

# Slick Haze Mirror

by: Dusty

## CHAPTER ONE

I paced back and forth in my living room. Everything was sinking in. Natalie was gone, sick of my incessant withdrawal from life with her. She moved back in with her mother, our children in tow, and decided upon finishing college and living her life, without me. My deranged sleep habits, including vivid, but still so lucid dreams, haunted my every move, from how sore my neck was, to my zoning off in thought during the most inopportune times. I'd just gotten off the phone with my lawyer, saying that everything about the divorce was filed, notarized and finalized. That included when I would be able to have my children, which was during any breaks that we were taking in the states. Being on the road and in the studio, being a musician in general, would make it hard to be a real dad, and this hurt. She would probably find someone to be a pseudo-father, maybe later a stepfather who could be there with them at any given moment.

The phone was still in my hand, but it wasn't in shock of the finality of the situation, since I'd just received the news from a Mr. Ira Koslosky of Koslosky, Milgrub and Ponter. More was on my mind about the person I was thinking of calling. Everything was running so fast, so fluidly together in my mind, and I needed an escape for a while. Three months went by from the time the papers were originally filed until now. Dreams had invaded my mind for many moons before that. It was all rushing through, along with the desire to call up a certain someone who could help me get away for a while.

It seemed to take ages for me to lift the phone into my sight and press speed dial number three, "Hello", A gruff voice answered. It was not the one I was expecting.

"Is Lynette there?", I asked, my voice shaking a bit, hoping she didn't change her number, which very well could have happened, since the last time I'd called her was right after the idea of divorce came up.

"Yeah, just a sec", The person muttered and I heard him calling to her through the speaker.

"Dirty Dick's casino. Poker in the front, liquor in the rear. How can I help you?", I heard her cheerfully announce, and it brought a smile to my face.

"Hey Lynni, still got that escort service I see?", I joked.

"GQ!", She squealed upon recognizing my voice.

"Aw, don't call me that", I blushed.

"Can't help it that you're a pretty boy", She teased a bit before calming, "What'cha need doll face?"

"Divorce is done", I said dryly.

I heard a coo of sympathy come through the line, "You okay?", She crooned.

"Actually, I'm good, but I could use a little help from my bestest friend in the whole wide world", I pouted, imagining that she could probably picture my face with the voice.

"Feel lucky I'm not working tonight"

"You'd call off anyway", I grinned.

"Yeah, but the boss man is finally figuring that I was getting over the 'call in sick every other day' routine"

"I'd clear your schedule now then", I told her quickly and before she could argue I added, "I'll be there in ten", and hung up. Grabbing my keys, cigarettes and wallet from the breakfast bar, I stormed out my front door and to my car. I was on a mission and if I waited too long, gave myself time to think it over, I'd never complete it. I had to get these dreams out of my head, maybe talking to her would help relieve some of them.

As I twisted and turned through the blocks, making my way to her apartment without delving too deeply into the city, my thoughts fledged a full on attack, and I began doubting everything I was doing. *What the fuck am I doing? I can't do this...but I told her that I would be over, so I can't just chicken out. Maybe I could feign a car accident...* I thought quickly, but decided against it, since I'd just had the dents knocked out of the back passenger door from my last encounter with the word 'wreck'. Sooner than I'd have liked, I was in the lot by her apartment building. It wasn't much, but it wasn't straight ghetto fabulous either. She kept it well enough, much more than I could say to some of her floormates, and gave it as much a homey feel as the landlord would allow.

My feet trudged the three floors to her level and down the hall to her door. I knew enough to knock, as she never unlocked the door unless a person was coming or going. Once I did conjure the cojones to knock I heard her come bouncing to the door. I was greeted in seconds by a short girl with vibrant blue eyes and a curly bob of hair. She was one of the 'outsiders', always had been. Her hair was platinum blond by bottle, but it didn't look bad, and trendil-filled reaching just below her ears at the longest point. Her skin was tan by nature, being a quarter black will do that to people. Just as I'd seen her last, she was into vintage clothing, especially those with beads of all sorts. It gave people the impression that she was lost somewhere in the twenties, but to me it made her more...her.

She smiled and ushered me in with a tug of the arm. I looked around and noticed that nothing was changed, except for the lump of man half asleep on her sofa, "So kid, what brings you down here?"

"I...", I stuttered, "I don't know"

"Oh, don't feed me that. You cannot tell me that you're just here slummin'", She said, hands on hips.

"Who's he?", I asked of the napping person in the other room, hoping to get her mind off of why I'd come.

"That's Wade, boyfriend", She told me simply, "Now about your little problem. If the divorce isn't bothering you, then what is?"

I sighed, "I uh...", I stammered a bit more, giving a sideways glance to Wade, a pierced rocker type with slick, black hair, "You got any?", I asked quickly.

"Pot? No, I'm dry", She told me.

"Anything else?", I asked, desperation hitting my voice more than I'd intended.

An eyebrow cocked in my direction, "You don't *do* anything else, Taylor"

"Look, right now I don't care...", I told her, my hands in front of me for emphasis, "I just need something, and then we'll talk"

"I got some blow", She said.

I nodded, "I don't care, just get it...I've got money"

She waved me off as we went into her bedroom, "You don't gotta pay me back, you know that"

As she dug through a nightstand drawer I contemplated everything I was doing. *Cocaine? Damn Tay, are you out of your fucking mind? This isn't like hitting a joint, this is a hell of a lot worse than that.* I shook the thoughts from my mind as she set down a mirror on her chaise longue and motioned for me to sit across from her. The chair gave more of a feel to her involvement with twenties style, a deep, rich red fabric stretching to the edges, which were trimmed in oak and painted a dark gold. Everything in her house held warm tones, except the walls and carpet, which were the standard cream. It was cozy. She had lived in the same place for years. I'd first met her when we were both just eighteen, and she still resided in the vintage apartment that she does now. It made me feel at home to be somewhere so familiar.

Carefully, I watched as she lifted some of the contents of a now open baggie with a razor blade and tap it out onto the mirror. Then she continued to cut up the clumps with the blade, moving carefully but quickly. Out came her expired gift card, a thing she used to crush up what she couldn't get with the razor. I'd watched her do this so many times, but never was I going to partake in it myself. Soon, she had two lines of the drug made and handed me the razor, "Lick it", she said as I looked at her questioningly.

I did as she instructed and cringed a little. Bitter. I remarked this but shrugged it off. I needed this. Watching her more after setting the blade down on the oval, antique looking mirror, she rolled a twenty dollar bill up and stuck it to her nose, plugging the other side, and sucking the entire line through her

nasal passage. Her eyes watered a little and she wiped her nose clean before handing me the makeshift straw, "Its good shit, so it might hurt a little"

For some reason, I was a natural actor, so I took her words in stride, even though I was scared out of my wits. I mirrored her actions, perhaps too quickly, as my nose burned and my eyes watered as if I'd just been punched right on the bridge, "Fuck!", I shouted while jumping up, grasping my nose and pinching, hoping the pain would subside quickly. It did, and just as soon as it faded, the high came to me with a vengeance. I felt my eyes go crossed and come back into focus as I swayed in my standing position, and Lynette laughed, "Not funny", I muttered dryly, waiting for everything to focus completely again. Finally, I focused a bit more on her as she pulled a cigarette from my pack, "Heyyyy", I slurred a little, "What're ya doing?", I asked as she licked the lighting end a tad.

Her eyes lifted to meet mine and she giggled a little more before telling me, "Just watch", as she bent down and breathed the rest of the line I left into the lighting end of the cigarette. She then went and licked the filter before patting it in the remains and handing it to me, "Light this"

I cocked my brow, but did as she asked. As the first hit went in I felt a little lighter, much lighter, and my lips, "I can't feel my mouth", I slurred, causing another giggle to come from Lynette's direction.

"Ready to talk yet?", She asked, patting me on the knee.

"Gimme a sec", I said, touching my cigarette to my lips again and forcing out another pull, "I gotta be able t'talk right 'fore I talk", Once I forced my mind to clear enough to speak, I did, "I just...there's this huge problem that I have. Its really getting to me, and it just...it makes me feel guilty"

"What, were you fucking the maid? Wait, you don't have one of those or your study wouldn't be a pigsty", She giggled, "Some steamy affair ruin the marriage? Or did Nat find out about all those girls you diddled overseas?"

I shook my head rapidly. It felt cool, and almost distracted me from what I was going to say, "No, no nothing like that...well, no...still no. Its something that's gone on longer than any of that"

She sat back a little and sighed, "Is this that thing you were having a conniption about last year? The one you refused to tell me about?", I nodded a bit, getting another sigh from her, "Go on, unless this is some confession of love and shit for me, then I don't wanna hear it", She smiled a bit.

"No, I do not worship you like a goddess", I rolled my eyes, smiling a bit, then my expression became somber, like my words, "Its something so much more than that", Her face was soft and curious as I lifted my eyes her way, "Its something that's eating at me, its been eating at me for years. Until recently the dreams have just been really vague. Hints are what they really were, nothing more...but now, there's some meat in them for lack of a better word. Its driving me to a place I really don't want to be", I was sure I was talking a mile a minute, but she seemed stuck in the time loop as well, hanging onto my words as if they were pouring out like molasses, thick and slow, "Its so wrong to have these dreams, so wrong that you couldn't even imagine how wrong it is...but I do. I have them every time I fall asleep, and I think of them when I'm awake. Its always there, always on my mind, and its killing me to keep it

locked up"

She smiled a little, "Okay", I stayed silent, going over my words to make them make sense, "I don't wanna sound like a bitch here, but get on with it!", She giggled.

A tight smile crept into my face, "My dreams...they...", I stuttered, "They're about Zac", I muttered a bit at the end.

A cocked eyebrow made itself apparent in her stare, a grin still held a bit, "About Zac? And what is going on in these dreams?"

"Like I said, before they were just...vague. Me just watching him in different places...touching his arm...stupid shit that would just confuse me beyond all reason", I shook my head a bit, taking another pull of my cigarette, "But now...just recently, maybe four or five months ago at most, they're getting worse. More action, to say the least", Another puff of smoke escaped, "When they first got worse, there would be a lot of focus on his lips"

"Well duh, look at them a minute", She butt in, laughing a little and taking a cigarette from her own pack.

"That's exactly what I *shouldn't* be doing, Lynni, but I am...a lot", I ran a hand through my hair, it was greasy, "And then, after a month or so of this, I kissed him...and he kissed back", I sighed more smoke from my lungs, "After that happened, I'm sure you can just imagine how it could get worse, and once it did, I tried not sleeping, and that didn't work. Everyone knows how I get after four or five days without sleeping...", I smiled a bit, "God, they're so awful, but I love them..."

"I really don't know what to tell you about that", Lynette sighed, "Other than I know many a girl that desperately wishes that you two weren't related, because they're fag hags", She giggled.

"That's the problem though, they could wish...hell, I could wish it for all its worth, but that worth is nothing", My hands went vigorously as I talked, "This isn't about being gay...cuz you as well as anyone else could look at me and know that I'm bi, but God damned...this is way off the charts"

"Tay, hunny, you have always known that I'm not a person to judge", She told me, "And you know my beliefs when it comes to lovin' somebody or even having an infatuation...you just can't help these things. Men will like men, women will like women, people will love their abusive counterparts...we can't change these things"

"But I also can't do anything about it. I can stare and ogle whoever I want, but when it comes to this, I can't do anything else. I can't just walk up and be all like 'I really wanna kiss you right now' with him...fuck, I mean, he's *blood*", I sighed, putting my head in my hands after snuffing out the cigarette, "This is just too much", I muttered through my palms.

With a slight twitch of my back, I felt her hand at my shoulder blade, "Hun, it ain't your fault...honestly when you think about it, so many of us are related...all of us are no matter whether you look at

evolution or God's Creation...everything in life is relative", I looked up to see her smile, "Its just what level *you* put it on...and what you decide to do about it"

"I wish I had the brass balls to do anything about it", I laughed softly with bitter tones as she pulled the baggie out again, "More already?"

She looked up with a slight smile, "You *don't* wanna feel the crash of this stuff, so unless you're planning on sleeping right now, I'd suggest more", I nodded slightly and leaned against the back of the chaise as she cut out two more lines. These ones were larger, but I learned to go slow this time. We still left enough to lace our cigarettes, and sat in silence for what seemed like a good hour, but I know it was only about fifteen minutes.

"I just want one chance to just kiss him", I sighed, inhaling the last hit of my cigarette, "Just one where I won't get the shit knocked out of me", A buzzing in my pocket told me that someone was calling. As I looked at the caller ID, a tight smile crossed my face, "Speak of the devil", I muttered before flipping the phone open, "'Lo", I answered.

The voice on the other line gave me chills, "Where have you been? I've tried calling your house, and your cell for the past hour and a half"

"Sorry, I'm at Lynni's and my phone is on vibrate"

"Well damn, don't scare me like that!", He yelled lightheartedly, then quieted a moment, "Lynni's? What, she get an ounce or something?"

"No...she's dry"

"Shit!", Lynette replied as I spoke, got up and picked up the receiver of her antique phone, "Thanks for reminding me"

"Reminding her of what?", Zac asked.

"I don't really know, hold on", I lifted my head to get her attention, "What did I do?", I asked her.

"I have to pick it up tonight", She said quickly before initiating a conversation on her own phone. I returned to my own.

"So why were you calling?", I asked softly.

"Cuz I was bored maybe?", He laughed, "Why are you talking so fast?"

"Long story...don't really wanna talk about it right now"

"Okay...", He drawled out with amusement clinging to his voice, "Anyway, you up to doing anything tonight?"

"I dunno...I just got the confirmation from Ira...", I muttered, "I was really just gonna hang here and chill a bit, as long as Lyn doesn't have a complex with that", I looked to her with a grin.

"Me? Complex with you?", She laughed before going back to her call with, "Oh, just a friend that's here"

"Yeah, tonight will be a get stoned out of my mind night", I told him.

"Mind if I crash?", He laughed, probably out of amusement to how fast I was talking.

"Go for it", I looked at Lynette, who was closing her phone, "What time are you picking that shit up?"

"In two hours"

"All right", I told her, and went back to talking to Zac, "She's getting the shit in two hours, so it'll probably be back in three...I'm gonna head home, shower, eat, whatever and I'll pick you up on my way back in"

"Sounds good to me"

"Kay, later", I told him before flipping the phone shut and putting my hands in my hair, "Shit", I whined, "I can't say no to him, and I can't be mean at all..."

"Well, its not like you can just avoid him...you kind of work with him, and like, stuff", She laughed, "You'll be fine...I'll be the watchdog"

I looked warily towards the door, "What about your boyfriend?"

"Works soon"

I stayed around for about an hour before heading back to my house to get shit together. Only I didn't really have anything together at all, at least in my mind. I took extra long scrubbing and washing, half hoping that someone else would pop up to ask if he was doing anything, and have a proposition that was more exciting than sitting in a retro apartment getting stoned all night. The other half, though, was anxious. Very anxious, like first-date anxious. I shook the thoughts from my head as I climbed out of the shower and finished getting ready.

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## CHAPTER TWO

People think I'm naive. I'm beginning to think they're right. I thought that maybe venting the things in my mind would help me get over them, but oh no, no. If the ride to Zac's was deafening, then once he stepped into the car it was deadly. I didn't want to say anything, afraid that I might say too much, so I let my CD player run through its list of songs. My eyes were almost completely diverted when he began tapping out the beat to the Used's "All That I've Got". He noticed my sideways stare quickly though.

"Hey man, you all right?", He almost laughed as a blush ran through my face.

"Yeah, I'm just all scattered and shit, you know?"

A grin spread over his face, "No, I don't know, but let's just act like I do", *Smartass*.

"Well, let's think here, I just got a divorce, and my kids are a thousand miles away from me", I told him, "How would you feel?"

"Like getting a piece of ass", He cackled and received a smack on the arm, "Seriously, dude, you are free! You can go and kiss, and grope, and fuck anyone on this earth without drawbacks"

"Not everyone", I muttered just above audibility.

"What was that?"

"I said stop being a smartass or you can sit at home, alone and sober all night", I told him, a small smile to let him know that I wasn't *really* angry with him.

"Didn't sound like you said all that, but I guess I don't wanna be stuck home alone...again", He sighed, acting as if *he* were doing me a favor.

"Hey man, its your call, you can either sit around and wish that you weren't just a few months short of the big two-one, or you can come have a smoke-fest...hmmm, let's weight these options shall we?", I took my hands from the wheel a moment to have them act as scales.

"If you don't drive we'll be doing nothing but dying", I rolled my eyes and put my hands back, "You are such a fag", He muttered light-heartedly.

"Keep that up and I do believe that I'll shed light on that one time...", I cackled as his fist connected to my thigh.

"Don't even...", He warned, more angered by my persistent grin.

"There is no denying it Zac, so just give up...you're no less a fag than I am"



"That was *one* time", He protested.

"But you'd do it again", I grinned wider as I looked to him a second.

"Doesn't mean that I actually will"

"Closet case", I muttered.

"I am not!", He shouted, "If I'm doomed to this all night, maybe I should have stayed home", He crossed his arms over his chest and sulked.

Although my better side was jumping for joy, and hoping that he would decide to go home, I felt bad and really didn't want to shove him as far away as possible. Lacking better judgment, I looked to him apologetically, "Okay, I'll stop it, as long as you don't call me a fag anymore I won't do the same to you", I reached my left hand under the right and gave it to him as a truce. He took it, and it was nearly my undoing. The chills crept swiftly over my entire body from such a simple touch, a gesture meant to stop wars, to come upon agreement, but it only caused a raging battle in my mind.

We pulled back into the lot of Lynette's building and climbed out, heading side-by-side to the doors and up the stairs. He was always one to smoke a little pot, especially with Lynette, because not only did she get great bud at a great price, but she was also a genuinely great person to be around. Plus she always had a well stocked kitchen, something that our other brother Isaac frowned upon, since we were rarely actually in our own homes. Another series of knocks on a door I was at just hours before led to it being opened by Wade, dressed in more formal attire and lacking the studs and hoops and barbells on his face, "Who the fuck...?", He asked loudly.

Lynette came and saved the day before he could get any more out, "These are the guys I was telling you about", He gave a blank stare, "My friends Zac and Tay", She tried jogging his memory, but with no avail, "Forget it, they're hangin' out tonight. Go to work", Dumbly he walked past us before we went in the house, "I don't even know why I try...", She muttered, closing and locking the door once we were inside.

"Seems like a great guy", Zac snickered.

"He can be...once in a while"

"Then why are we with him again?", I asked, my brow cocked and a crooked grin across my face.

"Good sex, company...", She sighed, plopping down on her sofa and reaching for a cedar box in the middle of the walnut coffee table. She opened it to reveal at least a half pound of weed wrapped in cellophane, "Gimme a sec to check this shit and make sure it doesn't have any seeds", After a couple of minutes of inspection she decided it was good enough and continued to retrieve a pink and green glass pipe from inside the box and packed it full, "Mexican redhair", She choked out after inhaling the first light. We passed around two pipefuls without much said before she put the stuff away and disappeared. I watched her walk into her bedroom, closing the door almost the whole way, but I could still see a bit

and she was over at her chair a minute before disappearing in the general direction of her closet and bathroom. I decided against watching much more and let the high settle in for a bit. Minutes later she came out, "Tay, did you say you needed to go to the bathroom?", She asked.

My brows furrowed, "I don't remember", I laughed a bit.

"I think you do", She said, confusing me more before giving me a pointed look.

"Oh, yeah...shit", I said, jumping up and heading into her bathroom. There sat a thick line, waiting to be inhaled. I took it quickly, forgetting that it would burn so much before I took a cigarette out, laced it, and headed back out. I couldn't help but sniffle a bit, my nose feeling like it was a water works, but I hoped that it would go unnoticed.

"How long does it take you to piss man?", Zac laughed, half-lying lazily across the loveseat.

I sniffed a few times, "What's it to ya?", I asked with a Cheshire grin.

His brow cocked as he forced himself up and over to me. I became nervous as he scrutinized my face and looked to Lynette, who was busied trying to decide on a CD to play. Suddenly, he shot his head around to face her, "You got blow and didn't tell me?!", He shrieked and her head quickly picked up to meet her eyes to his.

"Umm...I didn't know how you'd react to Taylor doing it"

"Why would I care?", He looked back to me, "Good shit isn't it?", I nodded and he returned to Lynette, "Where is it?"

"Bathroom, but you can bring it all out here now", She told him and he started toward the room, "I was gonna have you go soon but I didn't want you to notice that I was telling both of you to go to the bathroom"

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle with her statement, "Of course you gotta tell us, mom"

"If I was your mother I would be one proud woman"

Zac returned shortly, carrying the mirror and sat down, pulling his legs in to cross them beneath him and placed the mirror upon his thighs beside me. I watched as he used skilled, experienced movements to pull out some of the powder and began to crush the rocks and cut lines, "How long have you been doing this?", I asked him, my eyes never leaving the sight of his hands.

He looked to me shortly, "'Bout a year", He worked a few seconds longer before his gaze returned to me, a toothy grin spread across his face this time, "Sorry I didn't tell ya, I didn't want you to flip out"

I shrugged, "Hey, its no big", I replied and he continued to crunch the rocky crystals with the gift card.

My eyes went from his hands down to his thighs and wouldn't leave. Trying as hard as I could to be nonchalant, I slowly crept my hand up to rest between the mirror's edge and his hipbone. He may have looked over quizzically, but I don't know because my eyes were cast down on his lap. It was comforting to know he didn't make me move.

My vision was given a blast of the unknown as the mirror lifted from his legs, "Hold this", He told me and I accepted, keeping my one hand on his thigh, the right holding the mirror. My balance went off a little, and instead of doing something stupid, like dropping the object in my right hand; I did something completely insane and regained my composure by moving my left hand, settling it right at his hipbone and discovering quite the bulk of something in the process, right below my fingertips. A blush invaded my face that I was sure was as conspicuous as the sun at noon and I replaced my hand to its prior position once Zac had finished and I put the mirror on the coffee table.

