rides more fun by taking the hills a little faster, so when we went over the bumps, I got butterflies in my stomach like on a roller coaster. I honestly loved my parents—I knew it was a rare thing for a thirteen-year-old to say, but it was the truth. They never treated me

differently because of my heart. They just boasted that I was a living miracle. I felt bad for my seven siblings whenever they were reminded that anything was possible if Paul's heart was still beating.

"Let's do this!" Mom said excitedly as she parked in front of my future high school, Mount Olympus High. Her brown dress stamped with yellow flower patterns flowed in the breeze when she got out of the car.

"Did you bring your pompoms, too?" I asked.

"No, just a shirt with your face on it," she replied, locking the doors.

We entered the school, Mom's hair bouncing with her every step as she commented on all the posters and class projects hung on the walls.

I was greeted by the other boys when we entered the indoor pool area, where we were told our mission for the day was to swim a mile without stopping. Well, except for me. I was allowed to hold on to the edge of the pool when needed.

Mom and I parted ways. I headed to the locker room to change, and she made her way to the bleachers.

Coach Dave stopped me before I could reach my destination. "How are we feeling, Paul?" He wore a cardigan sweater despite the 80-degree weather, bald head reflecting the light from the tall glass windows.

"As ready as I'll ever be." I frowned at his thick, foggy glasses.

"Good." He took the glasses off and wiped the lenses on his sweatshirt. "Very proud of you, kid. And remember, if you're feeling tired—"

"Don't worry. I won't drop dead in the middle of the pool," I said as he put his glasses back on, fixing them on top of his nose. "And if I spot the Loch Ness Monster, I can always use that curly mustache of yours to help me float."

"Very funny." He nodded. "Go get ready."

I entered the locker room and quickly put on my swim shorts, but the reflection of my massive scar pulled me to a stop on my way out. It was long, streaking from my left armpit all the way to my back, underneath my shoulder blade.

I placed a hand over my chest. “Don’t fail me today... please, please, please, please.”

I walked out to meet the others and approached the edge of the Olympic-sized pool. Mom waved proudly once she spotted me. I returned the gesture with a thin smile. For a second, I wondered if I made a mistake in thinking I could do this. I looked at the other boy scouts, knowing they were going to finish their laps way before me, and then glanced at the spectators on the bleachers. Many probably didn’t know who I was. What would they think of the boy coming last? I knew, at the very least, my scar would inspire some pity in them. And I hated that.

“Alright, everyone jump in!” A blaring whistle followed Coach Dave’s loud voice.

We dove in, the water too freaking cold for an indoor pool. With every kick of my feet and move of my arms, I was reminded of how unqualified I was.

I kept pace with the others for a lap and a half, Sawyer fluttering wildly, before my lungs suddenly craved air, and my muscles decided to go on vacation. Heavy breaths replaced my optimism. I held on to the edge of the pool, watching the other boys continue. After resting for a few seconds, I carried on swimming only to have my body start shutting down again.

I kept repeating the cycle. Hold the edge. Swim a little. Hold the edge. Swim a little. People would be surprised at how much of a workout that was. Though a part of me worried what the others thought, I was determined to finish regardless of the cost.

The other scouts were already wrapped in towels, standing by the edge of the pool laughing and goofing around. They were done. I was still dragging and swimming, wondering if I was going to finish. But every lap was already a victory. Everyone else could wait a little longer.

Suddenly, every single one of Sawyer’s frantic beats turned into victory horns. I laughed the moment I finished my last lap. I climbed out,

my body shaking, my fingers wrinkled like shriveled prunes.

Dave approached me, a high five at the ready. “You did it, kid.”

I slapped his palm with my own. “Yeah,” I said behind heavy breaths, lowering my hand to my thumping chest.

I looked over my shoulder, surveying the empty pool and the crowd on the bleachers.

I did it. I finished.

CHAPTER THREE

COMING FULL CIRCLE

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Olivia and I arrived at the Assembly Hall early. After being greeted at the back door, we were led to the green room. She had my suit jacket in hand, holding the hanger by the hook.

"Pretty surreal that we're here." Olivia said with wide eyes, closing the door behind us. "We're actually backstage. Can you believe it?"

I laughed and told her to pinch me. My reflection appeared in the wide mirror on the wall to my right, gelled hair reflecting the scattered light. "I heard we have a full house. Who would've thought?"

"I don't think you'll need that emergency Elvis song tonight," she said, handing me my navy-blue suit jacket with a thin smile. My eyes scanned her body's figure as I put it on, admiring the way her dress accentuated her curves.

"Still can't believe we're here."