"So what's on the agenda tonight?", Zac asked, making himself comfortable in a half-slouched position again.

"Sit here, get high, listen to music, maybe see if there are any half decent movies on cable", Lynette muttered from her recliner.

"That's no fun", Zac scoffed over-dramatically.

"Well what would you propose, oh God-man of all things fun?", I laughed and got shoved lightly in return, "Well we could stuff you full of Ex again and take you to another club and let you give-"

"Shut up!"

"What was this?", Lynette asked, her interest piqued by Zac's uncharacteristic embarrassment.

"Nothing, it was nothing", Zac said, giving me a stare that could cut through me if given the chance.

"Uh-uh", Lynette shook her head, "Spill it stud", Her glare won over anything Zac could give.

"Tay and a couple of our friends and me went to this club a few weeks ago, and before we went, we each did like, two hits of Ex. Once we got there we did another and went to dance...and I ended up dancing with this guy and let's just say that I really liked how my lips felt against anything they could and things got a wee bit out of hand"

"Yeah, we found him in the bathroom with the said guy", I added with a smirk.

"And that was *it*", He muttered.

"Ah, but you still would do it again if the chance came along", I kept my smile.

Zac's face paled a bit as Lynette looked at him in amusement, "Really now?"

His head bowed a little as a blush invaded his strong jawline and tickled itself throughout the rest of his face, "That doesn't mean it *will* ever happen again"

We sat silent for a few moments before Lynette sprang up, "I got an idea", She smiled at both of us, "You two are feeling pretty good, right?", We both nodded in confusion after exchanging perplexed looks between eachother, "Good, I'll be right back"

"What is she up to now?", Zac muttered, adjusting himself a bit on the cushion.

With my hand still on his thigh, I turned a bit and leaned against him, suddenly feeling a little chilled, "I have no idea"

She returned with a silk scarf dangling from her hands, "We did this once at a party I went to when I was like, seventeen, and its really cool", She walked over, "You, up", She told me, hitching her thumb behind her and I listened slowly, "You, sit up", She told Zac, and begrudgingly he listened and she proceeded to tie the scarf around his eyes.

"What are you doing?", Zac asked lamely, still sitting still and letting her go on with the charade.

"Its a touch-factor thing...you're more responsive to other senses when one is incapacitated", I looked at her in pure fear as her grin widened while she looked at me.

"Okay...", He drawled out in confusion.

"You can feel more when you can't see and its super cool when you're high"

He tore the makeshift mask from his eyes, "Wait, you two are going to touch me?", He glared a bit.

"Pretty much, yeah", She shrugged.

"Did we miss the big sign between Tay and me that says "Brothers" or something?"

"So? My cousin Delia was at the party and did it to me...", She gave him a blank stare, "Its not like I'm gonna have Tay suck you off or something, chill. It'll be fun, I promise"

With a few mutters and a, "I better get something out of this", To Lynette, Zac allowed her to retie the scarf. She gave me a simple smile after standing away a few steps. My heart raced and nearly hurdled from my chest as I realized that this was something I'd never imagined to ever actually do. But there it was, right in front of me.

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## CHAPTER THREE

My eyes were wide as Lynette stepped away from behind Zac, "You good to go?", She asked him.

"I'm all right", He nodded softly.

"You good?", She asked me.

I nodded and looked down, seeing that my hands were shaking, "I'm cool"

"All right then ladies, let's get this show on the road", She smiled, running a fingernail lightly up Zac's arm. Slowly, his arm showed goosebumps as she neared the top.

"Whoa", He breathed out, "You sure that was just weed?"

"Positive", She breathed over his neck and he visibly shook.

I watched dumbfounded for a while as she placed the tiniest kisses over his neck and shoulders, unable to force myself to move at all. Slowly, I finally took the step forward that was parting me from him. My heart felt like it could burst, and it was getting increasingly hard to breathe, but I couldn't tell if it was the coke or just the situation. I was betting that it was a little of both, leaning a bit to the situation side of course. Almost mechanically I reached my hand out and touched it to his jaw line and traced it slowly with my fingertips, relishing in the feel. His face was freshly shaven and soft with aftershave that I could still faintly smell, and it was heavenly to me. My heart skipped beat after beat as his mouth dropped open slightly at my touch, but he said no protests so I took that as a very good sign on my part. It gave me a bit more courage to continue. Bravely I traced his jaw to his chin and moved to his lips, full and soft, before cupping his cheek in my hand.

When I looked over a bit, I saw Lynette watching me with interest as she kneaded his shoulders softly. A smile from her gave me the motivation to continue as I dropped my hand to his chest fluidly, feeling his deep breathing and quick heartbeat under my palm. Barely my fingers grazed the fabric on his shirt as they followed my gaze to his pant line as if on a leash of sorts. He emitted the tiniest shred of a moan as my trail finished and I moved my hand to his waist, allowing the other hand to do the same on the other side, both grasping his clothed skin just enough to let him know that I was there. It felt as if I were in my dreams again as I ran my hands up his ribs then back down to his hips. Every piece of sanity left in me kept me from stopping at the crotch of his pants as my hands took their adventuring southward and over his thighs, running my hands up and down a few times. My hands felt numb against the worn fabric of his jeans.

"G-God", He stuttered as I made my way back up, just barely touching him at all. Apparently the touch was too much to him, or at least well enough to make him aroused.

I stacked up every ounce of courage that I could find as I rested my hands at the base of his thighs, just below the hipbones, and picked my body up with him as my crutch. My movements seemed to take forever, but finally, I pressed my lips against his. I felt his muscles tense under the pressure my hands gave as well as being able to feel the strain his jeans were under from a muscle I wasn't touching. For a moment I swear I felt him return the kiss, his lips falling into place with my own and moving in time

with me. But all of that was cut short like a knife split through his conscience and made it scream. Without warning, he pulled away and ripped the scarf from his eyes and glared at me with a slacked jaw. It seemed as though his eyes pierced through every shred of my being and tore it up mentally. I leaned in the same position he'd left me in, in shock from the sudden separation, and frozen by the stare of death I was receiving.

"What the fuck?!", He shrieked, wiping his lips dry of any remnants that I may have left, probably imagining it to be poison or acid. Before I could say a word in my defense, he shot forward and pushed me as hard as he could at that moment before getting up and heading to the door, his feet pounding into the floor like he always did when angry.

Fortunately, he had to stop to put his shoes on, and even in a rush, it was just enough time to collect my senses and catch up, "Zac, wait"

"No, fuck you", He glared hard, stomping into his left boot, "What the hell was that? What the hell were you thinking?"

"I- I-", I stuttered idiotically, watching my hands wring around each other.

"That was fucking sick, Tay", He spat before opening the door and storming out.

I stood there stunned for a few moments before Lynette walked over and tapped me on the shoulder. My head turned robotically and watched her say, "He can't get far", and lifted his wallet to my view. I thought back a moment and remembered that he'd taken his wallet out to retrieve a card to crush the coke, "And I doubt he's gonna walk eleven miles", She took me by the arm and led me to the couch, "Come and relax a little", She told me and sat beside me, "I'm sorry Tay. I didn't think that it would end up being that big of a thing. I mean, I'd done it so much before at parties, and everyone would touch everyone and it wasn't a big thing. I'm sorry"

"Its okay", I sighed out, "I just need admitted somewhere"

Her arms wrapped around me, "No hun, no you don't, I promise"

"Yes I do", I choked out as a sob found its way to my throat and out my mouth right after, "What *was* I thinking?", I sobbed hard into her shoulder. My tears fell and sobs collected any words that I might have wanted to say and drowned them before they could surface. We sat in silence for a while, maybe twenty minutes, before we were jarred from our states by a pounding on the door. It was loud and angry, sending us jumping with every thud. We knew that it couldn't be anyone but Zac, but he still yelled through the door anyway to make his presence more known and remind us that he was still plenty angry.

"Told you", She told me and my eyes welled in more tears as they widened in fear, "Go sit in my room and close the door. I'll talk to him", My face showed my skepticism, I'm sure so she comforted me a bit by saying, "It'll be fine, I promise, just go", She whispered and nudged me a bit toward her room. I listened and closed the door, falling into her chaise and curling into a ball, letting my tears return in

the solitude. The most I could hear from where I laid was muffling, and I lacked the motivation to move to the door and eavesdrop, so I was left to be unsure.

My eyes rose to the window and looked to the outside world. It was dark and vacant and uncaring. Vaguely I could see my reflection from the haze of the glass almost mirrored and visible was every detail. My red-rimmed eyes and blotchy skin reminding me how much of a mistake I'd made, and caused more tears to fall. Pulling my knees up close to me and resting my arms on them gave the perfect hiding place for my face as I collapsed into more tears. I cried openly until my chest hurt from the sobs, then just my tears showed my anguish until my eyes stung with the hateful things and eventually dried. Once that occurred, I felt like a thin, ugly, frail shell of myself left empty from being torn into and eaten. It was a terrible feeling and I wished and hoped that this was all just some terrible dream, but somewhere inside knew that it wasn't, and wouldn't give the satisfaction of letting me even imagine that it was.

I was near sleeping, exhausted from my outburst of emotion, whenever Lynette opened the door and slunk into the room, "Hey", I called in a raspy whisper as she closed the door and adjusted her eyes to the dim lighting that her bedside lamp gave off.

"Were you sleeping?"

"Almost", I replied as she sat down next to me, "He hates me", I assumed, choking back another onslaught of tears before they made themselves known and let my weakness show through.

"He doesn't hate you", She cooed, wrapping her arms around me protectively, "He just can't grasp why you did that"

"I don't even know why anymore", I sighed into the crook of her neck.

"He wants to try to talk to you", Her words were like steel hitting my heart dead on. It was an end result that I really didn't have the strength in me to hear at the moment. But she wouldn't let that get by her, nor would she let me sit there and be afraid, "He promised that he won't yell", She promised soothingly, as if she honestly believed that he'd keep his promise. He wasn't a big yeller, unless he was to the boiling point, which he passed the moment he tore off the scarf.

"I-, I can't"

"Yes you can"

"No-"

"Don't argue with me", She scolded, "Would you rather that he hated you?"

"No"

"Do you want him to just ignore you for the rest of your life?"

"Yes", I muttered indignantly.

A light laugh escaped her throat, "No you don't"

"I wanna crawl into a hole and die"

"Don't do that, sweetie", She crooned, "Just go out there and try to sort things out with him"

"This isn't just some stupid misunderstanding, Lyn. I went and went against everything we've ever known and royally fucked things up with him", My tears came again as if I'd opened a floodgate.

"That's why you need to talk to him. Maybe you can make him understand things better than I can, because I can't tell him how you feel, what you feel in here", She poked her index finger against my temple, "Or in here", Her finger went to my chest.

My sigh seemed to echo throughout the room as I lifted myself from the comfort of her shoulder, "I don't know what to say"

"Just tell him everything", A pause came as she thought of something, "Except that you're sorry", She added and it seemed to be the most ridiculous thing imaginable.

"Why? It was stupid, and a mistake"

"No Tay, its how you felt. There's a reason things happen, so nothing is a mistake", She grabbed my jaw and made me look her in the eyes, "And what you felt was apparently genuine, so how can you be sorry for something like that?", I shrugged, "That's what I thought. Go, and don't you dare even mutter those words in front of him", She repeated and wagged her index finger in my face to back up her warning.

"I'm scared", I whimpered like a child.

She rose from the seat and reached out for my hand, "I'll be there right beside you, hun"

"Promise you won't leave?"

"I swear it, and after all this mess is cleaned up, I'll light us a good ol' Chonger", Her smile gave me confidence as I took her hand and rose from the chaise.

All things confident melted away as we began our trek across the room and in its place in my veins was frozen, solid fear. Confronting things had never been a strong-point in my life, so I usually just ignored a problem until it went away, or at least smiled it off as if it weren't such a big deal. But this I couldn't



just avoid, or smile off. I guarantee that if I'd have gone in that room with a smile on my face I'd have been handed one of my own body parts within seconds and left to bleed to death. *Maybe that could be a good thing*, I mused as we continued, *Think about it; you wouldn't have to see him everyday and be reminded that he hates you. You wouldn't see him and remember what you feel...But you'd never have any resolution, or at least a solid understanding of what's going on, and what about your son? As little as you'll see him, you're still his father...*, The battle raged on in my head, each side weighing its options. I decided that not smiling would probably be the best choice. *But what if he beats the shit out of you anyway?*, The thought crossed my mind with the speed of light and shocked me.

My knees nearly faltered halfway through her bedroom, suddenly weak as if I'd just run a ten mile marathon. She caught me and I'm sure it was an interesting sight to see her petite frame holding my six-foot-two self in a standing position, but she did it. We stood like that a minute to let me calm a bit and regulate my breathing again before we started again toward the door. When we were just two or three footsteps away from the door I had the urge to run back and hide under her bed like a six year old, but she held my arm too firmly to even attempt it. As she reached for the door knob I swallowed hard, trying to tie down all my fears, but it didn't work. The light was bright to me, as if it were the lights described just after death, and how I wished it were for a few seconds, but instead strode on unready to face this, but unable to avoid it at the same time.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

When we walked out into the living room, I felt frozen as my eyes fell upon him. He sat on the loveseat, where he had before, hunched over with his elbows on his knees. I was mentally betting myself that he was lost in confused thoughts. Thoughts that were caused by my idiocy. Internally smacking myself around the whole way, we made our way to the sofa, where both Lynette and I cautiously took a seat. It seemed to take forever but Lynette finally broke the silence, "Either of you can speak up anytime now. I'm just gonna sit here and cut out a few lines, okay?", Always the joking type. I loved her for it though, because it did make me feel better, and Zac even picked his head up to look at us, both of us.

His stare lingered a few moments on me before speaking, "Why on earth would you do that?", He asked softly, no malice, only curiosity.

I sighed heavily and cast my eyes downward, "Its a really long story", I admitted.

He sat up and gestured around the room, "We've got all night"

I really didn't want to go through the whole story again, especially not with him, but if I left things out it would just cause more confusion on his part, so I began. I went through when it first began, the year before with the confusing dreams and sleepless nights that came with it. I spoke of how in real life I'd stare for so long without meaning to, just wishing that I could do something about how I felt. Then came the first kiss in my dreams months later and how I tried even harder to avoid them and everything leading up to the present time, including my telling Lynette and coincidental phone call by none other than him that came after, "I just...I just had to see what it was really like. This has been killing me, Zac.

I thought maybe if I did it, the dreams would stop, the want would stop..."

"But why would you want to?", He asked in the same tone he'd had the first time he asked.

"I don't know, Zac", I huffed out from my own exasperation of the situation, "I just...I wanted to, and I can't help it, but I still want to", I blurted out without thought, and immediately regretted it afterward.

The silence that filtered in after I spoke those words was deafening. He sat there stunned, as if I'd slapped him across the face, unable to comprehend any of it, I suppose. I was afraid to speak anymore, scared that I would dig myself a deeper hole. Lynette looked to me a moment in shock but said nothing and just went back to the lines she was making. She again broke the silence when the lines were finished, "I think we all need one of these", She announced, resting the mirror on her lap as she rummaged through her wallet to find the bill we'd used before. Though I wanted to take the next line, she passed the plate to Zac. I was last, and I took extra care to make sure that I didn't touch his hand as he passed everything to me, though I wanted to so badly that it brought tears to my eyes. It was all a reminder of how much I had messed up.

My eyes cast down to the powdery sliver of drug. Such a small thing, so expensive, but so relieving. The mirror hadn't been wiped clean all day, so a coat of fine powder laid upon it like a dreamy haze against the slick glassy surface. I wish I were in a dream, because then I could wake up and this all would have never happened. But I was painfully aware of how real this all was as I leaned in and breathed in the line as fast as I could. I wanted the pain. I wanted to feel it burn into my head and remind me of how stupid I was. The mirror nearly fell from my lap as I retracted my hands from the burning. Once it subsided a bit, I looked to Lynette, "Where's that Chonger you promised me?"

"This ain't over and done with, you just said your story", She told me with a cocked brow as she lighted her cigarette. She leaned in on her knees and looked from me to Zac and back again, "Its time to touch-base kiddies"

"You use that word again and I'll have to hang you", Zac muttered.

"Touch-base?", She perked up, "Why wouldn't you like to touch-base, Zac? I think that you have a lot of repressed anger that you're directing to the wrong people, and we need to touch-base and correct this problem", Zac sat silent a moment with his tongue in his cheek before picking up a throw pillow at the speed of light and tossing it at her. She melted into a fit of giggles before saying, "Okay, okay, I won't try to touch-base"

Zac forced a shudder, "That word is just...creepy"

She sniffed hard a moment before speaking again, "Okay, seriously...you two are *not* fine, and we gotta fix this cuz I'm not gonna let you two live like this"

"I'm fine", I muttered indignantly, just wanting to get this over with.

"Right...", She drawled out in disbelief, "Anywho, beyond beating yourself up, Tay, how do you feel?"

"Like shit"

"Okay then...Zac, Tay was nice enough to share his side of everything, so why don't you try now", Her attempt at having a serious facade definitely made me feel better. If she was being so light about the situation, which she'd been thrown in the middle of, then perhaps there really wasn't much reason to worry.

That idea was washed down the drain as Zac sat silent for the longest time, slumped in the loveseat as if he were trying to disappear into it. Finally he let out a sigh and said, "I don't know what to think of it"

"Why?", I asked, curious and out of my mind wondering about it.

"I just don't know...", He said in defeat of his thoughts.

"Because you did enjoy it, didn't you?", Lynette pried.

His eyes shot up to meet hers, big like a deer caught in bright headlights. His lower lip quivered a bit, "I-, I-", He stuttered before bowing his head.

She stood slowly, "I think its time for that weed now", She said and disappeared into her room, closing the door and letting the silence invade the room we remained in like a bad stench.

I pulled my legs up to my chest and curled up into a ball in my seat, hoping to get small enough to disappear. I closed my eyes, hoping to shut out any real life that swirled around me. It was all too much and made my head spin from it all. My throat was tight from the coke and my desire to just break down and bawl right then and there. I wanted to, but I didn't. Instead, I grasped at the fabric of my jeans for dear life and kept my eyes shut.

"I did", Zac muttered in a croaky voice.

His words caught me by surprise and my eyes shot open and looked at him. His head was low, hands wringing between his knees and elbows resting just barely at his thighs, "What?", I asked at a whisper.

When he picked his head up, I saw tears in his eyes when he forced them to meet my own, "Lynette asked if I enjoyed it...", He drawled out, moving his gaze away again, "I-, I-...I did"

His voice was barely audible, but I caught the words and my heart leapt into my throat once they registered in my mind, "Y-You did?"

He nodded solemnly, "But this...no. We can't do this Tay", He said, "No matter how much you or I enjoy it, it just can't happen, because its wrong"

"I'm gonna tell you what I told Tay", Lynette said, slinking back into her seat. I didn't even hear the

door open, but she was there, her box in her hands. As she opened the box and took out the dried, green plant from its protective bag, she spoke, "You can't help who you like, or love, or else this world would be a much different place. Besides, whether you look at scientific evolution or God's creation, if you think about it, we're all related somehow so there really isn't that much to debate on the subject", As she packed her pipe full she added, "It wasn't any huge thing until about a hundred years ago either, and that mostly changed because people began creating myth on why children were born messed up in some way and saying that it was because the genes were too pure or some shit like that", She waved the comment off with the hand holding her lighter as she brought the pipe to her lips.

Zac was next to receive the bowl, "Well its not like...", He trailed off, choking back the smoke after taking a pull of the weed, "Never mind"

"What?", I asked as he passed the piece to me. I took a long, much needed inhale before passing it back to Lynette.

"Its nothing", He said after exhaling.

"Bullshit", Lynette croaked as it was sent back to him.

"I'll get to it", He said before lighting the drug again.

Silence filtered in for many minutes after that as the pipe continued to be passed around our little circle. Three pipes were filled and smoked before Lynette brought up the subject again, "Now Zac, you were saying?"

"Huh?", He muttered.

"Back when we started smoking, you were saying something like "its not like...", then you said never mind", She paused as she took a pull of her cigarette, "And you said you'd get to saying it"

"I said it was nothing", He muttered.

"Nuh-uh, I don't think so, slick. Tell us"

"No"

"Yes...", She whined out, "If you don't I'll tell people about your little rendezvous with that guy...", She smiled wickedly.

"You wouldn't", He attempted to make his eyes wide, but the drug running through his head prevented it for the most part.

"Oh but I would", Her grin stuck to her face as if it were painted on.

He huffed out a sigh, "I was gonna say that its not like I didn't feel the same way a bit", He pushed out in a quick breath, "I mean...", He stuttered as he noticed our shocked stares, "I noticed that you'd stare, and at first it confused me, but then...I started to like it. Liked having someone watch me so...intensely...and...", He trailed off a bit, lowering his voice to a whisper, "I started wishing that you'd come over and do something, anything to tell me that I wasn't crazy", He took a deep breath after finishing that sentence, "But I never wanted to say anything, just in case I was insane"

I sat there, shell-shocked and unable to speak a word. Everything in me wanted to just scream and cry and laugh all at the same time, but I did nothing. This lasted for minutes on end before I could think of anything to say and when I did, all that came out was, "Okay, its your call. What do you want me to do?", in a whisper, near crying. I was anxious on both parts, one side hoping that he would just hold me or something, tell me that it wasn't so sick. The other was scared out of my mind that he would say that he wanted nothing to do with me. Everything in me froze solid and I visibly flinched when he opened his mouth to speak. *Please don't hate me...that would kill me. Please...* I begged internally and waited for the backlash of my actions.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

"I really don't know", He whispered slowly, "I don't know why this has to be so hard, I don't know what to do about this, I don't know anything anymore"

I could feel my heart breaking for him as he spoke those words, "I've felt that way for over a year", I told him in the same tone that he had used, "I've been so God-awful lost that it ate at me and tore me away from anything real, even though I tried to push it all away. It was like this was everywhere I went...", My eyes watched Lynette as she cut out three more lines, "Then I finally gave up trying"

"Why can't it just be...easier?", He asked, tears in his eyes.

"Because life isn't easy", Lynette put in, "It never has been, or else we'd all be kings and never die", She added and took her line, then gestured for Zac to have his, "Here", She said, lifting the mirror.

He, instead of just reaching for it as he had before, stood up and sat between the two of us before snorting his line and handing the item my way. I took the line fast again and closed my eyes as the burning made tears well in my eyes. Just as it began to subside I felt a pair of lips against my own. My eyes shot open to see the closed eyes of Zac everywhere. Shock invaded every morsel of my being, but quickly faded as I returned the kiss, letting the tears now fall out from behind my lids. My arms, as if being led by an outside force, went quickly around his shoulders to pull him nearer. Slowly did I feel his tongue play over my lower lip, and I opened my mouth without any second thoughts.

My heart seemed to stop as our tongues touched, each exploring the other. It was almost too much to handle but I refused to end the kiss. He stepped forward and lifted his knees up on the cushions of the couch, pinning me in my place, and put his warm hands against my sides, causing more chills to run through me like lightning. My shirt was bunched from the way I sat on the couch and his fingers found

their way to my unclothed skin. I audibly gasped but didn't let us disconnect. Instead a garbled moan escaped my lips, motivating his hands to continue up my ribs, tickling me and stirring my senses into insanity. It was wonderful and maddening at the same time. I let my hands slide up and twist through his tangled, shaggy mess of hair and came around to touch his face again. It still felt the same, at least it would to anyone except me. Because of the situation now, it felt like heaven against my fingertips.

A loud, intentional cough from Lynette jarred us apart, "Well, its good to see that you two are on good terms now, but could you like, visit me for a bit and do that some other time?", A grin was plastered against her face as she spoke and it made both of us blush a deep crimson in return as we nodded, "Good...what to do, what to do?", She pondered as she stood and paced. As she fought with herself about a gameplan for the rest of the night, I felt a hand just above my knee, slowly gracing its way up my thigh. I looked down to see Zac's hand and shot my head up to look him in the face, blushing right after.

"Got it!", She announced, making both Zac and I jump, "Hashbrownies", Her grin spread from ear to ear, "Who thinks this is a good idea?", She asked and all three of us made our way into the kitchen, "Okay, Tay, get me the cocoa, flour, and sugar out of that cupboard; Zac, get me a bowl from that shelf behind you", She told us while she retrieved the eggs from the fridge, her bag of weed in the other hand. She rummaged around for a bit before muttering, "Now where the hell is it?"

"What?", I asked in hopes that I could help her find whatever it was.

"The recipe box", Her exasperated voice moved it volume as she spun around looking for it.

I looked a minute or two before spotting a box on top of the fridge, "That it?", I asked as I pointed to the item I was referring to.

A grunt came in her reply as she pulled a chair over to the refrigerator and climbed atop it to retrieve the missing box, "What evil person would do that to a short girl?", She shrieked as she put the chair back and looked at us like she desired an answer. The most we did was shrug. She sighed softly before plopping down on the chair she'd just been standing on and flipped through the alphabetical entries. Finally she lifted an index card from the shuffling and cheerfully declared, "Found it", in a sing-song voice.

"Well then let's get to it, woman!", Zac commanded laughingly.

Lynette stopped in her tracks and looked to Zac with a cocked brow, "Excuse me?", Her hand went to her hip, "You called me what now?", She took a few steps until she was right in front of him, "I am not a housewife or a servant, don't treat me like one, or I'll show you who's boss", Her face was serious for several minutes until Zac made a face. As she broke down in giggles she scolded him with, "Don't do that! That's not fair!"

"Fair? Who said anything about fair?", He asked menacingly before attacking her with tickles. While she squealed Zac cried out, "Tay, help me out here!"

I shook my head and held out my hands, "No way, man"

A defeated sigh left his lips as he released her and said, "Fine", Then stood sulking for a good few seconds while Lynette caught her breath, "You suck"

I lifted my brow in a cocky manner, "Wouldn't you just like to know?", I told him smugly, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Behave you two", Lynette warned as Zac matched my stare with an enticed grin, "Let's get baking here"

The kitchen was a small mess when we finally got everything mixed together, save for the main ingredient. Lynette searched for it for a good five minutes before spotting it on her small dining table across the room. With the large bowl in hand she began making her way over to the bag only to slip in a small pile of flour that was spilled on the linoleum. A squeal of surprise escaped her as she toppled down into a heap on the floor, the entire mixture covering the better part of her as well as the floor. Zac and I couldn't help the giggles that came as she sat there in a chocolaty mess.

"Oh, you think this is funny, do you?", She asked in a perturbed manner. We didn't see her stand and walk over toward us, but we felt as she flung her hair and hands, as well as the chocolate batter, all over us as well. Our gaping mouths was cause for her own laughter as she stated, "Is it so funny now?"

So started a batter battle that lasted a good hour before we attempted to clean off a bit. Still a mess with chocolate stuck to our hair and clothing, as well as the residue that stained our skin, we began to attempt mixing another batch, this time having the bag of weed right within reach to prevent any further mishaps. Finally we sat around her tiny table in sticky, glorious victory, eating square after square of warm, intoxicating brownies. We decided that a movie was in order and took the whole pan as well as a knife into the living room.

"Hold it", She told us and we stopped in our tracks, "As much as I don't care that we're a mess, I don't want my couch covered in it", She told us and handed the pan to me as she ran to her linen closet and got a few spare towels as well as a raggedy old beach blanket to protect her deep caramel sofa and moved her ruby throw pillows, "There, much better", She announced and we all fell to the couch, a bit exhausted and in a daze. After a little argument we decided Pirates of The Caribbean would be the movie of choice for the moment.

Once the story got going in the movie, I noticed Lynette staring with hazed eyes at the screen, positively drooling over Orlando Bloom, "Got a problem, Lyn?", I snickered.

She gave me a cocked brow before looking back at the television a moment, then back at me, "Uhh, he's like, hot?", Her statement was more like a question. I simply shrugged and this set her off, "Oh don't even pull that! You cannot sit here and tell me that he's not drop dead gorgeous"

Again, a shrug came from me, "He's good looking, but not really anything spectacular"

"Like me!", Zac announced, giggling as he flexed a bicep.

I gave him a playful shove, "You wish", I told him before looking back to Lynette, "Now Johnny Depp, he's hot. Orlando has to put a few years on him"

"Aww, I thought you liked them young?", She teased, taking a quick glance at Zac.

"I do but-", I stopped as I noticed her glance, blushed and picked up a throw pillow from the floor and heaved it at her, "Take that you scurvy little bastard!"

By the end of the movie we'd finished the entire pan of brownies, smoked two more pipes and were a fit of giggles, poking fun at the comical points of the movie. Our laughter subsided somewhere around two in the morning, as Lynette was beginning to get drowsy, but me and Zac were still wide awake and threatening to do awful fourteen-year-old schoolgirl slumber party things to her if she fell asleep, "Come on you guys, I've gotta work tomorrow night...", She whined.

"So? You can serve food without sleep", Zac countered and smacked her upside the head with a pillow.

She shot him a look that challenged that idea, "Yeah, do you really wanna know what happened last time I did that? I ended up with four scalding hot dinners all over me after losing my balance of the tray...", She paused a minute to watch Zac's hand as he pummeled her again with the soft item, "And stop touching my pillows with your nasty, chocolaty hands!", She squealed before standing, "You guys are welcome to crash here, but I really do need to shower and get to bed", She tried sifting her hand through her sticky hair, "Its gonna take me an hour alone to get the chocolate out of my hair"

I sighed, but stood with her, "Fine", I puffed out like a little kid, lip protruded and everything, "A shower sounds good anyway, so me and Zac will head", I hugged her quickly, as did Zac before I was pulling him by the arm towards the door, "And we'll have fun without you!", I cried petulantly, but laughed, as did the other two as we unlocked the door and headed out into the hallway.

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## CHAPTER SIX

As we made our way down the hall, I stumbled into the wall nearest too me. We were only about half way to the exit, a set of old elevators. Zac's eyes got wide and his mouth dropped open. He kept this for several seconds before it melted into one of amusement. Our laughter filtered through the long corridor, but it was stopped short, too short for either of our liking.

"Hey!" Boomed a voice from the direction we were headed. We looked up to see a portly man wearing a grey uniform. He was the security guard, a person who lounged in a stuffy office most of the time. I guessed that a resident on the floor called about the ruckus we were causing.

Zac and I looked to eachother briefly before he asked, "Stairs sound good to you?" in a whisper with a



grin plastered over his face. I nodded and we began our trek back the other direction to the stairwell.

Our pace quickened as we heard the guard yell, “Hey! You two! Stop!” and the heavy footsteps behind it. They stopped soon after and I looked back to see the man inspecting where I’d run into the wall, “Hey, you boys best get back here and clean this up!”

I heard Zac snort as we ran and he cried out, “Why don’t you do it yourself! You could prolly lick it up! Its chocolate!”, and as the man came toward us again he laughed harder as he said, “Or you could use the exercise”

We made it to the stairwell without problem and shot down it, pausing at the bottom to catch our breath. The guard made it to the second floor before we began our fleeing again, but we were much faster and ducked into my car before he could catch where we’d gone. Minutes rolled by as we saw the shine of a flashlight roaming across the lot, searching out for the hooligans that caused such a riot. As soon as the flash went away I sat and put the key in the ignition, peeling out of the lot, and causing something of a squeal from Zac.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?!?!” He asked as we made our way to the highway.

“Chill”, I told him, placing a gentle hand on his thigh. It made me tingle, “He was at the other side of the lot. We’re fine”

He gritted his teeth and glared still, “You’re gonna get us arrested...I know it”, He mumbled helplessly.

“Shut up, we’re fine...”, I rolled my eyes and made my way across the familiar bridge. Soon we were at my house and tromping through the back door into the kitchen.

Almost falling into the chair, Zac sighed and looked to me with glassy eyes, “I don’t even know if I have the energy to shower, man”, and he ran his hand across the glass tabletop that had been bought by my now-ex-wife at the beginning of the year. She somehow got into a very glassy phase and all the tables and stands in the house showed it well. Even though I was leery of the idea at first, mostly because of the children, it seemed that the slick top would prove useful to me in more ways that just eating off of it, or a place to put my laptop.

I smirked and plopped down on the chair across from him at the small table, “Dick that...”, I nearly laughed, “You will”, His confused stare intensified as I dug through my knapsack. My smile only grew as did his own as I pulled out a rather large amount of cocaine.

“Dude! That’s...”, He took the baggie from me and inspected it, “That’s like...three balls man. That’s three-eighths of an ounce”, He looked to me, “When did you get this?”

“Near the end of the movie when you went to the bathroom...Got this too”, I smiled, pulling out a full ounce of weed, “Have at it”, I nodded to him. He nodded back and began cutting the drug and pulling it into four thick lines as I packed my glass pipe with a good nugget of the weed. Soon we were both very awake and chilled out from the ample amount of activity we’d had through the night and went into the

living room, sinking into the deep green velour sofa. As we turned on the CD player, I heard The Used playing “On My Own” filtering through the speakers. It was a very soft song, especially for that band, and put me in a very mellow mood. The lyrics were sad enough, but they didn’t seem to pierce through my wall of serenity today, as they would other days. Instead I let a small smile sneak over my lips and leaned in against Zac.

His body was so warm against me, and he made me feel even safer when an arm crept around my waist. Tilting my head a bit, I let my lips find his jaw line, leaving small pecks as they made their way down his throat. I steadied myself as I moved by placing a hand against his chest, feeling his heartbeat, quiet but quick, under my fingertips. Slowly I made my way over him and my lips found his with ease. My fingers found their way back into the matte of his mid-length, shaggy locks. His hands went to my hips, gripping and massaging the bone and just making it harder for me to keep my head.

It wasn’t very long before it was too much for me to handle as we were. A thought ran through my head and I smiled a little as I leaned in to his ear to whisper, “Didn’t you say you wanted a shower?”

Without words we stood and made our way upstairs and into the larger of two bathrooms. I watched silently, in awe, as he peeled the sticky, stained shirt from his skin and discarded the fabric in a corner, “What?” He asked, blushing a little as he reached for his belt.

I slunk over to him with glazed eyes, “Nothing”, I whispered as our lips came together again and I reached down and replaced his hands with my own over his belt buckle. When it was undone I carefully unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. My fingers felt like they were completely numb as I removed both his pants and boxer-briefs delicately. As I stood back up I took my time in order to let it all sink in. He was definitely more masculine and toned than myself, and it was beautiful. When I got to a level he could reach, he began rolling my shirt up my torso and finally off of my arms, leaving me to catch a small chill from the cool vent behind me. With as much care as I’d taken with him, he stripped me of the remainder of my garments and pulled me against him once again.

He let his hands rush over me once I was naked, and it actually made me feel a bit vulnerable, bashful, even in the wake of all that was going on around me, including what was inside my head. With a dizziness invading my sight, I reached over and turned on the water to where it was bearable, trying my hardest not to lose Zac's hands on my body for one second. When I finished that task, I was back against him, and I was insane with the feeling of it all.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was almost too much, just having his rough hands on my body. They were searching, grabbing, pinching, all the while curious and trying their damndest to find out all they could. Once he exhausted his manual search, I found myself against the wall, being assaulted by full, fervent lips. Gasping, I grabbed for anything that I could use to hold my standing position. I'd nearly given up the search when I finally reached the bar holding my washcloth, which was ironically just left of my waist and would have been discovered without trouble if I were in a stable frame of mind. The grip I held to it became something of a life-or-death situation, at least to me, when his lips found my throat and his hands slid

down my sides and around to my ass.

His hands held a steady grip as his kisses trailed up my neckline, stopping a moment to bit and tug at my ear (which caused a sizeable moan to be emitted from yours truly) before tickling my jawbone and finally came to rest on my waiting lips. The astounding pleasure that came with this gesture was only heightened by the jarring rush that followed his right hand's quick but soft movements and two fingers plunging deep inside me.

As my knees faltered, I thought that I would surely fall, but instead Zac's body merely pressed harder against me, our erections now pressed almost painfully against each other. He pulled his face back only long enough to flash me what I knew to be a wickedly mischievous smirk before returning. Before I could process any thought to give answers to my confusion about the glance, he ground his hips into mine while simultaneously pumping his digits in and out of me. This being too much to handle silently, I let out a muffled groan and bit down on his plump lower lip.

Once his actions slowed a little he departed from our kiss, his eyes still burning and smirk still teasing my curious and aroused mind. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and without hesitation I lapped the sliver of crimson away before reuniting our embrace. It wasn't long before I had to bread the kiss, barely capable of breathing and ready to scream. At first, all my weight was against him, trying to muffle the noises I could no longer hold in but I gave up within minutes and decided instead to just rest my head against the wall and let it all out.

By this time I began to notice the inferno of steam surrounding us, far too hot for either of us, so I used my free hand to reach across the tiny stall. My original intention was merely to lower the hot water, but that proved too difficult in my state of mind, so I decided instead to just turn it off completely. The room was still thick with steam and our own bodies kept the room at a consistent temperature.

The chocolate had long since been washed from our bodies and, in minutes after stopping the water, sweat beaded where the water had just been. My hands roamed over his back and shoulders, into his hair and then I began the rotation again, seemingly unable to even force myself to stop. The feeling was just that incredible, almost far too much to handle. I felt as if I would literally explode into tiny pieces at any moment. My breath was erratic and shallow as were the beats of my heart. Just when I was nearly to my own boiling point, he stopped. All of my breath seemed to fall out of me in despair and I tried so hard to open my eyes. It was a vain attempt, I realized as I caught the tiniest glimpse of what was ahead of me before they shut again. Without my conscious thought, I let out one of the most pathetic and desperate noises I had ever even imagined to be able to make: a whimper, one reminiscent to a starving puppy as you walk by with a Philly Cheese-Steak sandwich. At least that's the closest I could fathom, and to this day have never heard duplicated.

After that escaped completely, I felt his breath hot against my ear, teasing me with stifled moans and minute kisses for more time than I cared to count before whispering, "I-want-you," in something of a staccato growl.

I, of course, made no contest to his demand and simply nodded before we made out way, stumbling, down the hall to my room, just one linen closet separating the two locations. We fell together, still lost in rushed kisses, onto the bed. As we did so, I searched blindly through my night stand drawer for the

tube of lubricant stashed below a sea of paper and pens. We parted shortly after my fingers found it and I handed it to Zac.

An amused smile overcame his face as he read the contents aloud, "K-Y Warming gel," his brow cocked a bit as if to ask what it was doing among my possessions.

"Better quickies," I replied with a crooked grin.

A short laugh fell from his lips before handing it back to me and falling to lie on his back beside me, "I think I can let you do the honors," He told me in the haughtiest manner that he could muster before we both fell into silly laughter for a brief moment.

I felt a blush run over my neck and face, masked by the dim lighting given solely by the street lamps through sheer curtains, as I entwined our legs and slathered his upright cock with the liquid. A slight moan came from him as I used my thumb to put pressure along the underside of his member as I pumped it a few times after coating it, mixing the lubricant with his own traces of precum.

Once I'd finished that task I looked up slowly over his torso, neck and finally his face. His eyes were shut, brows knit into each other and lips in a loose 'O' form. It was simple and sensual all at the same time, as well as breathtaking. Seeing it in reality made me think of one thing: that my dreams couldn't hold even the weakest candle to the sight in front of me at that very moment. I drank it in like a fine wine and stored it in my memory before crawling over him slowly, moving my legs now to straddle his and placed a long kiss on his lips.

When we parted, I rose up on my knees to allow him to line himself up, then gradually I lowered again. His shaft was thick, so my body held up a little resistance, but finally he was a good enough ways inside of me. My muscles strained and even tore, but I still had no problem enjoying the moment. This had not been my first time. Even if it had been, feeling him inside me, throbbing against any muscle he came in contact with, sent jolts of pleasure through every inch of my being. After a minute or so, I began gyrating slightly, evoking a moan from deep inside his throat, as well as causing a compulsive thrust from his own hips.

Soon we were rocking together in almost choreographed rhythm. I held to his waist and he to my hips, each ready to guide the other with hardly a moment's notice. I felt myself reaching the brink of orgasm again and suddenly his hand was at the base of my shaft, moving with short, rapid pumps, almost kneading, and it was these small motions that brought me over the edge screaming. I didn't slack on my pace for him as the sensation filtered from me. In fact, I went faster to allow him to reach his climax in no time.

I may have shed a few tears when he finally exploded throughout my insides, but no one could have known through the sweat, and all I could remember was his throbbing penis and the liquid result of his powerful release. It caused a rush through me that matched my actual climax. Once the orgasm passed over us both, I collapsed on him, letting his spent shaft fall out of me in the process. His heartbeat felt something like a mouse's: quick but soft; and we both struggled to breathe for quite a few moments. Exhaustion overcame me as my breath returned, but I stayed upon him, wrapped in his languid, but still protective, arms. My euphoria was so thick as I drifted that even the view behind my eyes was warm

and clouded, welcoming, something it hadn't been for a long time.

"I love you," I heard just barely before slipping into dreamland, "I'll never forget this," was whispered even softer in a murmur.

"I love you too," I muttered back, hardly aware of it myself, before succumbing to sleep entirely.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

Harsh, midmorning light tore me away from the most restful sleep I'd had in over a year. Then a cold draft came over me as I woke a bit more. I lifted my head from the pillow to see that I was the only person occupying the bed. My first thought was that I'd only dreamt the previous night's affairs. This was only until I sat up and combed my fingers through my hair and found it still matted in a few places from the brownie batter, and then looked down over myself to see myself stark naked and spotted with cakey remnants of Zac and I's mess.

Still groggy from sleep, I slipped on a pair of boxers from the hamper to tide me over until I got a sufficient shower. As I made my way out of the room, a second thought crossed my mind: He was already awake, perhaps showering or getting something to eat. No sounds were heard as I went into the hallway. The bathroom light was filtering through the half-opened door, but I soon realized that it was carelessly left on the night before as I peeked in as viewed a scatter of filthy clothes. I made my way down the stairs and through an empty living room and into an equally vacant kitchen.

I sighed a little, thinking, *Maybe he went out to catch breakfast*, since he did so often, and plopped down on the couch, retrieving the remote to the stereo and letting Kings of Leon blare through its speakers. The cushions were incredibly comfortable to my still exhausted form and I couldn't help but let my eyelids drift close. The next thing I know I'm waking up halfway through "Holy Roller Novocaine" with the phone ringing shrilly. I hadn't even meant to fall asleep, but didn't dwell over it. Instead I my way over to the phone and stared at the Caller ID until my eyes focused enough to read the name and number. It was one of my parents, most likely, since their number was private but I didn't allow unidentified numbers. My dad's name scrolled across the digital reading, and I glared slightly. Neither of them were someone that I wished to speak to at the moment, but I still picked it up, fearing the consequence of not doing so. They could call over and over, or leave inane messages of them calling out my name, and that I should pick up the phone. I sighed before bringing the cordless receiver to my ear, "Hello?"

"Hey sweetie," It was my mother with her cheerful but always with a hidden agenda tone. *Great . . . just dandy.*

"Hey mom," I tried sounding happy to hear from her as I fell back on the plush couch.

"I just called to make sure you're doing okay there . . .," Her voice trailed off at the edge. This was always her way of asking 'So how's it going? What's new?'