"I'm so proud." Her hazel eyes looked down as she caressed her belly. "Are you proud of your dad, too?"

"Fingers crossed he is," I said, gaze fixed on her face.

In front of the mirror was a long wooden table crowded with trays of fruit and cheese. Beside them were red plastic cups and soda bottles.

After pulling out a chair for Olivia, she sat down and reached for the bottle of Diet Coke. "I'm not even going to ask which one you want," she

said, twisting the cap.

"It's a shame they only have one bottle." I sat beside her, observing our reflection.

Maybe it was the lighting in the room, but my dark circles looked like charcoal smudges, adding a touch of gray to my blue eyes. My cheeks were puffed, my skin flushed. But Sawyer was still pounding.

"Being here is full circle for me." She slid a red cup of Diet Coke over and then poured herself one. A long sigh followed. "I never told you, but Mom played piano here before she died."

"Really?" I said, body suddenly numb.

"Sorry if this is a bit out of nowhere. It's just that being here is sparking all sorts of emotions." She took a sip from her cup. "It's a sad thing to say, but when I think of her, I only remember sickness and pain." She fixed her brown locks behind her ears, pursing her lips. "I'd watch my siblings help her to the bathroom so she could vomit after her treatments. I was three. It was horrible."

She had shared a few things about her mom's disease in the past. But Olivia's days with her dying mother were somewhat of a mystery. She often chose not to talk about them. Her dad had been my main source of information for that time.

Her eyes met mine in the mirror. "In the few good memories I have of her, I hear her voice whispering, 'Seeing the cup half full paves the way for many blessings.' I'd look at her every time she repeated it, wondering how someone in her condition could keep saying that."

"How come you never told me?" I asked as she rose to her feet.

"Some things are just for me. That was one of them," she replied as a frown formed on her face. "Funny how life works, right?" The corners of her lips trembled. "You always want to avoid painful situations, and plenty of times that's exactly how you get placed right in the middle of them. You choose to believe in some sort of miracle only to be disappointed in the end."

"What do you mean?" Sawyer rushed his pace.

"I used to believe Mom would get better. But then she played here and died." Her eyes grew vacant. "Now you're playing here and—"

A knock.

"Hello!" Dad appeared from behind the door.

"Hey, you!" Mom emerged beside him, both of them wearing their Sunday best.

"Hey." I got up and gave them a hug, Olivia's words playing out in my head. "You guys are early."

"You know how much your dad dislikes looking for parking," Mom said.

We all shared a laugh. "I see you're stocked up on food." Dad circled the table, carefully inspecting the choices on display.

"Help yourself to anything you want," Olivia said, struggling to keep her emotions from showing on her face.

"How's the baby?" Dad asked, a few grapes in hand.

"Very good," Olivia replied. "Growing."

Dad nodded before turning to me. "And how are you?"

"I'm good. I keep thinking about this hall." I put my hands in my pockets. "I mean, there's a Steinway Model D on stage. That alone would have made me happy even if no one showed up."

"The finest piano for the finest son," he said in a serious voice. "Congratulations."

"Thanks. I wish Jonahs was here to see this. I'd find a way to sneak in a few bars of Rush for him."

"There'll be other opportunities," Dad said.

"He called, by the way." Mom reached for a slice of cheddar. "Wished you good luck."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll give him a ring tomorrow."

"Alright, Maggie, we should head inside." Dad grabbed an apple.

"Be honest; you only came early for the free food." I chuckled.

"How did you guess?" Mom smiled after taking a cracker.

"Good luck, Son," Dad said.

"Bye, you two." Mom waved. "It'll be great."

I returned to my chair after they left, lacing my fingers over the table. Olivia kept pacing around the room.

"You can sit back down."

"I'm alright." She nibbled on the corner of her thumb.

"I want you to know I'll make it through this ordeal," I declared.

She halted and looked at me, confused. "I'm sure you'll be amazing tonight."

"No, I mean I'm going to beat the odds of this jacked up heart."

A few members of the backstage crew entered the room, interrupting us, and Olivia left soon after.

The moment I walked onstage, the crowd stood and applauded. They weren't there to see some random artist or because they felt sorry for the man with half a heart. They knew me. They knew my music. They knew my journey. The crowd reminded me of the pool and how hard I'd worked to finish my laps. How, even if I had to cling to the edge, I could accomplish my goals.

Peace came to me as I played. I looked around the room and could somehow feel a divine power wrapping a blanket around those present. But even in the middle of such a glorious moment, in the back of my mind, Olivia's words echoed like haunting lyrics to my melodies.

"She played here and died. Now you're playing here."