"I'm great . . . for once I got a good night's sleep"

"That's good . . . ," I could tell she was smiling. She often worried about how I slept, if I did at all.

"Ira called yesterday . . . ," I started, knowing that it was probably not the best of things to announce, but figuring that I should get the upcoming tiff over with as soon as possible.

"Oh," She pushed out quickly, her temperament souring, "And?"

"It's over," I told her in the simplest manner possible.

But simple, you see, is not a fathomable idea to my mom, "Hun, can't you just try . . . "

"Over means completely mom," I sighed.

"But what's to say you two can't just try to work things out? I mean it's not like you can't be around each other or something, and why in the world would there ever be a real reason for that awful thing to ever come up?" She blurted out, *Ah, moms*, I thought in the least salty manner that I could conjure.

"We've been over this mom," I sighed again, "We're just not the people that we used to be to each other"

"But why can't you just try to . . . adjust to these . . . new you's?"

"We tried that mom, and all it did was make us fight more," I got out through clenched teeth. I love my mom, don't get me wrong here, but she's just a brick wall when it comes to some things, like divorce, or anything that contradicts the conservative mannerisms in politics, and after a while, it would wear on anyone's nerves.

"But what about your kids . . . ?"

"It'd be worse to have them grow up with us at each other's throats all the time"

"But you could . . . "

"No mom, it's over," I sighed, "And they'll probably have a step dad to be there for them all the time anyway . . . ," I breathed out while massaging my temple.

"Taylor!" She gasped and I could almost see her hand flying to her chest at such a "unbelievable" thought, "See, this is exactly why you need to at least try to make it work somehow. Those kids need their *father*, not some replacement"

Again my teeth clenched, "I'm telling you mom, it would be too stressful and too awkward for *all* of

us"

"Why? Why can't you just put those little differences you apparently have aside for Ezra and Ellie's sakes?" Now, I know that she's just trying to help, and to keep her Christian faith, but again with the brick wall comment.

"Yeah, then they get older and tell their friends that their parents never speak to one another and don't even sleep in the same room and whatever else might happen . . . and then those kids tell their parents and their parents will think that we're more dysfunctional than the Manson family, which we most likely would be, and then those parents won't let their children be friends with my kids and then they end up angst ridden, self-injuring crack heads that hate us . . .," I rolled my eyes, "Just what I want to see on the cover of the National Enquirer"

"Now how do you - . . .," She cut off and I knew almost exactly what was to come, "And just *why* wouldn't you be able to share a room? It's not like you'd have to have sex, and hell," *Uh-oh, she's bustin' out the swear words*, "You don't even have to share a bed," And I'm sure this sounded logical in her mind, but the mental image I got was not one I wanted to see, whether I was with Natalie or not.

"It wouldn't work," I insisted with a groan.

"And why not?"

"Because I'm not going to be the annoying third wheel if she'd have some guy over. That, in fact, would be another thing our kids would blab about," I told her in the calmest manner possible.

"If you are still married then that shouldn't even be a problem," she spat. *Oh boy . . .*

I paused long enough to retrieve my pack of cigarettes from the coffee table and light one, which by the way, was a luxury I'd not had since Natalie and I were married. Smoking in my own house, that is. Once it was lit and I had taken a sufficient pull, I spoke, "Well, one, we're *not* married anymore, no matter what you wish, and two because I wouldn't be attracted to her or have the feelings I did before, and hence wouldn't be having sex with her . . . but I'm also not going to be the asshole to tell her that she's not allowed to fall in love with, or just have a one night stand with another man"

"*Not attracted to her?!*" She shrieked, "No one used to be able to shut you up about her!"

"Things change," I stated confidently.

"Not that much!"

"Well they did," My words were calm but I was reeling on the edge.

"How? Tell me why you don't like her anymore. Give me one good reason, and I'll shut up"

*Yes ma'am*, I thought viciously, "Because I like guys more!" I shouted without much thought, *Uh-oh . . . that wasn't supposed to come out*, Regardless, it did shut her up.

But that silence only lasted until she managed to choke out a series of sputters and, "What?" In a dumbfounded tone.

"You heard me, mom," I spat in a harsher tone than intended. I cooled a bit, only a little, before adding, "I'm gay. I like guys. I'm a *fag*"

"No," She gasped as if she'd just got word that someone she was close to had been killed in a horrible accident.

"Yeah, I'm a queer . . . one of those awful, sinful, mentally retarded people that "need help," at least according to you and dad and all of your bible happy friends"

"No," She repeated, but this time it was stone, "You're just making this up . . . to . . . to get out of making up with Natalie"

"No mom, you're lying to you," I whispered in a dark tone, one filled with tears. I really didn't want her to find out, and if she did, I didn't want it to be like this, but it was out now, and there was no point in going back, "I like guys. I have for a long time. Some girls are different. Natalie was different to me for a long time, but it changed. I don't know why but over time it did. I don't love her anymore. I don't know her anymore. She's just another face in a sea of beautiful women that I'm not attracted to at all," I stopped a minute before letting out a huff of air and finishing with, "There, is that a good enough reason?"

"No," She spat and all compassion toward her feelings went back down the drain with that one little word.

"Face it mom," I barked, tears now falling freely. My thoughts came to a popular, if not entirely taboo, phrase and I extended it a bit, "I'm here, I'm queer and there ain't nothing you can do about it. You can't change me and you can't just go and spend your whole life in denial. You can go ahead and say that you hate me, that I'm an abomination, and that I'm going to hell. I don't care, because if I am going to hell for finally admitting who I am, then I'm saving you a spot and I'll keep it nice and warm for you because your hatred will be under your own holy little mask," And with that, I hung up the phone.

As I was turning off the ringer, my eyes caught the time in the display window. It was nearly seven at night! I'd originally woken up around ten in the morning and I looked and saw that my mom had only called a little over an hour before. Frantically, I looked around for any sort of note from Zac before checking the rest of the calls and even my cell phone to be sure that he hadn't called. No note. No calls. I dialed his cell phone. No answer. He always answered his cell phone, unless he was showering or having sex. Only one of those really had any possibility of happening. He was a stickler for being clean, but sex? I'd bet that the happenings of last night probably had spent him for a good amount of time. Either way, I left a message.



I was up until dawn the next day, waiting for a call back. At least twenty calls had been made, all with a different amount of rings. I gave up just as the sky began to lighten, and shuffled my way to the bathroom. Forcing my muscles to work, I turned on the shower, stripped and stepped in. My tears overcame my sorry excuse for stoicism shortly after finally getting all of the batter out of my hair. My knees seemed to disappear and I curled up under the steaming spray and cried. No, I wept . . . wept like a child. This lasted until the water ran ice cold. Haphazardly, I wrapped a towel around my waist and slunk into my room, all the while my tears fell, teeth chattered and every inch of my body shaking. Sobs came loud and clear, ringing out my regret, fear, frustration, confusion, and anger.

Eventually I must have exhausted myself to sleep, who knows when. But I found myself waking and still bare, my towel disheveled and the door bell ringing and someone pounding against the oak. My head hurt like hell fire, but I rushed to find clean boxers and a tank to wear before nearly falling down the stairs to open the door in hopes that maybe it was Zac.

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## CHAPTER NINE

My expression melted as soon as I tore open the door. Not Zac, I noted dumbly. Instead there stood a very annoyed looking Isaac, "H-hey Ike," I could have smacked myself for stuttering during my attempt at being casual. Obviously my attempt was futile.

"Where have you been?" He asked with a bite in his voice, "I've been trying to get a hold of you! There was no answer here or on your cell. What the hell?"

"Sorry, I turned off the ringer on the phone and accidentally left my cell down here," I answered.

"What about yesterday?" He asked in a disbelieving tone.

"I had it with me all yesterday! I got in a fight with mom so I turned the ringer, but I had it with me just in case anyone else called . . . I had it all night!"

"No . . .," He drawled out and gave me a look like he was talking to a little kid, "That was the day before," He pointed out in that obnoxious, condescending, faux-omniscient tone that I loathed. His brows creased and he asked in an authoritative way, "Are you high?"

"Nooo . . .," I told him in a 'duh' manner.

His hands were at his hips, "Then why are your eyes bloodshot?"

"I told you, I got in a fight with mom. It upset me, I stayed up until dawn and I guess I slept for a whole day," I shrugged, not knowing the answer myself, but supposed it made sense.

"I'll say you got into a fight with her," He snorted out.

"Oh god," I muttered, rolled my eyes and turned around. Isaac followed and stayed standing while I fell into the couch, clicking the stereo onto the same disc that had spun the last time. I looked up to see his arms crossed over his chest. The look on his face could have meant anything: That mom ranted about every little detail about the fight, or that we just simply had a fight, or that she did nothing but try to babble what the fight was about behind sobs, "What?" I asked, waiting for him to continue.

"I think she told me everything," He began, "But she was hysterical, so I really only caught some of it . . .," He paused as if he were thinking, but I knew that he'd had plenty of time to script it all, in French even, and maybe Spanish or Japanese too, "But what I got was that you told her that the divorce was final, she tried to have you work it out, like usual . . . and you told her that you're gay to get out of it?!"

"No Ike, I did not tell mom that I was gay to get out of her endless droning," I sighed out in a bored voice.

"Then why?" He asked with his hands on his hips.

Rolling my eyes, I looked to him, "Well, I dunno, maybe cuz it's true?"

"Oh horse shit," He spat and wagged a finger at me, "And don't go getting cocky. I'm just trying to find out why on earth I'm getting a call from my mother, while I'm out on a date, sobbing about all of this nonsense"

"Shut-up," I spat back, "I'm gay, get over it. I don't know why this is so hard for everyone to comprehend . . . I - am - gay," I emphasized, "Nat and I got a divorce because we both changed. Neither of us liked who the other became. I was distant to her in so many ways, and she just . . . I don't know. I did love her, but it just faded out. I didn't tell her why I didn't love her and she didn't give her reasons either. I didn't expect to have to tell *anyone* but it seems that no one can just accept that it's fucking over"

"You're not gay," He had his foot down on this one.

"Who are you to say who I am?!" I shouted, "So I came out to mom in a not so level-headed way . . . She wanted a reason about why I just couldn't stay with Nat and have a semi-normal family life, so I gave it to her"

"I'd know if you were gay," Now he was just being petulant and childish about it.

"You'd know if you had an ounce of common sense in that head of yours," I said through clenched teeth, and again he crossed his arms, this time as a sign to continue and try proving him wrong, "All right, well how about Skylar, Brent, Mark, Scott, Robbie, Don or Tanner? How much privacy do two guy "friends" really need?" I asked, naming off every actual boyfriend I'd ever had over at the house, apartment, or any hotel. He'd actually walked in a couple times while I was making out with my first boyfriend, Skylar, and we played it off thusly, "Or that Sky was always teaching me some wrestling move?" I asked with a cocked brow and crossed my arms to mock him.

Ike stood dumbfounded for a few minutes, jaw dropping more and more as the details came together. He collapsed into the couch beside me, massaging his temples before jarring from his shocked state with, "Why didn't you tell me?! It would've saved me from *looking like an ass* !!"

"Because I told you, I didn't want to have to tell anyone. Besides you'd have looked like an ass whether I told you now, five or even ten years ago," I told him, relieved to finally be able to relax a bit, "Cigarette?" I asked as I took one out and he graciously accepted.

"Who else knows?" He asked after taking a few pulls from the cigarette, "I mean, if you told *mom*, then I'm sure there are others"

I shrugged, "Friends mostly. All the guys I named obviously," I couldn't help the little grin that came when I said that, "A few of our road crew, friends like Lynni, Chad, Mikey . . . friends I'm with a lot, ya know?" I thought a little more before another name came to mind, "Zac"

"You told Zac but not me?"

"No, he just kind of knew. He's the one that introduced me to Sky," A blush rose in my face from just mentioning Zac alongside an ex of mine, "Yeah, Sky told me after Zac left the night we met that he thought I'd be into him," I laughed despite myself at the memory, "I was so pissed that I actually cut the night early just so that I could go yell at him . . . I was like "you *knew* I'd be *into* him?!" and he just looked at me like I was blind or retarded or something and was like "Umm, yeah Tay, it's not like you hide the fact that you check out guys like him all the time". I felt like an idiot, and I was so pissed off at him, but I just cracked up laughing . . . "

"Speaking of Zac . . .," Isaac began and I blanched as he spoke, "Have you seen him around? He hasn't been home except to shower and get clothes in days"

Luckily, I had enough strength in me to play it cool, "No . . . Me and him went to Lynni's the night before mom called, but other than that, no," And I silently added, *And it's breaking my heart*

"Hmph", Came from Isaac, "I'm gonna kick his ass when he finally does come home," He decided out loud, "We've got a vid to shoot in two days . . . He can't be disappearing like this"

*Video?!* I asked myself in my head, "Aw shit! That's in two days?"

Isaac's blank stare said it all, but he felt the need to add, "Uh, yeah genius"

"Fu-u-u-u-uck," I croaked with my head in my hands and ran my fingers through my hair afterward, "I don't wanna do a video! Not now . . . not with a dozen girls in it to ogle each of us. It'll just give mom more ammo," I whined, "I can see it now," I put on the best impression that I could of my mom, "See? I told you that you aren't . . . gay. Look at all those girls, and you're loving it! Now you better go make up with that poor girl or so help me God, I will tan your hide, even if you are a grown man"

Isaac let out a hearty laugh, "Oh man, please do it, just so I can watch that for real"

"So you can watch that?" I said as my face soured, "Watch this," I declared, hitting him square above the knee with my knuckles. The look on his face was priceless and I laughed as he cried out in pain. Once my laughter died I straightened out and continued, "Now, anyway . . . No, mom doesn't need anymore reason to make me reconcile with Natalie, no matter how amusing her attempts may be. We're gonna have to talk with everyone and get it all sorted out, cuz no . . . I do *not* wanna be in that hot-seat. I'd rather come out to the world on live tv than face her"

Isaac snuffed out his cigarette and stood to leave, "Will do, but I gotta get going cuz I have a lot of shit to do today, but if you hear from Zac, tell him he needs to come home," With tears in my eyes I nodded. I noticed them and looked to my stereo and acted like I was switching CDs so that he didn't see my face, and with just a short goodbye, he left.

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## CHAPTER TEN

The day of the video shoot had me excited beyond any means of the word. The way that the video was being shot was chiefly an idea of our own making. The whole theme of it was something of a party to match the upbeat tempo of the song itself and the joie de vivre attitude all together. Three totally different fetes in three different places. One would be at a bar in the city, hosting a wild and drunk party. The second would basically be a keg party outside of the city at a field, more laid back, but still having a ton of fun and drinking. The third was to be the performance location, where people would be just hanging out and watching us "playing" and everything at a rock club. I was bound to be just a little more than tipsy by the end of it, and I liked that idea.

Anxiety rose over me as I readied to make my way first to the bar, because I'd be face-to-face with Zac. He'd avoided me, as well as Ike, for almost a week now, and the only thing that I could fathom it being was a rather awkward "reunion", if you could be so bold as to even call it that. This was why I was determined to drink. I was not excited for that part at all.

An awkward sort of reunion is exactly what it was too. I arrived at the bar late, even though I'd left my house early, because of a wreck during the already hectic noontime traffic. Isaac was there with the director, probably talking over where we should be standing and what we should be doing and a few fine details that needed refreshed in his memory as well as any changes that needed made for whatever reason. Zac was just feet away, right in Isaac's view, and looking rather solemn. I'd guessed it was because he'd caught an earful from Isaac the entire time from the moment he arrived home to when Isaac began talking to the director.

Not that he didn't deserve it. I'd have done the same if I were Isaac, or if I'd have found him first. I went over and said "hi" to everyone and gave my apology for being as late as I was. Zac didn't even look at me and it just twisted the rope inside me a bit tighter. It wasn't until a break later that afternoon at the club, the last shot of the day, when I'd caught the chance to pull Zac away and talk. I was relieved only for the fact that there was a break. There had been quite a few of the fan-types on the sets, and all they seemed capable of talking about was "how hard it must be to go through a divorce so

young and with kids to think about and blah, blah, blah,” but I managed to avoid being completely smothered all day, thanks to Isaac reminding them to keep a bit of distance and not talk about it so much, because “It has been hard”.

I kept a note in my mind to thank him, and that I owed him big time. Instead of the throngs of dribbling and swooning girls, I hung out with groups of guys all day: playing pool and darts, having a beer on the tailgate of a truck, those sorts of things. Everything about the video was being shot with hand held cameras to give it a “real” impression, as if it were just shot by a friend with a camcorder. Isaac gave that idea, and I liked it because the rules were laid back and it gave us a chance to just unwind and have a little fun. At least that’s how it ran until the shot done at the club. That’s when we had to straighten up a little and be more professional, because even though we weren’t actually plugged in, we had to make it look that way.

When the director called for a break, I was by far tired of Zac’s little game of avoiding me. I marched right up to him, dodging all the girls in the process, grabbed his arm (not too hard, just to let him know that I meant business) and told him, “We need to talk,” In a low, confidential voice.

Zac shot Isaac a pleading look, but Isaac probably figured that it was just my turn to yell, so he shot Zac a helpless shrug as I tugged him off to the club’s small dressing room. Once there, I shut and locked the door before speaking, “Where the hell have you been?”

“At a friend’s,” He muttered, still not looking me in the eye.

The tears I’d been holding back all day now sprung a leak, “You coulda left me a note or something . . .

“Look Tay,” He said in a stone voice, “I’m not gonna sit here and lie to you. I enjoyed what happened,” He sucked in a deep breath, “But that’s what’s so wrong. We’re not supposed to enjoy it. We’re not even supposed to imagine what it could be like”

“What . . . What about what you said?” I asked with a lump in my throat. I could feel the walls crumbling as I spoke.

“I do love you, and I won’t ever forget what happened,” For the first time all day I saw a smile directed my way, “I don’t think I ever could. But it can’t ever happen again . . . and we really shouldn’t even talk about it because . . . because that would . . . it’d just add fuel to a fire that never should have been sparked”

I tried to hug him, but he shoved himself away. Not knowing from where, I became angry, “Fine . . . just fine. You can go ahead and hide everything in your mind, away from your life. You do it all the time. You go and you put up a wall against anything that tries to get too fucking close. But I know, because I know you. I know what’s hiding in there,” And with that I poked my finger against his temple before he could back up again, “Because I have it too. You can go ahead and hide it all away, but it *will* come back, but I fucking won’t”, And with that I stormed back out, basically ripping the lock off of the door.

For the last two hours of the shoot, I put all of my anger and hurt into the energy to get everything done with, just so that I could get away from everyone. I wanted to just curl up and cry for hours, much like I did a few days before.

No.

I wanted to get drunk, really drunk. If he could hide how he really felt, then so could I. A better idea came to mind as I got back into my car. I headed for Lynette's and caught her while she was getting ready for work. She actually worked at the bar that I'd been at just hours before.

"Hey handsome, what're you all dolled up for?" She asked as she opened the door the rest of the way and let me in, all while putting a set of gigantic, fluorescent green, wire hoops in her earlobes.

"We shot our video today," I smiled, putting on an astounding casual act.

"Really? How'd it go?" She smiled as she sat to put on her boots.

"Oh, it was great," I matched her grin, "We all had a total blast," I thought of an excellent ploy as I talked, "Zac and I . . . we, uh, wanted to celebrate a little," I gave a suggestive glance to play out my plan, "I was wondering if you were holding . . ."

"I actually got a pound of middies yesterday to sell," She grinned widely.

"Oh, I'm good on weed," I told her, remembering the bag in my dresser, "I was hoping that you had a lil' something else," I said and closed with a sharp snuffle to put her on the right track.

"Ohhhh . . .," She smiled wider, "How much do you need?"

I thought a minute. Considering I'd not touched what was left from the first night, I still had nearly an eight ball left, "Gimme two balls", I told her, figuring that it would tide me over for some time.

"That's a lot for two people"

I shrugged, "Well, its gotta last a while", My feigned but believable suggestive grin returned and it sealed the deal after she giggled a little at the idea. Before long the transaction was complete and I was back in my big, empty house. I opened the liquor cabinet after I slipped off my worn boots and grabbed the first thing that my eyes fell on. It was vodka, Absolut Vodka to be exact. I then went up and stuffed a cigar with the weed and began alternating between taking puffs of the blunt and gulps of the vodka. It wasn't long before I was starting to feel the tingle of intoxication. But I wanted more, so I dumped out the remains of the left over eight ball and cut out lines, then began switching between a line of the cocaine and a swig of the burning liquor.

My throat felt closed and I'd gagged twice by the time I'd finished but I kept going. Beginning on the next eight ball, I kept with my system of drinking and snorting. I could barely see by the time I had

three lines left of that bag, but I continued. The bottle was just a few shots from being completely dispatched and it began as a fifth with just a few shots taken from it. I leaned down to do one of the lines and before I could get the hand with the straw up on the table again, everything went black.

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## **Part Two**

### **Chapter Eleven**

I woke up groggy and numb. I liked the numb feeling. It lasted until I opened my eyes and was blinded by blurred, but still bright white, light. Once my eyes began to focus it didn't take long to realize that I was in a hospital room. It was a small room, void of people. That didn't last long. A nurse came, most likely to check my vitals, but didn't have the chance to. One lazy, bored look up stopped her in her tracks. Stuttering a moment, she got her composure back and went to alert, it seemed, everyone. In a flash I was surrounded by people, at least three doctors and two nurses to each of them. It took them a good hour to get through the basics: questions and demonstrations to assure that my mind and body were working.

Finally the interrogation ended for the most part. Everyone left, save for one doctor, my regular physician. As soon as I noticed this, I knew that my trip through this hell was far from over, "You're a lucky man, Taylor," He self-declared as he took a seat next to the bed, "Do you remember what happened?" As much as I wanted to remember (note: sarcasm), I couldn't and told him so as well, "Well, from what we've gathered from . . .," He stopped to look at a sheet on his clipboard, "Your brother Zac, you were found on the floor of your kitchen, with an empty bottle of vodka and remnants of cocaine on the table," He sighed heavily in his pause, "Upon result of testing we found nearly enough alcohol to do in most people your size and just under one quarter of an ounce of cocaine in your system. This all on top of large amounts of THC, which could have been added anytime within the past few weeks"

"And you probably think that it was a "suicide attempt" don't you?" I muttered, now remembering a bit.

"Considering how long it takes these drugs to run their course and do their damage, it's the only believable solution"

"Well it wasn't," I stated in a harsh, sharp tone, "I just got a bit carried away is all"

"Taylor you could have easily died by the alcohol alone. There is no way that you could have not been doing this without reason or purpose"

"I didn't try to kill myself!"

"I'm sorry Taylor, but everything points otherwise," The doctor apologized, but his stone face gave me no solace that there was real emotion behind his shallow words.

"Fuck that," I muttered lowly.

"Is it true that your divorce was recently finalized?" He asked immediately, ignoring my comment.

"Yeah, so?"

"And that there is still no set visitation between you and your children?"

*What-the-fuck?* I asked wordlessly, "I'm a musician. There will never be a "set plan" . . . ever. I'll see them when I'm able to, as I always have. That was the only agreement made," I told him after a moment of thought, "And what does this have to do with anything?" I demanded.

"These are called stress factors, Taylor, ones that are very common in cases like your own"

"I'm not a case, there's no case, period," I told him in an exasperated tone, "When am I allowed to go home"

"That's another thing I need to discuss with you," He told me, looking again at his clipboard.

*Discuss? Discuss what?* I thought, taken aback by this and I'm sure my wide eyes and gaping mouth told him just what I was thinking.

He continued after a moment of staring at me and then that annoying piece of plywood in his hands, "Your family is here and they've decided after my counsel that it would be best for you if you were placed in a mental rehabilitation facility"

"My *family* decided that *I'm* a basket case? They can't do that! I'm *not* going to a nut ward"

"They are permitted to do something such as this as long as there are three consenting adult members of your family to sign for it, and there are four: your parents and two eldest brothers"

"Fuck them, I'm not screwed up and I'm not gonna go!" I spat out, crossing my arms to the best of my ability.

"They're just doing what is best for you and whether you think so or not, you're in need of help. No one with a clean bill of health would have done what you did"

"Everyone in Motley Crew did . . . ," I muttered petulantly.

"And everyone in Motley Crew has been to at least one form of rehab in the past twenty five years," He pointed out much like my brother Isaac would, and it annoyed me, "Regardless, you will be transported late tomorrow morning to a center in Tulsa, by request of your parents"



"And for how long is this bull shit gonna last?"

"As long as you decide . . ."

"Then don't fucking send me!"

"You are required to go for at least a trial of time. That is not my decision. I advised that you just be sent across the city, and kept in my care, but your parents insisted that if you were to do it, that it would be in your hometown and as far from a city like this as possible"

It wasn't long before he readied to leave, tell me when I was going and the entire procedure, which included three guards to ensure both my safety and my inability to escape. He asked if my family could come in as he was leaving and I stated simply, "I *wouldn't* advise that one, doctor," With a scowl over my face to set my words in stone. He only nodded and went out the door, closing it once he'd exited.

I refused to turn on the tv, considering that it had nearly been twenty-four hours since I'd apparently been admitted. My thoughts turn backwards and ran through what had happened the night before. Zac must have come shortly after I'd blacked out, or else he probably would have been too late. My heart collapsed as I thought of what his reaction must have been. My emotions volleyed between guilt and anger. Angry because he was what pushed me to my overdose. Guilty because I'd still give anything to never let him be hurt.

My brain racked until the time when an orderly came in to tell me that I needed to get ready to leave. He left again and a nurse entered to remove the IV and direct me to a closet where a set of my clothes sat on a shelf. My duffle bag was located below, packed with at least four other complete outfits as well as extra boxers, socks, toiletries and cigarettes. Isaac had to have been the one to pack it, because Zac would have forgotten something basic like boxers or my toothbrush; My mother would have packed my entire wardrobe, extra toothbrushes, shampoo to last a sorority house for months and of course, a first aid kit.

I opted for sitting in a recliner, fully dress with my bag at my feet when departure time was nearing. It seemed to take forever, but a nurse eventually came in for me to sign my discharge papers and with her she toted a wheelchair. I leered at the mechanism as I signed and the nurse, a thick bodied but friendly middle aged woman said, "All right, hop in"

"You're kidding me, right?" I asked with a laugh.

"Sorry sir, but its policy"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not getting in that thing. I'm completely capable of walking out of here on my own two feet," I told her stubbornly.

So started an argument between me, three nurses, two doctors, half a dozen orderlies and my parents. Needless to say, I lost. I found myself being wheeled from the building and even with the words "No comment," the press must have used the image of my incapacitation to spice up their stories.

When we arrived at the JFK terminal, I begged for Dramamine to ease the sickness that would come with the flight, but it was an order that I not be allowed any drug unless prescribed after my admission into the clinic. So instead all of the five other passengers in the private jet had to suffer through my getting sick. The plane landed only after too long of a wait and I was escorted to the place I didn't need to be. Not even glancing at the name as we drove up, I looked on at the three large, looming buildings ahead. I stepped out, happy to be walking, but not anymore comforted by the bland cream walls and static atmosphere that awaited me beyond a thick, metal door.

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## Chapter Twelve

Once all the paperwork was signed and complete, I was to wait for one of the center's doctors to come out, give me the tour and an evaluation. My parents were there with me, but they might as well have not, because they sat across the lobby from me. My mother looked at me once, but tears sprung forward and her brows fell into a glare. I decided it would be best to look away soon after.

It seemed to take an eon of looking at my feet and the slate blue carpeting before the doctor emerged and called my name to wrangle my attention. I looked to see my parents now by the doorway greeting him. You could tell that they'd already come prior to this trip and met the man. They were slightly more casual than they'd be with a complete stranger. Plus, they left after a short, hushed conversation.

Once they had left, he looked to me again and gave a warm smile from beneath a groomed, brown mustache that was connected to an equally chic goatee, "Taylor," He greeted in a tone that matched his overall disposition, "I'm doctor Jeff McKinley. You can just call me Jeff or Dr. J, as you'll see many of the other patients here do as well," Unlike my own doctor in the city, he talked directly to me, not a clipboard or portfolio, though he did keep a clipboard loosely at his side.

I stood and shook the hand he offered me after the greeting, "Nice to meet you," I told him, feigning a bright attitude.

He almost laughed as we parted, "You don't have to be fake or formal here. Be happy if you *are* happy. I can tell that this is probably the last place you want to be, as it is for the other two hundred young men in this ward"

"You have no idea," I muttered.

"See? Much better than being fake," He smiled again, "Now, if you'll come with me I'll show you to your room and the around to a few places that you'll probably be a lot," We went through the lobby and down a long corridor. He paused a moment at a wide room containing a few sofas and chairs, a few tables and a large television, "Since we're passing it now anyway: This is basically a common room," It was empty, "Any of the residents in this hall can use it anytime between wake up and lights out, which are eight and eleven respectively," I cocked my brow a little, "Its actually quite a popular place, but this is lunch hour," As he said this I nodded my understanding and continued moving through the room that spanned at least fifteen feet on either side of us. Back into a thinner hallway we went, passing doors

upon doors on both sides, "These are the residents' rooms"

I looked up to notice that this was not a long hallway, and it ended after only about thirty doors, "Call me completely insane, no pun intended," I smiled a little, "But unless there are mass dormitories behind the doors we see here, it doesn't fit that there are two hundred people here"

He chuckled a bit, "There are two hundred people in the ward, but there are only up to 75 people in this hall at its worst"

"Ookay," I was no less confused as we paused at a door near the end.

He opened the door to bear a normal dormitory-style room: Two twin beds on either side, a dresser and a closet for each bed. It was an empty room, no linens, no sign of inhabitancy whatsoever, "Because of your circumstances, we'll try to provide you with no roommate unless necessary"

"My circumstances?"

"Being a celebrity," He corrected.

It was more uncomfortable for him to say it than I could ever feel and I wave it off as I chose the bed on the right, "I shared a room with both of my brothers for years, even after we got famous," I told him, throwing my bag on the mattress, "So its no big deal to have a roommate . . . in fact, I hate being alone," I admitted as I put some of my things away. Once I had a few things tucked into the drawer, I looked back at him, "Now, explain this whole ward/hall thing to me"

He leaned against the other dresser, putting the board down and began, "Well, there are different halls in this whole complex. There are three wards. The first two are the young men's and women's, each housing people anywhere between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. The last is the adult ward, which carries the older residents and is not separated by gender because it only contains about one hundred and fifty to two hundred people at its max and most of them have illnesses that make it impossible to function correctly"

"Ookay, now what's the difference between the halls here?" I asked, now finished with my clothing and sitting on the bare bed.

"The hall that you're in houses patients that are fully functional and here for rehabilitative purposes: the self-injurers, eating disorders, suicide attempts," His eyes looked deep when he said the last one, "The second hall is the home of the fully functional, but permanently disabled: the deeply autistic and schizophrenic mostly," He drew in a breath, "The last is home to those with more serious conditions like severe psychopathy and sociopathy, as well as those with severe cerebral palsy, Down's Syndrome, things of that nature. It's the people who need constant medical supervision," He finished with, "Does that help clear your confusion?" And I nodded, "All right, well let's continue the tour, shall we?" He smiled again and we made our way back through the hallway. We passed the huge room again and it was filled with at least two dozen people, some watching a movie, a few playing cards and others doing various things.

"As you can see, people get to interact with others easily here, only this is not a co-ed place. You won't see women here, unless they are staff," He pointed out as we passed the lobby and reception, and went through a set of heavy doors. He quickly gestured to the left, "In that room is the showers, sinks, what have you. The lavatories are connected to both the shower room and common room," I had noticed a door in the other room, but didn't speak of it, "Using the restroom must be accompanied by a member of the staff, of which there are three male supervisors in the common room at all times that residents are out. Four are present in the shower room between eight and eleven, both morning and night, which are the times permitted to shower or otherwise freshen up. Two stay just outside of the shower and two stand near the sinks"

"Okay," I nodded, feeling as if I needed to say something.

"Shaving will be something much different here. It's the same for everyone, whether one is prone to cutting or not," He began, "All razors, shavers, clippers . . . anything used for personal hygiene of that sort is kept in a locker in that bathroom. There are several compartments in it, one of which will be labeled as yours," My facial expression must have screamed that there was a bag of razors in my possessions, "A staff member is preparing your room with linens as we speak. They are also checking of that nature, or thing that are otherwise unsuitable"

"Like what?"

"Drugs, alcohol, pills or glass containers"

"Oh," I said, "Yeah, my brother packed my bag, so I'm doubting there's anything like that in my stuff . . . other than a pack of razors," For some reason I felt like a criminal admitting that I had razors here.

"That's fine. They will be taken and placed in the locker. No harm done," His smile reassured me and we continued through the hall, stopping briefly at a set of doors with windows, chicken-wire checkered, just like any other windows I'd seen in the whole place. I peered in to see a gymnasium, "On Wednesdays and Fridays after lunch the residents are given the option of coming to the gym. We provide the basketball court as well as several different and quality sports equipment, three weight sets and benches and a variety of weight and cardio machines"

"That's cool"

"We like them to stay active and not just sitting around watching movies or playing poker all day," We continued and more doors came on the left side, "This first one is the infirmary. Doctor Preston is here in the daytime to deal with injuries or illnesses that aren't emergency as well as just ordinary checkups," We moved on, "Storage rooms and supply closets are all that these two are," He pointed out the next two. We passed the only door on the right but I did first notice his name on it. Instead we went right through a heavy set of metal doors into what I correctly assumed to be the cafeteria, "This is the lunch room. We provide meals much like a regular school . . ."

"Uhhh . . .," I muttered, "I never went to a normal school . . ."

"Oh, well . . . it's a variety of foods each day . . . nothing really fancy, but its not gruel and grits either," He had a laugh in his tone, "All residents go through that door," He pointed to a more leftward one, "And they come around after getting want they want and come back out that one there," He said, pointing to the door next to it, "You'll notice staff accompanying some and that is because they don't or won't eat . . . Some came here like that, but some are just being stubborn"

"So I never want to not eat, eh?" I asked with a faux-mischievous grin.

"We understand if a person would rather not eat a meal, or very little of one. Some might not feel good, some may not be hungry then. Its no problem once in a very scattered while, but if it becomes habit or if a pattern develops, we begin to try correcting it or finding out the problem," He turned and I followed him back out, "Last stop," He said, unlocking the door to what I'd previously discovered to be his office.

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## Chapter Thirteen

He gestured for me to take a seat as he walked around his desk and sat in his chair. Once I'd sat down, he began, "Okay Taylor, I have here all the clinical facts of what happened to bring you here: an overdose of both cocaine and alcohol," He said not even glancing at the clipboard that was now on top of his desk, only tapping it with his hand, "My job is to find out why and try to fix it"

I sat back and shrugged, "I got upset so I went on a bender"

He held back a laugh, "That's quite apparent, but why were you upset?"

"That, I don't feel comfortable talking about," I told him in the most professional way possible as tears came to my eyes.

"Your parents told me that you recently had a divorce . . . "

"That's *not* the reason, I assure you. That was a mutual decision"

"And the estrangement of your children?" Now he was viewing the papers.

"I travel the world Doc . . . sometimes I don't see them for half a year, so its nothing new. We, my ex and I, decided that I would be with them when I could," This information was something he apparently understood.

"What was it then that set you off if it wasn't these two things?" He asked, purely interested and without sarcasm.

"I got in a fight with someone and said some things I shouldn't have," Vaguely I admitted.

"Your mother mentioned that you two had crossed blades recently . . . ," He looked to his paper only briefly, "But she failed to tell me why"

I sighed, "My dad was there then, wasn't he?" He nodded and another sigh escaped my lips, "She always calls at least one of us, me and my brothers I mean, a week since we're so far away . . . And this time was my lucky turn. She asked how things were and I told her that the divorce was done, and she got upset because she and my dad don't really believe in the word, or the idea of divorce," I pulled my legs up on the chair against me and wrapped my arms around my shins, "She tried, even though I told her it was final, to make me reconcile with Natalie"

"This is your ex-wife?"

"Yeah. My mom told me I should stay with her for the kids' sakes and I told her it'd be worse if we stayed together,"

"How?"

"Because right before the divorce we were always bickering, unless we weren't anywhere near each other. She told me to put it aside and I told her it wouldn't happen . . . and how when the kids got older they'd probably go tell their little friends what it was like at home and how that would go over with those kids and their parents . . .

"Again she told me to put aside our differences and I asked her how I or Nat would explain to our kids, even if we kept the peace, why mom and dad slept in different rooms," I fidgeted a bit, feeling my cigarettes in my back pocket and then eyeing the empty, but noticeably used, ashtray right in front of me, "Can I smoke in here?"

"Oh, sure . . . but other than here and your room . . . ," He didn't need to finish his warning as I nodded while digging in the lighter from my pocket. I could have died in relief after the first hit I took once I lit the cigarette, "Better?" He asked and again I nodded, taking a few more puffs from the stick, "Okay then, please, go on"

I had to think a moment about where I'd finished, "Oh, okay . . . How were we gonna explain the separate rooms," He nodded as I said that, "Well, I moved on that point to how we'd explain if Nat would bring a date home, and I'm sure you can just imagine my mom . . . she did not like that idea and asked why there would be guys coming over . . . ," My voice trailed off as I flicked an ash, "And I flat out told her that I wasn't gonna be having sex with the girl, but at the same time wouldn't be the asshole to tell her she couldn't have someone else . . .

" 'Why?' She asked. Why couldn't I do my thing as a husband? I told her it was because one, we weren't married any longer; and two, because I didn't find her in any way attractive anymore," I pulled out my wallet and showed him the family portrait from it, "That's her," I pointed out, "So you can just guess that my mom tried to call my bluff. Its true though and I told her that things just changed . . . she didn't believe that and challenged me to give her one good reason why we'd changed so much to even think of divorce, so I did," I tried beating around the bush.

But he wouldn't have it, "What did you say?" He asked.

I sighed. I really didn't want to say it, but I figured it to be better than the real reason I was in that chair, "Please keep in mind that I'd been fighting with her on the issue ever since I filed for the divorce, but I didn't pull out the ace until then"

"Okay," He said simply, fingers at his chin.

"I told her it was because I didn't . . . ," I stuttered before taking a deep swallow, "Because I'm gay"

"Well, that would change things," His eyes were wide, brows lifted like that was the last thing he had expected to come out of my mouth, "If you don't like women, why were you married to one?"

"Okay, I'm not one-hundred percent gay. Very few women will trip my trigger though. Natalie had been one of them, but she faded off my radar just like ever other girl I'd ever dated. On the other hand, any guy I'd dated would still probably turn my head . . . but I tried being normal"

"Normal is vastly overrated, Taylor," He smiled a little, clasping his hands atop the desk, "Normal is what feels right to you, within certain boundaries of course"

"That's what I realized . . . ," Which was a half-truth, "So I refused to live in a lie anymore"

"And how did your mother take this news?"

"She denied it; Said I was lying to get out of the discussion. See, she's not one to suffer gays. Actually, she still believes that they all belong in institutions, which is probably why she agreed to send me here," I thought out loud, "Anyway, she does not like gay people, but she won't speak it aloud to any of them. She avoids them though, whenever she can. I really didn't ever want to come out to her, and if I did, I really didn't want it to be like that, but she brought me to the point that I shouted it and put it right in her face. I asked her if that was a good enough reason; she said no, and I told her that someday she'd have to face it that her son's a fag, and that if I was going to hell for something I can't help, then she's going too for being spiteful and turning her back on her own flesh and blood," I sighed, now snuffing the cigarette after lighting another with the end, "Then I hung up"

"And when did this happen?"

"Three days before I overdosed"

"Did you just let it fester then? Waiting that long?" He asked, writing madly as he spoke.

"No, actually that was just the tip of the iceberg," I admitted slowly.

"Then what else pushed you to this?" He asked confusedly, having stopped writing.

"I . . . ," I stuttered a bit, trying to find a way to word it, "I had sex with someone that I shouldn't have. Someone I'd fantasized about for quite some time . . . a close friend . . . ," Saying it was Zac would have been my own personal death by embarrassment, "The first male lover I'd had in over four years. He left the next morning before I woke up . . . it was the night before my mom called that it'd happened," Tears welled in my eyes at the memory, "I didn't realize that he actually took off until after, long after the fight with my mom," A tear fell now, followed by several others, "I tried calling so many times until I found him the day that I overdosed . . . he . . . he said that it couldn't ever happen again; That it was a mistake," I sighed, snuffing out my second cigarette, "Then I got mad and told him he could hide away his feelings all he wanted, but I wouldn't be there when he couldn't do it anymore . . . Then I left and got the stuff, and OD'ed"

He offered a tissue once I finished, "That all would definitely explain why . . . ," He told me, "Now we just gotta work on fixing everything," He stood and went to a supply closet, "I'll tell you now that you are here for at least thirty days. Its policy. You'll come to see me on Tuesdays and Fridays at about four, and we'll talk a bit more," He headed back with a plain, black, hard-bound book, "Right now, I'm taking you off of the 'suicidal' list. Its apparent that you didn't intentionally try to kill yourself, but you are unstable, and that could have caused your death. For this I'm classifying you at the moment as being severely depressed, and also mark that this causes you to unconsciously harm yourself. It's a step higher than suicidal, so I'm glad we got you here now"

"At least you don't think I tried to kill myself," I muttered, "I just wanted it all to stop. I wanted numbness"

"I know, but there really *are* other ways to relieve this pent up emotion that don't including hurting yourself or even drugs," He hand the book to me now, "Write in this. Write how you feel, about anything really. It will help me understand you as not only a patient, but a person. Don't hold back. Because you are an adult no one will be able to see this except for you and me, ever. Draw even, or write songs," He smiled, "We'll work on everything more come Friday. You don't have to come in tomorrow. I'd rather you too the next few days to just get settled," He looked at his watch, "Well, its only three now. Come on, I'll introduce you to everyone out there"

We made our way out and first he introduced me to the nurses at the reception desk. They were all friendly enough and took away my fear of the bun donning, pursed-lip witches I'd envisioned, "Tabby, could you get me one of my script pads?" He asked a tall red-head. She smiled and retrieved a pad from the back of the station, "I'm going to prescribe you Effexor. Its an anti-depressant that should level you out a bit. We'll begin a week of seventy-five milligrams and after that you will switch to one hundred and fifty milligrams," He told me as he scribbled on two sheets, "Tabby, get this filled for me tomorrow"

Our next stop was the common room, "These will be the people you see most," He told me before announcing, "Everyone!" They all turned to look my way and I felt a blush run over me, "This is our new guy, Taylor. Make him feel a bit welcome," A chorus of waves and greeting erupted and the three staff members came over, on from a table filled with card players, "Taylor, these three are Scott, Brad, and Jon," He told me, pointing to each one.

Jon was short and a little chubby. He was the man you saw about using the bathroom. His head was cut into a close-fade and your could see the end of a tattoo peaking from the sleeve of his t-shirt. Despite



the kind demeanor he gave to me and those around him, you could tell he was not one to be toyed with.

Brad had long, sandy brown hair tied back and stood just a few inches below me. He had an overall nice disposition that made me immediately think of him as being a peacemaker. Other than a silver hoop in his ear, he seemed to be one of the All-American types in his dark blue Dickies and cream polo shirt.

Scott had a head full of slick and perfected black hair, and he'd been the one playing cards. He seemed to be the pseudo-rebel type with a silver hoop in his eyebrow and both ears pierced three times. A small collection of necklaces shone brightly over his tight black dress shirt, and under the cuffs I saw a flash of bracelets as I shook his hand. It was all silver, save for a ring I recognized as being white gold on his left, middle finger. He was a bit taller than me and quiet, but polite.

After he introduced us, the doctor gave his goodbyes for the evening and I was left with the three men. Scott invited me over to the table and the other two resumed their places. I accepted and took a seat beside him. He was with two others: A boy with spiked bleach blond hair and the other a mop of dark red. The blond introduced himself as Kane, and the red-head was Tommy.

"You know how to play Cinch?" Scott asked.

"Yeah, I actually play it a lot," I answered quietly, though I was elated that it was a game that I knew.

"Good, then you can help me teach these numb-nuts," He grinned. I sat across from Tommy and we because to play; Tommy on my team, Kane on Scott's.

Once the other two got the hang of it, Tommy spoke up, "We heard about what happened"

"Huh?" I asked, the statement taking me back a bit.

"We heard the report on MTV," He said, "I figured you'd have stayed in New York if you got put anywhere"

"I didn't want to go *anywhere*," I muttered solemnly.

"No one does," Kane muttered.

The rest of the game was littered with idle, small talk. By the time that "lights out" came, I felt a little more comfortable. Granted, I didn't like being there, but meeting people was my stepping stool to making the visit at least a bit bearable.

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Chapter Fourteen

Over a week had passed since I'd been admitted and I felt better; not just about being there, but felt better in general. Being away from everything tore down my stress. It seemed that it was more a sane world to me there, in a ward full of those who the world deems 'troubled', 'insane'. At any rate, I had Isaac FedEx me down more clothes, as five outfits didn't last me long, and laundry service was only on Sundays. I also had him send me a carton of cigarettes to last me a while, at least after the last half a carton ran out.

My first visit to Doctor Jeff's lifted a lot of the weight off of my chest, at least regarding my emotions after the fight I'd had with Zac. The second visit came Friday. The medication given to me had started to kick in, and it helped my stress levels to stay down while I settled in. That was the central topic of that hour. He asked how I was feeling, if I'd gotten sick, how I slept, things of that nature. He also asked how I was coping there. I'd actually made about a dozen friends, despite my reputation and status, including of course, the two I'd met my first day.

Tuesday came and I was walking into his office, still beet red because a boy named Toby tipped off a table chair even after Jon warned that sitting atop the back of it was a bad idea. Save for a bump on his head and a sore back, he was fine, "What did you find so funny?" Dr. Jeff asked, holding a chuckle back himself as I stumbled in, breath ragged and a smile plastered to my face.

"Toby finally fell off of the chair," I gasped out.

"Ah . . . I was hoping he would someday," He smiled as I sat down, "So apparently you're still in a good mood?" I nodded, "Well," He let out a heavy breath with that word.

"Uh-oh . . . what's 'Well'?" I asked imitating him.

"I had your mother come in yesterday," He admitted, "I talked to her about the fight you had with her and tried to get her thoughts on it"

"That probably went well," Was my sarcastic reply.

"It was quite . . . colorful," He breathed out in a huff, pulling a tape recorder, "You listen to it . . . I don't usually tape anyone but patients, but from what you told me, I figured to do it so that maybe you would be able to hear," He told me as he pressed play. After telling her that she was being recorded, I heard through the speaker as he asked, "Why do you think he would say something like that if it weren't true?"

"I told you, to try to get me to give up. He does things to shock people out of things. He went out and got his ear pierced without permission at age 15, just to keep us from yelling at him for a date he'd gone on; he had sex many times before he got married, and told us so when right after we learned that Natalie was pregnant and that they were to marry. Telling people he's gay is just another attention getting shock to get them away from the real issue at hand"

I started to speak but was cut off with a quick, "Wait"

"I'm betting any money that this little stunt is just the same, I bet," She paused, "My son is *not* gay. He's doing it for attention and to try to get himself out of something he got himself into"

"That bitch," I cursed under my breath.

"He told me that the night . . . the night he had his accident he'd gotten in a fight with a lover of his . . . a male lover," The doctor's voice came out clear.

"He-is-not-gay!" She shouted, "He was filming a music video that day. He probably just made it up to make the story seem more realistic to you"

"Mrs. Hanson, he gave reason of what the fight was about and it was something that happened days before, even before the fight you had with him. I, as a professional, have no doubt in my mind . . . "

"He's not gay!" She repeated in an even louder tone, "I do not reproduce gay children. I'm a church-going woman, and so is my entire family. He *knows* that it is a sin to lie with another man as he would a woman . . . "

"Being a homosexual is not your fault, or your husband's, or your religion's. Its not because of anything either of you did, nor is it his. Its how you're born, its an inclination given at birth"

"God wouldn't make a child gay," With her tone I could tell she was clenching her teeth.

"I don't know why he is gay, but it is who he is, whether you would believe it or not, and far be it from you to be so against something that is also a part of yourself. He needs his family right now," He paused a moment, "And is it not also a sin to have such angst against anyone? Especially one you're related to?"

"Are you a Christian, Dr. McKinley?"

"Yes I am"

"Then how can you go and condone his behavior, even support this vile thing?", She spat.

"Because I'm also aware that its much more important to love others as they are, instead of condemning them," Her head clicked my tongue and because to say something just as Dr. Jeff shut off the tape recorder.

"Why did you stop it?" I asked with my brows knit.

He stuttered a bit before saying, "She left after that . . ."

"She said something else and I want to hear it," I demanded and he reluctantly listened, rewinding it a

little first.

"My son is not gay, and if he would be, he'd not longer be my child," I could hear her shuffling, "Good day, Doctor"

Tears welled in my eyes, "She'll never change . . . her view is all she sees," I sniffled back my tears, "I didn't do all of this just for attention, and if I would have, I'd still deserve to be here!"

"Its okay Taylor, I believe you," Dr. Jeff told me soothingly and nodded before lighting a cigarette.

As I calmed with every inhale, I relaxed and spoke, "I'm not going to let her stop me from getting better. If she wants to disown me, fine. My brothers and friends are still there for me," I told him, wiping away the last of my tears, "Hell, Zac knew I was gay back when I was like, thirteen . . . he introduced me to my first boyfriend," Again it was hard for me to keep my wits as I mentioned him, "And he *knew* that more than a friendship would come of it!"

Dr. Jeff looked at his watch, "Time's almost up. I'm sorry today wasn't as great a visit as normal"

"No, its fine. It makes me feel good to know that there are people I hardly know backing me up in being who I am," I gave a genuine smile even through my ruddy cheeks and puffy eyes.

"That's good. Just remember that it is who you are and it is good to be who you are," He patted my shoulder as we went to the door, "I'll see you again on Friday and I'll check that book of yours"

"Got it," I smiled and made my way out the door. It wasn't making me feel good to know my mother's full un-sugar-coated view of me, but it was good to know that basically a stranger supported me. Of course, he was paid to help me, but his fervor and interest were sincere. I made my way back into the common room and took a free seat next to Mikey as a movie began on Cinemax, *And free digital cable for all!* I thought with a smile, "What's on?", I asked him.

"Devil's Advocate"

"Hmm . . . , " I pondered, "Never seen it . . . it's the one with Keanu Reeves and Al Pacino, right?"

"Yeah," He smiled, "Its an awesome flick"

I sat, watching until a scene sparked my interest and made me go over and ask a nurse for paper and a pen. When I received it, I simply wrote:

*'Behold, I send you out as sheep amidst the wolves'  
But I will thrive because apparently I'm really a wolf, eh **mom**?*

Once I scribbled that out, I signed my name. Then came the request for an envelope which I addressed to her and asked it to be sent out I felt mean, but it made me feel better, and I began my walk back to

finish watching the film.

Halfway back, I heard a commotion coming through the doors behind me. Two men grunted as they carried a tall, slender boy in. I couldn't see his face, but I could see the cuts on his arms and a shaggy blur of raven black hair. I recognized the voice as well as he screamed, "Get the fuck off-a me or I'm going to fuck you both up!"

It was Skylar's voice.

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## Chapter Fifteen

My head felt like it was miles above me, spinning and I had to lean against the wall for support. As he writhed, I noticed a pair of shining cuffs restraining his wrists at the small of his lower back. I imagined from his fighting, those instruments only added to his injuries. I crept from the scene as Cori, one of the nurses, emerged from the station. In her hand she held a full syringe and shot it into his upper arm. It was then that I saw his face, cringing and tear streaked, and I had to turn around. As I got back to the room I was determined to keep my cool, especially after seeing a sea full of curious faces.

"Well?" Asked Tommy.

"What?" I asked as if it were nothing.

"What did the cat drag in?" Toby asked as though it was common knowledge.

"A cutter," I answered simply and returned to where I was sitting before. It was enough information to satiate them and that made me happy.

After a few more hours passed, everyone got antsy. Even I was wondering, so I went to the table Scott was at when he asked if anyone wanted to play cards. Apparently he wanted to keep at least some of us occupied. This idea was set in steel when he announced that he was going to teach us pinochle. His idea worked, considering it was a moderately difficult game to learn. It took nearly an hour to get me and the other four, who included Tommy and Kane, as well as Richie and Pat (two others I'd befriended the week before), used to the rules and play down enough to start a real game.

"Wonder why its taking so long?" Asked Pat, a half-black, half-Indian seventeen year old. I learned that he'd been in and out of group homes since he was five and had been admitted for anorexia after his latest foster mother complained that he ate more than she could afford.

"They stuck him with something," I blurted out.

"A needle?" Scott asked and I nodded, "Probably a light sedative . . . He was making a lot of noise on the way in," He pointed out, "Just wait it out. You know Dr. J will bring him out before dinner"

I began thinking that I must have been a boring admission to these guys, because while they seemed interested in Skylar's entry, it seemed as though it was just another day, another person. Though I wondered what they thought, or if they even realized I was there at first. I decided to not pose the question and that it would be a better idea to just concentrate on my hand.

At nearly six I felt Tommy tap me on the shoulder. I looked at him, but he was looking behind himself, at the hallway. There stood Dr. Jeff and the newest addition to the 'not-quite sane, but not completely insane' family. He didn't look like he'd been drugged, but he wasn't clawing toward the exit either. Hair fall past his eyes, nearly covering them completely, but it didn't matter anyway because his face tilted downward, as did his eyes.

"Well its good to know that I've no need to catch your attention today," Dr. Jeff laughed a little as we all looked on sheepishly because of our nosing around, "Anyway, this is Skylar," And he received the same greetings that I had, but still refused to look up. He was quiet and frank to the staff as they talked to him.

After the doctor left, Scott tried to coax him over, but he declined, "I just want to go to my room . . . thanks," In a mutter that I hardly caught.

Scott came back over to the table after Skylar departed, "He'll be fun," He told us sarcastically.

"I'll say," Muttered Richie, a plump kid with a short mop of bland brown hair and a face full of similarly colored freckles.

"He's just shy," I told them without thought.

"No, he's just a punk that needs to get his head out of his ass," Tommy cracked.

"How would you know?" I shot back at him, a bit of anger tinging my words.

"Cuz that's how *he* acted when he was brought here," Piped Scott.

"I don't think that's his problem," I told them, casting my eyes downward.

"What makes you Mr. Know-It-All?" Challenged Ritchie in a cocky tone.

"Cuz I know him," I finally announced in a low voice, shutting the traps of everyone around me, "He's never liked being around a bunch of people he doesn't know"

"Really? When d'ya meet him?" Asked Pat in an interested tone. Pat had a little more than a slight attraction to guys, I could tell just from being around him. He never said anything about it though, and I don't think he ever would.

"A long time ago," I told him, "My brother Zac was friends with him," I decided to keep it simple, "We

were friends until I was like seventeen or eighteen," I added a minute or so later. Of course I kept to myself that we dated until that point, and whereas it ended with a bad falling out because of my idiocy and desire to maintain a "normal" and heterosexual lifestyle. In other words, it was when I'd met Natalie. Of course I ended up with flings and short boyfriends while Natalie and I dated, but it ended completely when we married.

My answers were apparently enough to feed their curiosity and we resumed our game. Once it ended, Scott suggested poked, but I declined and rose from my place. I found myself walking the hallway where the rooms were, trying to act casual and not rouse Jon's suspicions, who was standing just outside the corridor.

I heard shuffling from the door across from my own. Inside was Skylar, back to me and digging through a brown leather suitcase, all the while muttering obscenities under his breath. I knocked lightly and without turning or stopping his search he declared, "Go the fuck away"

"Pushing *me* away would make *you* a hypocrite," I told him bravely.

In a flash he was frozen. It took a few minutes before he slowly turned, probably hoping that what he heard wasn't real. When he saw that it was, his eyes turned to slits. Even before I could see them again, they were closed to the point that even with glasses on, I couldn't. How I wished that I could though. Time and again people would compliment my eyes and how blue they were. They were bleak compared to Skylar's. Dark hair, thick lashes and alabaster skin set them off and made them appear to be a shade that shamed the clearest, deepest oceans I've ever seen.

"Fuck you," He spat, breaking me of my thoughts, "What the fuck are *you* doing here?"

"Cuz I snorted a quarter of coke, chased it with a fifth of vodka and went night-night," I told him smartly while walking in. I looked him over and gestured to his gashed arms, "What's up with that?"

"None of your business," He spat, veering his eyes to his suitcase. With a defeated sigh, his search hopeless apparently, he lifted it from his bed and tossed it to the floor, plopping down in its place. As he landed, some of his shirt rumbled up to show just a peek of his stomach, "So, what happened?" He asked, producing a pack of Marlboros from his pocket and lit one, "Wifey get pissed? Get baby shit on your favorite shoes?" His spiteful tone tipped the scales with, "What stupid thing went off in your pristine life to make you do such a stupid fucking thing?"

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## Chapter Sixteen

My anger was rising with his words. Of course, I wasn't going to feign complete innocence and ignorance, because I expected a less-than-blissful reunion, but the last thing he said was completely uncalled for, "First off," I said while closing the door as quietly as I could, "You know just as well as I do that my life isn't perfect"

"That's why you left, wasn't it? To have your perfect life, your normal life," He shot back at me.

"Shut the fuck up and let me finish," I hissed, breaking most of the gap between us and pointing a finger at him, "If you can be a bitch to me, you better bet I'll do the same to you," I warned and his wide eyes got the hint (I hadn't done much yelling while I'd been with him, nor him to me), "Now . . .," I continued in a lighter, but still sour, tone, "No, my life wasn't perfect. Ever. You're right though, I wanted normal. I wanted a wife and two-point-five kids and whatever . . .," I sighed, waving my hand, "But it didn't work. Normal in an average straight man's life wasn't perfect for me . . ."

"I coulda told you that," He muttered.

"Shut up," I spat through clenched teeth, "Nat and I didn't work," I looked down, "She and the kids moved back to Georgia and the divorce wrapped up about two weeks ago"

"That why you're here?" He supposed with a sneer and cocked a brow.

"No," I spat, "I could give a shit less where she is or who she's with. I filed for the divorce," My information drew him back a bit, "Now . . . If you wanna know why I'm here, I'll tell you. But first, you gotta drop that whole asshole act right now. Deal?"

"His brow cocked again, "I could probably just look in the tabloids," He sighed, rolling his eyes and snuffing his cigarette.

"Nope. Sure, there's probably a bazillion articles saying that I'm locked up for my out-of-nowhere drug binge . . . but other than me and Dr. Jeff, no one knows anything else"

"Why would you wanna tell me?"

"To shut you the fuck up about my 'perfect' life"

For minutes on end we held semi-cold stares. It was at that time that I realized I could really both hate and love something. His eyes were no less stunning than when we were teenagers, but now they served a different person than devastating those who received his gaze. Now they were used as a weapon. I could feel my hard facade breaking down, and soon after, I just wanted to throw my hands up and surrender.

What *was* I doing there anyhow? Other than stirring up old skeletons, of course. Oh, yes, I was attempting to be a peacemaker. Too bad I'm terrible at that. Perhaps I should spend more time with my abnormally Zen, youngest sister Zoe.

Right when I was going to back out of his room with my tail between my legs, his face relaxed as well as his body and he took back his laying position. He rubbed his eyes with his palms and sighed, "Fine, I'm sorry, but it just hurt a little there still, ya know?"



"I've told you that I'm sorry. I've called and tried to talk to you, but you had people giving excuses for you," I told him, "How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Til you mean it"

Again my features became cold, "I do mean it, or else I wouldn't even bother saying it, or coming in here to try to talk to you"

He met my stare again for a moment before saying, "I guess I'll believe you," His eyes tore from mine and skated around the room, "Besides, I wanna hear this little story"

"You can't go and blab about this," I told him and as a blush ran up my face, I corrected myself, "I don't think you'd want to go blabbing this"

"Scout's honor," He said along with the hand gestures to match.

"You weren't ever a scout," I declared with a crooked grin.

"So? Same idea," He shrugged, "Okay, here . . . on my life I won't say a word"

My brow cocked as I looked up and down his arms, "Doesn't look like that means too much"

Automatically his hands went to his forearms, covering them, "I don't do it cuz I wanna die. I do it for different reasons," He waved it off, "Anyway, I swear on whatever terms that I won't say a word"

I stood a moment, studying his face then said, "All right," and proceeded to tell him first of the fight with my mother, including my coming out to her in detail. This also spanned the conversation that the doctor had with her and, "She pretty much disowned me," With a shrug.

"There is no way that you said that to your mom. You've been her goddamn lapdog since I've known you," He scoffed a bit in denial.

"Yeah, well that whole good-boy thing ended that day," I told him, "Everything was done and she's still trying to make me stay with Nat," I shook my head, "So I just snapped"

"*That's* why you're here?" He asked with a cocked brow.

"No," I stated with a stone expression, "But I'll tell you as soon as you tell me why you're here . . . and don't spare anything"

"How do I know that anything you have to tell me is worth wasting my time?" He challenged.

With my elbows on my knees I replied, "Have I ever given reason to even want to, no, even think of

binging on any drug?" With a shake of the head from him, I continued, "Well then, you know some of the shit, a lot of the shit I've been through and none of it has caused any sort of reaction like this . . . so yeah, I think you'd be surprised at what I have to say"

He sat on the idea a moment before declaring, "Fine," with a long, drawn-out sigh, "It started after you left. It was a . . . a way to drown out how I felt inside. Then David," He referenced the uncle he lived with, "Found out about me and kicked me out. I lived with a guy for a while and it was all right I guess. I'd cut if we fought, or lost my job. It was my escape," He looked down, "Then I started getting a tolerance to it and cut deeper and deeper," I saw a trace of a tear fall, "I found out that he'd been cheating on me for months, and when I asked him about it, he acted like I didn't mean anything, so I ran off. Cops found me at the park around two in the morning," He scratched his head, "At least that's what they told me when I woke up," He clapped his hands together, "They all think I'm a nut job so I got to go on a nice car ride here"

"Nice," I muttered with a smirk.

"Yeah . . .," He sighed before perking up, "So, what's your story?"

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## Chapter Seventeen

I sighed deeply before telling him about my trip to Lynnette's, doing my first lines of coke and the dreams I'd had. My dreams were told just as I'd originally told her, no name. Continuing still without a name, I told him about the events that had happened once Zac had come over and after we'd left together, "I woke up alone around ten, went downstairs and passed out to music. I figured that he had just gone out to get breakfast, but then my mother called and we fought. Then I saw the time. It was seven at night, and still no sign of him, so I tried his cell phone. No answer. I tried again and again until sun-up with the same result. I fell apart in the shower that morning and basically crawled to my room. I woke up a full day later to Ike pounding on the door, looking for me because my phone had no ringer turned on, and I was dead asleep. He confronted me about the fight with my mother, and I flat out told him the entire story . . . "

I looked to him with a slight grin, "He didn't believe me until I challenged him with what happened when he'd come in on you and me before," A blush ran up my face, "Anyway, he yelled at me for letting him be the last to know and look like an ass in the process, but eventually reminded me about the video we were to shoot in the next few days, and asked if I'd seen Zac," Every ounce of willpower I had went into not being phased, "And how it was bullshit of him to run off when we had something so important to do in just days . . . "

"Anyway . . .," I waved it off before I could think much of Zac, "The day of the shoot came and I saw *him*. It wasn't until the end of the day that I managed to pull him away"

"So its someone in your little crew?" He asked with a mischievous smile.

I nodded solemnly, "And when I asked him what the hell was up, he told me that it was all a mistake, in a few more words of course, and that he didn't even want to talk about it. I pretty much felt like you did when I had left . . . but I didn't cut myself . . . I just wanted to be numb, so I went back to Lynni's got another two eightballs and went back to my house and helped myself to what was left of the coke that had been hidden away, the weed, and a fifth of vodka," I scowled at the memory, "I woke up the next day and my parents and brothers decided I was enough of a basket case to be sent here"

"And why is that so bad that I wouldn't want to go blabbing it?" Asked Skylar, sitting up and lighting another cigarette.

I stuttered a moment, "Because I was going to tell you who he was, but I . . . I can't"

"And why not?"

"Because I know that one or two things will come out of it," I looked up at him with tears stinging my eyes, "One is that you'll hate me and never want to even think of me again . . . and the other is that you will go blabbing it, because I'm not even sure I can trust you anymore"

"I haven't told the world that you're gay have I?" He challenged with a semi-hard glare.

"This isn't even nearly on the same plane," I whispered.

Out of nowhere he sighed and relaxed. I looked up at him and saw no cynicism, no hate, no anger, "Taylor, there is nothing in this world that could make me actually hate you"

"Leaving you for Natalie sure seemed to do wonders though," I laughed morbidly.

"No, that just hurt . . . a lot"

"Fine then, you'd think that I'm beyond messed up and need locked away from the entire world for the rest of my life"

He cocked his brow, "I never believed you to be quite normal in the first place"

"Exactly"

"But I don't think that you need locked up for it," He added.

"Oh, but this would most definitely change your mind"

"Tay, I watched you streak through our entire neighborhood in broad daylight . . . "

"This is worse"

"Try me"

Tears came to my eyes again, "I can't," Was all I could choke out in a whisper. After a moment I added in an even lower tone, "He was right to tell me it was a mistake. It was. We *shouldn't* have even imagined doing it, much less make it a reality"

"Just tell me . . . ," He told me with a caring, but slightly exasperated sigh.

"Who . . . who was missing from my story. Who never gets left out of partying, but was completely absent except for just one mention? Who is probably the worst person in this world for me to fuck?" The blank stare on his face told me that he was completely ignorant of the concept, "Who got the two of us together?" With that statement his jaw dropped and eyes widened. I felt the tears fall down my face, "See? I told you so," I choked out and stood to leave.

Before I could take a full step his hand was clasping my wrist. My gaze jolted towards him and I tried to see beyond the watery haze from the tears. I could see nothing but a blur, but felt as he tugged my half numb body back down to sit and his warm hands guiding me at the shoulders to lie beside him. I couldn't help the sobs that escaped my throat or the flood of tears now soaking his shirt, but he seemed oblivious to it, resting his chin at my forehead and stroking his thumb over my shoulder.

To say what happened in entirety made me realize how right Zac was when he told me how much of a mistake it was. It made me feel filthy and littered, and with those thoughts came louder sobs and thicker tears. This also caused Skylar to merely hold onto me tighter and kiss my forehead. Barely did I take notice though, as my thoughts felt like mud in my brain, just coating it with thick, ugly reality.

Why did he keep hold of me? Why were his lips at my forehead? I felt like just tearing away and stealing to the bathroom. To scrub myself though, I knew wouldn't work. It was hopeless, and yet, even though it was so vile, he stayed at my side. I thought I could even hear bits and pieces of whispered words coming from him, but my cries were too loud to know if it had been reality or just my meek attempt at optimism.

"Taylor!" A shouting voice that was not Skylar's burst through my sadness. Then a pounding.

To my complete despair I felt him rise up away from me, *So now he leaves*, I thought, and with it came more tears. All of my strength seemed poured into turning over, and for a moment I wanted numbness again, but eternally. It faded as I saw Skylar talking to Jon. I only knew who it was because of the voice and sheer size of the man.

After only a short few words with Skylar, Jon left and the door was still wide open when Skylar returned. As he laid back down, now in front of me, he spoke, "I told him I knew you and that you were having a little bit of a hard time today," And kissed my temple before adding, "He doesn't care that we're in here, but the door has to stay open," He scrunched his nose a bit, "It's the rules," I nodded and laid my head on his upper arm, letting the other come around my torso. I felt a sob rush through me again, "Shh . . . relax," He whispered, kissing my forehead again. I gripped his waist and cried for a bit before falling asleep to the rhythm of his breathing and subtle coaxing words.

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## Chapter Eighteen

The sorry excuse for rest didn't last very long. Reluctantly I opened my eyes after having Skylar call my name and shake me for a good five minutes or more. Once I did, the reality of what I'd said sunk in again, but before the flood of tears had the chance to come again, he was helping me up by the wrists and saying that it was time for dinner. We chose an empty table and I ate silently, refusing to make eye contact with him. When I was half finished, he cleared his throat and it startled me enough to lift my head and look across at him.

A soft smile played over his lips, "I was hoping you'd look at me sometime today," He told me with a light laugh in his voice. After poking a few pieces of pasta with his fork, he stopped and began speaking again, "Why did it happen?" I shut my eyes tight and looked down again as if in such pain that would be more caused by a shotgun than just a question, "I don't hate you. I just want to know . . . why?"

I shrugged and looked up at him again through a teary film, "I don't know. It started over a year ago with stupid fucking dreams that just wouldn't quit. I thought it was just cuz I was antsy," I sighed heavily, "You weren't the last guy I was with. Even when I dated Natalie, I was getting bored, and had a few meaningless, two-week flings with guys on and off. It stopped when she and I got married . . . So I just figured that it was because I was fucking horny and he was the only really good looking guy around," I laughed a little, "So I went out and actually had one night stands with guys, fuck sessions basically," My mood turned again, "But it didn't stop. No matter how many people I screwed, or how much I screwed them, the dreams didn't stop. Then I filed for divorce, thinking that maybe having the freedom to have a relationship with a guy would help. She moved out, and I started going out with guys again. It still didn't help it. The dreams got worse. They were more vivid, more detailed, more X-rated," I let out a deep breath, "Then I got the call saying that the divorce had been finalized and that was the night I went to Lynnette's because it was also the night after a dream I'd had that just . . . sent me over the edge"

"Why did you tell this chick, Lynnette?"

"Cuz she's one of the most open-minded and liberal people I know, plus I was coked up," I told him in the most truthful manner that I could, "She actually only gave me some things to think about, but then Zac called, and I just said 'Fuck it' and you know the rest", I shoved a forkful of spaghetti in my mouth just to shut myself up for a minute, "It was just . . . I don't know. Maybe I was going insane just from being with someone I knew I shouldn't be, and thought that even Zac would be a better alternate . . ."

"Hey, I'd fuck him too," Skylar laughed a bit before taking a drink of his soda.

"That's not helping," I glared even with a slight smile coming through my tight frown.

"Maybe you were right, maybe Natalie did drive you crazy," He cackled a bit.

"I'm going to dump this plate over your head," I threatened.

His laughter faded a bit, but his face was still red when he spoke again, "What if it was just a sign that Natalie was so wrong for you, and you should have stayed with me, and since you knew you couldn't have me, you went for the closest thing your brain could process to me"

"Egotist?", I asked with a cocked brow, but fought a rush of energy sweep through me at the thought. We finished eating in silence again, but this time it wasn't nearly as tense as when we began. When the hour was up, we found ourselves filing out the doors, and I led him, regardless of his hesitation, to the common room.

We were one of the last out of the cafeteria, so most of the people were already settled in the room when we got there, "Well, they look like they're having fun by themselves, so let's just leave them be . . .", Said Skylar as we went into the room.

"Shut up," I told him with a laugh as I took hold of his wrist and led him toward the table where Scott, Pat, Tommy and Kane sat. I crept up behind Scott as he shuffled the deck of cards and when I was within reach, grabbed him by his shoulders, "This Skylar, is the most boring genius you will ever meet," I announced.

"Shit," Scott gasped after he looked back at me, "I'd kick your ass if I was allowed"

"All he does is play cards, eat and sleep, at least that I know of," I grinned as if I didn't hear him. Begrudgingly, Skylar took a seat between Scott and I and I looked across the table, "That," I pointed, "Is Kane. He's a mini-Scott, but he also watches MTV," I chuckled and looked over at Pat, "Pat's too quiet, but he's cool, and that's Tommy," I introduced them both, "Guys, this is Sky, he's cool, but anti-social"

"Hi," Skylar nearly whispered, a blush running up his face and even down his neck and through his ears.

We did eventually get him to talk more. I was set on having him befriend more people; I did it when we were teens, and I'd do it again. Besides, my insides were fluttering all night from what he'd said, and I felt something that I hadn't in a long time: the nervous feeling that you got when you were alone with someone that you liked. I'd told Dr. Jeff that any guy I'd dated could still probably turn my head, but what Skylar did was more, and always had been, because he'd also meant more to me than any other person I'd dated.

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## Chapter Nineteen

Friday came again before I knew it and it was to be the first time I entered the gym. The guys on the staff decided that it would be a good idea for us all to get some exercise. We were filed into the gym and told that they were going to have a game of skins and shirts basketball for whoever wanted to play.

About thirty kids decided to play the game, and the others either sat on the bleachers for most of the time, talking, or somewhere else. Extra staff were brought in to watch the people not playing the basketball game. Jon and Scott were to be team captains and Brad stood as the referee. The two picked out players for teams, and even though I'd avoided being alone with him, I knew that Skylar and I would be great on the same team. But it wasn't so, and much to my own inner disappointment and enjoyment, Skylar was on Scott's team. Scott's team was shirts for the first half of the game.

Though bandaged, I saw when Skylar removed his shirt, there were several scars along his arms and torso from his past cutting. A few of the other kids had them as well, but no one else caused tears to well in my eyes at the sight of them like he did. As we readied to play, I wondered how many of those scars were the result of my leaving him. When we finally began play, I forced the thoughts from my head and put my energies toward the game.

We switched who played and who sat out throughout the game, but when it was almost time for my appointment with Dr. Jeff, I went to tell Scott that I had to continue sitting out when he called me to go in. He merely nodded and I took my seat on the bleachers along with a thin, brown haired and eyed man named Andy that I'd also befriended in the first few days that I had been there. He was a year younger than myself and also there for cutting himself. We exchanged small talk for the few minutes before my appointment. I couldn't help it as I walked out of the gym, but I looked toward Skylar as he ran toward the net nearest the door. He was preparing to get the rebound and when he didn't, he looked over and saw me. After giving me a confused glance, I mouthed 'appointment' and he nodded. Once he went toward the center line again, I opened the door.

The hallway was cool as I walked toward the doctor's office and it felt good against my steaming body and sweat-soaked tank. Dr. Jeff's door was open and he sat at his desk writing as I came through, knocking lightly before coming through the threshold, "Getting a workout I see?" He asked with an amused tone as I sat in front of him.

"Yeah, basketball," I muttered as I settled into the chair.

"So how's the last few days been?" He asked as he retrieved my portfolio from the filing cabinet.

"It's been great," I smiled.

"Jon said you had a hard day after you left my office last time . . . ," He trailed off, looking at a note in my folder.

My expression faltered a bit, "Yeah . . . ," I bit my lower lip, "The boy brought in that day . . . He was a . . . friend of mine," I told him.

"A friend?" He asked, catching my pause.

I could feel my ears burning with the blush, "An ex . . . the one I left for Natalie"

"And how did this go?"

I took a deep breath before I spoke, "It was a little . . . rough at first. I . . .," I stuttered, "He told me that he started cutting because of me," I nearly whispered in a morose tone.

The doctor nodded, "He did tell me that it had begun because of an ex"

"Yeah . . . but we talked it over. I was upset when Jon came in because of a mix of things; What my mom said was a little of it. Telling him why I was here, and of course just the tiff we had when I went to see him at first . . . it all just came too quickly to me, ya know?" I told him the half-truth at least. I figured that one person knowing the full truth was enough.

"And you two are okay now?" He asked, looking up from his pen and paper.

I nodded shortly, "I guess"

"Why do you only guess?" He asked, still looking at me.

I lit up a cigarette and tried to relax in the stiff, leather chair, "Because I can't quit thinking about him. I act like a complete moron at just the thought of being alone with him", I admitted in one breath, "I feel more with him than I have anyone else. I still do, and I haven't been with him since I was 17," I told him as I ran my hand through my hair, "And the person I was with before coming here was the person that actually got us together . . . Sky said something to me too, and it hit me like a rock"

"What was that?"

"He was just joking around, but he said that I knew Natalie was wrong for me ever since I started screwing around with guys again, and since he was miles and miles away, I looked to the closest thing to him, which was this friend of ours, because he's in our crew and lives in the City," I sighed and flicked an ash, "It made sense though . . . because I'd think about him, and then I see this totally gorgeous guy that actually got Sky and me together, so you know he's not against gays, but also someone I know I shouldn't be with, but I can't help it, because it's the closest thing that I have to anything . . . real," I sighed and snuffed the cigarette, "Did that make *any* sense?"

Dr. Jeff nodded, "Yeah. Its not something that you'd hear about everyday, even in my work, but yes, comforting yourself with anything that is even close to what really gives you comfort isn't all that strange"

"Okay," I sighed with a light laugh from relief, "I just wanted to make sure that I wasn't crazier than what you already know I am"

"I don't think that you're crazy at all, Taylor, you just need a little bit of help to get back to being who you really are"

I itched my head and then shrugged, "Whatever you say, Doc"



"I'm being serious. You are no more insane than any other person walking the streets. You've just been through a bit of a bad patch and can't cope with it as well as others. At least you don't grab shotguns and climb clock towers when you want someone you can't have," He smiled a little.

"Yeah, I just go get coked up and sleep with them"

"That's not what I was getting at," He said with a little warning in his voice, "What I meant was instead of doing something completely off-the-wall, you do something a bit more heard of, like dating a person that was close to someone that you really liked," He ended with a much lighter tone.

"Yeah, I guess," I sighed, "But what am I supposed to do? I mean, I'm stuck with him here for at least two weeks, but I can't exactly do the norm, ya know? Even if I could just drag him off somewhere, I wouldn't, because its just . . . new again"

"The best advice I can give to you is just be friends with him for now. I can't tell you what he's been through because I'm not allowed, but I can tell you that he just needs someone there for him right now"

"I was already given a quick summary of why he's here," I told him with a small, tight smile.

"Yes, well, in any case, I think that it would be best for the both of you to just stay at the point you're at," He smiled, "Have you written much in your journal?"

I nodded, "Yeah, but its in my room"

"That's okay. Just be sure to bring it with you next time," He told me, "As I told you when I gave it to you, it will help me more to know what's in your head, even if you can't say it out loud. You hadn't written in it much when I saw it last week . . . "

"Trust me," I let out a huff of air, "I've written a lot since then"

"I figured that you would," He looked at the clock, "Well, I suppose that even though time isn't quite up yet," It was really only a half hour since I'd come, "You can get back to the gym," I nodded and stood, "I'll see you back on Tuesday, and remember that book," I nodded again on my way back out.

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## Chapter Twenty

The next day I sat in my room, clouded with cigarette smoke, writing. I'd been up since just before dawn, but didn't write until after the sun was completely up. This lasted with only breaks for breakfast and lunch for hours. Then Skylar was at my doorway. I don't know how long he had really been there, but he gave a luminous smile when I finally did notice that he was there, "Hey," I almost whispered.

"Hey," He parroted, but in a much more suave manner, "What'cha doin?" He asked plopping down on

the bed beside me.

"Writing . . . ," I muttered, glancing at the past few pages, "Doc's orders"

"Yeah, I got one too, but I don't write in it," He shrugged.

"Why not?"

"Cuz I don't see a point in writing my private thoughts out, then letting someone that doesn't even know me read them"

I shrugged, "Anything that I don't want him to know, I don't write, and I don't talk about them," I smiled as I sat up and combed the hair out of my face with my fingers, "I just . . . I dunno. Can I ask you something?"

He shrugged and smiled, "Sure"

"Is it bad that I feel more sane in a nut ward than I do at home?" I nearly laughed, "I mean, since I came here, I felt like I can breathe"

"Maybe its not really the specific place," He told me, "Maybe its just that you're away from the bullshit that has you so stressed"

"Other than the Zac thing, I was far from stressed"

"Horse shit," He snorted, "Have you toured recently?" I shook my head, "Have you been recording?"

"Yeah, so?"

"I remember back in the day . . . I'd wait and wait and wait until you guys got home from touring or being in LA to record," He pulled his legs up on the bed and crossed them Indian-style, "But I'd have to wait like three days because you'd come home and do nothing but sleep"

"Uhh, yeah, its called being exhausted"

"Yeah . . . there was no such thing as Zac being exhausted. But stressed, yeah. You haven't taken a single real break since you originally got signed to Mercury, I know you haven't. Not even for your wedding, not even for the kids' births"

"And how would you know this?" I countered, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Cuz I pay attention to shit like that," He shot with a little bit of bite, "Anyway," He sighed, "What was your daughter named again?"

"Penelope . . . Ellie for short"

"Well where were you when she was born?" I merely bowed my head, "You were on tour . . . a tour you'd been on for how long? After a record that took you, what, four years to make? Of course you're going to feel better when you're away from it. I mean, geez, you finished this last record while going through the bullshit of a divorce," He sighed a little.

"I've been fine"

"Cuz you're used to it, but that doesn't mean its not still there"

"How the hell do you know this?" I asked, not in a way to sound skeptical, but more in awe.

"Dr. Jeff ain't the first shrink I've seen," He admitted, bowing his head a bit, "Actually, he's like . . . the fourth one since I got kicked out of David's"

"Really?" I asked with a cocked brow, "Yeah, my ex made me go to this one, but he was a total crack pot. Then I went to this chick doctor who hated me from the moment I came in there because she was this bull-dyke feminist . . . no, she was just way beyond feminism. She was one of those women that would gladly pull out an Uzi on any guy that gave her a wrong look," He gave a scared face that made me laugh, "The third guy wasn't too bad, but he moved to Australia a few months ago . . . like, six months ago"

"Damn," I muttered, "So you apparently learned quite a bit"

"Outside of not fucking with permanently menstrual women, yeah," He grinned, "Actually, I was thinking of going to school for it"

I laughed, "That'd be great. Going from being the patient to the doctor"

"Hell yeah. I figure that I know just as much as most of the assholes parading around as shrinks, so why not?" He smiled.

"If you know so much, then why do you cut?" I asked, no malice in my voice.

He sighed, "I like having pain that I can control. It reminds me that no matter what's going on in my life, I am in charge"

"You fight against your own emotions?"

"Pretty much," He shrugged, "Its more like covering them up"

"Its part of being human"

"When there's too much, it's bullshit to be human," He scoffed.

Tears welled in my eyes before I could help myself, "So you'd rather play God and warp your own body anytime you get upset? You . . . you'd rather go and give yourself more pain just to get a break from a different pain?" I asked him, keeping the tears in their reservoir, "It doesn't do any good though, none of this does; Cutting, drinking, binging . . . it all numbs it for a little while, but when it fades, you have to deal with what put you in pain in the first place all over again, and you also have to deal with the remnants of what you do"

"Then why the fuck did you go and OD, huh?" He spat back at me.

"Because I'm fucking human and I fuck up sometimes. I don't do it everyday. God, I've only done it once, but you, you do it all the time!"

"But you'd have done it again if you weren't here," He challenged with eyes nearly closed in slits.

What he said struck me like a two-by-four. I was silent for minutes and minutes, stuck in an awed state and expression. I shook myself from it, looked to him and went back to writing in my book. I didn't want to look at him, I didn't want him to know that he was right, though I did write the idea in my journal.

He stood and crossed his arms over his chest when he got the hint that I was avoiding the conversation, "See? If you weren't caught, and you weren't sent here, how much other shit would you do? Would you stop at coke? Or would you end up another musician junkie a la Leif Garret?"

"Fuck you," I spat.

"I'm not trying to be a dick here," Skylar sighed a bit, "I'm trying to make you see where I'm coming from"

"But you've been to therapy and it still doesn't help," I shot back, still in a sour mood from how right he really was.

"I don't have people around me twenty-four-seven to vent to. I don't have a family that gives half a shit, or even friends . . ."

"That's because you're anti-social"

"No, that's because people are assholes," He fired, then settled, "Anyway . . . I can't control the shit I do half the time. I've actually blacked out a few times and woke up with some of the worst cuts and I don't even know where they came from or what I did it with"

We fell silent after he said that. I looked back to my journal and felt the tears well up again, "I'm sorry," I sighed, feeling as if it was the only thing that I could say that would make even the most trivial sense.

"No, don't be. You leaving was just a strike of the match . . . everything else in my life was the gasoline filled room. If you hadn't done it, then I'm sure someone else would have," He shrugged, "At least you have the courtesy to try and apologize," He muttered, but I caught it, just barely.

I stuck the pen I'd been writing with into the page I was on and closed the book. Tossing it aside, I relaxed beside him, leaning into his form like I'd don't countless times before and carefully lacing my arm between his own arm and his waist. My hand gripped just so slightly as to let him know that I was there and was rewarded by his own arm wrapping around the top of my shoulders. I could have melted at his touch, but the memory of Zac was still in my mind and kept me from sinking too far into this comforting position.

A sigh escaped him as I refused to relax completely in his embrace and before I could even comprehend it, he was up and walking towards the door. Just as he reached for the handle I managed to mutter, "Wait," In a desperately quick tone and caused him to look back, "Why are you leaving?"

He came back a few paces to meet my gaze as I was now standing, "Why?" He asked softly, "You don't seem to want me here"

"And just how would you know that?" I asked putting a hand at my hip.

"You just didn't seem like you want me to even touch you"

I could have cried with those words, but I kept the tears behind my lids. This took so much willpower that I couldn't force myself to form any intelligible words. Even the word "no" was stuttered to incomprehension.

"Do you?" He asked, with tears in his own eyes, I saw after a few fugitive drops cascaded down my cheeks and too the floor for all I know. His eyes were soft but intense as he took hold of me at my waist. Careful, shaking hands just barely formed around my skin, the last few to the bottom just grazing a bit of skin exposed because my shirt had bunched from how I'd been sitting. I think I shook my head with affirmation to his question, but I'm not exactly sure. All I remember was his lips against mine. Full, nearly as plump as Zac's had been and just as soft and heart-wrenching.

I pulled away gasping. When I looked up, I saw flashes of Zac mixed in with reality and it made everything around me begin to whirl and go out of focus. It was too confusing, I had to get out of it, get control of myself, "I . . . I'm sorry, Sky," I muttered in a shaky voice, "But I can't see you right now . . . I just can't. I need to be alone," I nearly sobbed the last words as his face fell, heart broken and lost, before he made his way from the room. I wanted so badly to run after him, but I felt like I'd been drugged, exhausted and barely made it to my own bed before I collapsed in a fit of sobs. *What am I supposed to do?* I asked myself, feeling more insane now than I had even before coming to the clinic. Thoughts of Zac filtered through anything that I thought of, no matter how much I tried to fend them off with the feelings I had for Skylar. Nothing was working and it was far from fair. Sometime in my mental war, I felt the numbness of sleep drifting in and out, like a thick cloud over my eyes and mind. I let myself be surrounded by it, but even my exhaustion wasn't enough to keep the continual thoughts and dreams at bay.

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## Part Three

### Chapter Twenty-One

I woke up in a heavy, cold sweat and reached blindly for my journal. Every piece of the dream, save for Zac's name and his relation to me, went down on paper as I woke more and more. It was midafternoon by the time I finally looked at a clock. Just over two hours until dinner. I stuffed the book safely into my dresser before heading out. I looked in the common room for Skylar, but of course, without me dragging him he was never one for social activity. I shook my head a little at my idiocy before turning around, hoping that no one had noticed me. I'd been a hermit since the basketball game, in my room, racking my brain with what I was going to do about the situation with Skylar.

No one seemed to take notice, and I was glad. I made my way back towards my room, the words from the dreams bursting in and out of my thoughts:

*"Too bad,"* Zac had laughed maniacally and a flashback of the happenings flooded me. He had his arm around Skylar's thin waist, pulling him towards his own body, leaving kisses along his neck.

*"Told ya I'd fuck him,"* Skylar added with an evil glint in his eyes as Zac seemed to devour his throat, kissing, sucking, biting, licking. Zac's hand reached down through Skylar's boxer-briefs and gave a few almost violent tugs. Once the moan in Skylar's throat dissipated, he looked again at me with a mean grin and added, *"Oh yeah, I'd definitely fuck him"*

*Zac threw me a menacing but lustful glare but said nothing. Instead he trailed his kisses down Skylar's naked torso, nipping at random pieces of tender skin, hard enough to leave red marks in their stead. His thick fingers rolled down the fabric of Skylar's underwear until he stood completely exposed to me, in all the beautiful glory that I had once remembered with fervor and lust myself. He now knelt before Skylar's genitals, shirt off and pants nearly undone. They fell well below hipline and he wore a white pair of boxers that left little to the imagination. He gazed up at Skylar and for several moments it seemed they knew nothing else. This infuriated me and made me cry out.*

*Both of my ex-lovers threw me deviant glances, smiles full of malice and anger. Zac reached into his pocket and pulled out a large razorblade and handed it to Skylar. His smile curled a bit more as he grasped the shining object. My eyes grew large, no matter how much the heat hurt them. He placed a long, painful gash along the length of his chest. Zac actually lapped up the torrents of blood as he stood again. Skylar then took the blade to Zac's flesh. I watched as a lustful wince came as the blade tore open his own flesh and Skylar then put his lips against the cut, sucking as if he were one of Hollywood's vampires.*

*Zac pulled him away from the laceration and locked his lips to Skylar's, each devouring the taste of the other. Zac parted them again and lowered himself yet another time to his kneeling position. Just the quickest flash of the angered smile came to me before he began to descend upon Skylar's shaft. The blood coursed down Skylar's chest and on to the base of his cock. Zac cleaned it up hungrily, the red*

*mixing with the cloudy liquid of saliva and precum as he began again to suck.*

*Without warning, he stopped. This even seemed to confuse Skylar, but Zac's lips went to his again and I was again blind to Skylar's beautiful face and body. Zac grabbed Skylar by the wrist and came nearer to me. They stopped beside a small stand, an alter it may have been, for what I don't know. But they stopped, and Zac whirled Skylar around and shoved him against it. He leaned into it, hands gripping the sides for support. I could see the whole left side of them, and I could see well enough as Zac dropped his pants and boxers in one swift movement and ramming himself into Skylar with the next.*

*They had sex, no, they fucked right in front of me, and I was powerless to do anything but cry out, which they seemed deaf to anyway. A mix of pain and pleasure invaded Skylar's face as Zac thrust himself in and out as hard as he could. Orgasms came hard and fast, leaving them both shaking and breathless. I felt physically wounded as they both looked at me, Zac still passionately wrapped around Skylar's shaking but still lithe form, their smiles hurting me more than anything I'd ever felt before. As they regained their strength I composed myself as much as possible. That was, until Skylar opened his mouth, his grinning, hateful mouth, "You think this is it?" He shook his head and clicked his tongue to denounce my thoughts. Once that was over, they began again, this time it was Skylar's turn to be in charge. Over and over did it happen as I watched and screamed.*

*I, for the dream, was locked in an iron cage just feet from them, and a fire was set below the base of the cage. I could feel the heat gaining under me, through my shoes. I watched the rubber melt from the soles of my boots and my clothing then began to catch fire. I grabbed a bar as I cried for both of them after Skylar's last words, but they laughed as my own flesh melded with the metal. I screamed my apologies as I was engulfed in flames. I couldn't even cry, my tears just evaporated in the very sockets. I burned, watching them, hating and loving them both until I finally woke up, right before the hand of death reached my charcoal skin.*

What if it had meant something? Was I supposed to suffer this sort of torn emotion for both of these people until I died? Fire means passion, sometimes love to those who interpret dreams. Would this just consume me, as the flames did? What could I do to stop this before it does? Will I lose them both? Even losing one at the moment seemed too much to bear.

In the distance I heard Jon, at least I think it was Jon, calling my name. He sounded muted, echoed, altogether very far away. I felt several faces rushing towards me when I looked for the direction the voice had come from. I was being shaken by someone that wasn't running. Someone at the other side of me. I looked to see a mane of black hair, and even in the blur I knew those eyes, those eyes that just shot through me as if the light from Heaven. *Am I dreaming again?* I wondered silently as I watched this thin, pale faced angel falling below me. No, I was being lifted. I could hear the sounds of my voice, but knowing what I said was all but a mystery. I was babbling and I knew it. Too slurred and too fast for anyone to understand well enough.

I looked around as I was being transported and again saw Skylar's face. I forced myself to focus on him, to see his face, even etched in worry it was stunning. I think I said the words, "Don't leave me," To him, but it could be that I only thought the words. I even thought he nodded, but then I was seeing a blur of the fluorescent lights above me, they were coming so fast that it made my head spin. Then a spark of light came before I found darkness.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Dead.* That was the first thing to come to mind as I attempted opening my eyes. Harsh white lights flooded my vision and I cringed. *But how the hell can I be dead?* I asked myself, forcing my eyes open again. *Oh no,* I sighed, seeing the familiar surroundings of a hospital room. Again, I was alone, just as I had been weeks before in New York City. *But why am I here?* I asked in my mind. I looked around until I found the call button and pressed it, pressed it far more times than I needed to. Eventually, the door opened and I stopped pushing the stupid, red button.

It was Cori, the receptionist that stuck Skylar with the sedative, and I knew that this was no real hospital, "Hey buddy, you all right?" I nodded weakly, "Would you like something to drink?"

Again I nodded, "Water," My throat sounded completely raw.

She nodded in return, "Okay, I'll go get that for you and have Dr. McKinley paged," She smiled out before turning and walking out the door. I waited for what seemed to be an hour before the door opened again. This time Cori was accompanied by Dr. Jeff, looking weary and tired, "Here you go," Cori nearly sang and left us alone after giving me my drink.

"What happened?" I asked as soon as the door clicked shut.

"You took quite a tumble after having a panic attack it seems," He looked from his clipboard, "Do you know what those are?" I nodded, "Have you had one before?" I shook my head, "Do you know what could have caused this, Taylor?" He asked, taking the stool next to my bed.

I shrugged before taking a sip of the water, which felt like an oasis to my throat's desert. It took a few minutes, but then the memories came flooding back, "I was looking for Skylar," I told him in the most nonchalant way that I could muster.

"Okay, and why?"

I sighed, "He found me earlier today in my room, and we were bs-ing and stuff and ended up just laying down in my bed, nice and comfy...at least as much as I could. I kept thinking about . . .," I stopped myself short of saying 'Zac' and covered it up quickly, "The guy I was with before, the one that got me and Sky together . . . and it just wouldn't go away. I couldn't relax completely," I sighed, "He got up to leave, cuz he thought I didn't want him there, but I stopped him . . . then . . . then he kissed me, and it just confused me more and it just hurt so much, cuz I'd see him one minute . . . the other guy the next," Another huff of air escaped me, "So I made him go and just passed out. And I had the worst dream imaginable"

"What was the dream?" He asked, taking notes as usual.



I waved it off, "I wrote it in the journal . . . its way too bad to talk about right now," I looked up at him, "Then I went looking for him . . . and that's all I remember"

He nodded, "Okay, well you come see me tomorrow at ten and we'll talk this out. For now, just rest up. You've got quite the bump on your head from falling. You fell right against the hallway wall," He chuckled a bit as I winced, touching the sore spot as he spoke, "I'll have one of the guys come help you back over to your room," He told me and went out.

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The next day I sat waiting in Dr. Jeff's open, empty office. It seemed he was caught in a heavy traffic jam out on the expressway and would be a bit late. I looked around the room, spotting Psychiatric credentials; diplomas, certificates, etc; among his wall, framed and immaculate. A family portrait of him, a wife, three children, and a parent to either he or his wife sitting on his cluttered desk, next to a brand new Compaq computer. The photo was old, yellowing in the corners though I'm sure it was never taken from the frame. Clothes and hairstyles were outdated, but it was a classic family pose: Parents in back and the children gathered in front, including an infant held in his wife's arms and what was looking like Dr. Jeff's mother beside him, his arm around her shoulders. As the doctor came in, I stopped snooping, but a small thought plagued me as to why there wasn't a newer photo, save for one of a Labrador and her pups, probably from some two years ago.

In my hands was the book, my journal for this trip. I looked at the pages I'd recently written and shuddered when I did. The dream came flooding back to me, but I pushed it as far back as I could when I saw the doctor's door open and Dr. Jeff himself step in. Lighting a cigarette, I tried looking as casual as I could as he took his seat.

"You okay today, Taylor?" He asked and I nodded, perhaps a little too quickly, "Are you sure? You're looking a little pale"

My throat seemed closed as I attempted to swallow. I waved the book in my hand, "I, uh, was reading this . . . it just, brought back all the visuals . . . "

"Ah, yes," He nodded as I handed the book his way. I sat silent for what seemed, to me, far too long as the doctor immersed himself in the words written on the pages. He had to stop once in a while, scribbling furiously in his own pad of paper. Eventually my hands interested me enough to pass the time before he was finished, "Okay Taylor," He said and my head shot up, "I think that we need to try something here . . . it might seem a little drastic, but I think it would help you a lot," He pulled in a deep breath, "I think that you need to confront this other person, get everything squared away, out of the way"

"I can't," I said a bit more sharply than intended.

"Because this other person is in New York, right:?"

"Yeah, and he wouldn't come here"

"How can you be so sure of that?" Asked Dr. Jeff.

"Because, I am"

"Wouldn't you even be willing to try this? It could help"

"The only way I would do it would be to go to New York myself and talk to him . . . *by myself*," I told him, sitting a bit more rigid.

He sighed, "Outside of the fact that we're not allowed to do that without some sort of guardian from the clinic . . . isn't talking to him what got you here in the first place?"

"No, my idiocy did, and I'll admit that one. I'm fine, it was a bad dream . . . "

"One that sent you into a panic attack Taylor, and that doesn't tell me 'fine'," He sighed heavily, "Have you been taking your medication?"

That question nearly jumpstarted me. Of course I'd taken the stupid things. They were huge, ugly colored horse-pills, given to me every day by one of the lovely nurses at the reception desk after breakfast. They made me nauseous for the first week, but I'd become accustomed to them, "Yeah," I muttered quietly, "I don't have much choice do I though?"

He shrugged, "I've seen some patients come in here, act like they take their pills and spit them out as soon as they're out of the nurse's view . . . "

"If I'd have known that . . . , " I trailed off just to be a smart ass, "Nah, yeah I've taken them"

"Okay, that's good, but the fact that you still had a panic attack of that caliber says something"

"Why?" I asked, crossing my arms in curiosity.

"Because that medication is both an anti-depressant and an anti-anxiety medicine," He thought a moment before looking through my files, "Let's try here to figure this out, because you really shouldn't be having hallucinations unless there were adverse reactions to this medicine," My confused stare made him smile, "Sometimes, people will have non-allergic reactions to certain medicines when they're multi-purpose like the Effexor. Do me a favor here and answer a few of these questions okay?" I nodded and he proceeded to ask about my sleeping and eating habits, my moods and then he asked if any of my family had suffered from any of the ailments on a quite lengthy list. Once we were finished, he seemed to stare at the answers forever before looking at me, "We're getting you taken off of the Effexor"

"What? Why?" I asked, completely perplexed by his declaration.

"I was told that you were depressed and stressed out by your family doctor . . . but these results here are

telling me something totally different. You sleep five hours a night at most, you eat like you've been starved for months . . . and your moods, you're always in a much better mood, unless you're irked by something or someone has *really* done something to hurt you, which is far from extremely odd. But its your 'up' moods that concern me here. You say you've felt high just from waking up in such an amazing mood," He shook his head, "I've been medicating you and just making you higher than you usually are," He almost laughed to himself, "What you need is a stabilizer, not an anti-depressant. The anti-depressant is giving you energy you don't need, basically just overfilling you with it"

"And that's why I freaked out and saw shit that I shouldn't have?" I asked.

"Exactly. The stress you've become accustomed to over the years . . . its given you energy that you put into life itself. Its put you in a permanently manic state of mind, so everything's always swimming up there, waiting to be turned into a song. Its not too uncommon, many authors and performers of all sorts show this sort of thing. You've basically toned yourself to the state of mind that *you* want, not the one that would be appropriate," He paused, "My best guess is that the stress you were under, all of it, the divorce, the fight with your mother, the fight with your lover . . . there was just too much of it to hide behind a smile, so you went to make it stop"

I nodded, "Yeah . . . that's about it," And it was, I realized, it was so close, "Feeling good, and feeling numb have just been . . . entwined"

He nodded his agreement as I spoke, "Yes, and what we'll do is try to get you evened out finally, because being too happy is just as unhealthy as being too sad. Other emotions *are* a good thing, not something you should hide until it just explodes," He picked up his prescription pad, "We'll try you out on Seraquil, it's a mood stabilizer. We'll try it all this week and you can come check in with me on Friday. I will warn you that you'll probably be very moody for the next few days, but it will just be the medicine kicking in. By Tuesday you should be getting the full effect and be okay with the medicine, if its working. Friday will just be a checkup," He tore off the sheet of paper and handed it to me, "I'll see you on Friday then. Give this to one of the girls as soon as you can, and we'll start dosing this evening, right after dinner"

"Okay," I muttered, looking at the chicken-scratch.

He nodded and stood, opening the door for me, "I'll see you in a few days"

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

The next couple days made me sympathetic to anyone. Women especially, like Natalie had been through the bulk of her second pregnancy. On Wednesday evening I was in the common room, writing in my journal about everything, since I'd not done so since I had the nightmare. I was great, watching the shows and movies playing, until Richie came and plopped down next to me on a loveseat, "Whatcha doin?" He asked, trying to peer over the top of the book.

"Writing in my journal," I told him with gritted teeth. Just having him beside me had made me uneasy and unnerved.

"Why? Those things are such shit"

"Cuz it helps me, okay? I don't knock the shit you do, so how bout you just get the fuck off my nuts about it," I spat before I could register my thoughts.

"Fine . . . God," He sighed out before getting up, "I don't want whatever crawled up your ass," He muttered on his way across the room.

That night was worse. We were all packed into the cafeteria, and I sat with Kane and Tommy and Pat. My silence seemed to pound through my ears, engulfing all the noise around me and within me until it seemed deafening. Then I watched Skylar walk in. He'd avoided all sorts of social activity since he and I had gotten into our "fight". Almost all of his time was spent in his room, the rest were spent in the very room I sat in.

I watched as he walked in the door to retrieve his meal. He looked like he needed something filling. In just a few days it seemed that he just became so thin. Very few things were on his tray when he walked out. I wanted to cry right then. But it wasn't until his gaze found mine that I felt tears in my eyes. At first, he seemed an amnesiac, not knowing who I was or why I stared, but then his eyes grew hard and cold and he made a sharp turn towards an empty table in the corner of the room. Every piece of me wanted to go over and talk to him, but instead I felt like my throat closed completely and the tears came closer and closer to falling.

What had I done to receive this punishment from him? No emotion other than anger had been placed in my direction all week, and it was hurting more than I needed at the moment. Or did it only seem like it was more than I needed? Was it the medicine doing it? Or did he really get to me that much. Regardless, I was growing more and more upset by the minute and it was undeniably more than I could handle, medicated or not.

Running, I found my way to the bathroom. It was locked, and now instead of wanting to bawl, I wanted to beat the crap out of the door, just for being locked, even though I knew it would be locked. Brad was now at my side, hand on my shoulder, "Dude, hey dude, its okay. What's the matter man?" He asked in his soft voice.

"Stupid fucking locked doors in this stupid fucking place with stupid fucking people that I never want to see again!" I yelled, emphasizing each word with a pound or a kick on the heavy door.

"Hey man, chill," He told me and grabbed his set of keys, unlocking the door for me, "Come on," He told me, guiding me in through the doorway. Once we were in there, my anger faded and I crumbled against the wall, "Hey, what's going on?" He asked, squatting next to me.

Tears fell, fat and fast down my cheeks and into my hands. Garbled bits and pieces of words came out and it sounded more like some alien language than English. He sat there with me on the cold tile floor

until I managed to calm down, "I'm sorry . . . its this fucking medication and I hate it!" I tried yelling but my sniffing broke through as well as my raw throat and exhausted body.

"Well come on, let's get you to your room at least. You look like you haven't slept for a week," He told me and led me toward my bedroom. His assumption was exactly the opposite. I was actually getting ten or so hours of sleep per night, and it made me feel lazy, more than any time I could remember going for days without sleep. I guess it was just another of those things that I needed to get used to.

I fell into bed without a single complaint, finding a comfortable position in no time. Brad stood at the doorway for some time, just watching, probably making sure I wasn't going to go into another spell. When he realized that I was fine, he left. Soon after, I felt my eyelids growing heavy, beckoning sleep faster and faster with each tick of the clock on my wall. The cloud of sleep rushed over me and I laid in it for so long, until I felt the presence of someone. Someone was watching me, I knew it. My eyes shot open as if I were really completely awake and had been for hours. I looked up to see a figure at my doorway, silhouetted against a light behind them. They were blurry when I could have caught a good view of them. Once they realized that I noticed them, they walked away. I watched as they moved down the hall a little, and soon after I heard a slam of a bedroom door. It didn't take perfect sight to recognize the stance, or walk, or just flat out presence that they held off. It was Skylar.

What I wouldn't give to make things right with him again. But the problem was that I didn't know how. I'd have millions of words when I'm in my own little world, and in my journal as well, but as soon as I saw him in person, the whole thing would vanish and I'd become dumb again. Plus I had other things to straighten out before him. Or at least I would try to.

My lids began to drift again as my thoughts swam uninhibited through my mind. I wanted to keep my mind awake, keep it thinking, plotting, but my body was too tired. Far too tired. I'd figure it out later . . . yeah, later.

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

I avoided thinking the next day. I knew I would. When I say I'll do something that's unpleasant, I avoid it. Its always been me. Friday came and the doctor told me that my avoidance was part of my problem and that I just needed to face things instead of hiding them away to fester.

"Fine then, get me a phone," I told him, slouching in the chair I always sat in.

"And what will you do with that?" He asked, glancing at the office phone on his desk.

"Well, I've already confronted my mom, and she apparently wants nothing to do with me anyway because she's a wretched, wretched bitch -," A warning look from Dr. Jeff put be back in my place, "Sorry, venting," I smiled out with clenched teeth, "Anyway, she's out of the picture, but I still need to square with some other people . . . "

"Ah, this mystery person that I know everything about except a name," He smiled.

"Yep, and it will stay that way," I replied, "I'm sorry, I just . . .," I smiled a little, "I can't tell you a name . . . out of courtesy for them"

"Understood, it happens all the time," He smiled back, "Anyway, yes, you can use the phone here," He gestured with his hands to the phone, "You need to dial '9' first. I'll leave you some privacy as well," He told me, standing and walking from the room.

I sat a moment, fidgeting with a thread hanging from the hem of my shirt. Finally, I sighed and picked up the receiver, furiously dialing the numbers and then listening anxiously to the ringing on the other side.

"Hello?" Answered a groggy, confused Zac.

"Hey," Was all I needed to say to him.

"What the hell do you want?" He asked, instantly waking up.

"How's everything up there?" I asked, ignoring the malice in his voice.

"Its fine . . . Ike's out working on distributors for the album and talking with some MuchMusic suit about the debut of the video," He answered curtly, as if it were scripted, "Do you want anything else?" He sighed as if he were now bored of the conversation.

"I'd like you to be human to me," I spat at him.

"Lemme think about that," He paused, "How bout no?"

"What the hell is your problem?" I asked him, trying not to yell, "Shouldn't you be ecstatic that I'm way out here? You helped put me here anyway!"

"You need it"

"Then so do you, you fucking hypocrite. You had no qualms when we fucked . . . oh wait, that's because of your fucking coke problem"

"Unless I'm mistaken, you're the one that OD'ed on the shit"

"You're the one that does it all the fucking time!"

"Maybe if my brother wasn't always drooling all over me, I wouldn't need to be fucked up," He countered.

"You *wanted* to fuck me. You said the fucking words," I spat back, despite the tears stinging my eyes, "I only thought that telling you would clear my fucking mind, but more happened, so fucking what? We've both done more immoral shit in our live's than anyone could count, even God himself!" I paused to breathe, "Or are you trying now to repent your awful little deeds? Well guess what? It-won't-work. Deal with it. We're marred for hell, and were *way* before fucking"

I could hear him seething through the phone, "That's not what this is about Tay. What we did was wrong beyond comparison . . . "

"Why, because some ancient book says so? Because modern society deems it so? You enjoyed it just as much as I did, and you're the only one making it so wrong"

There was silence on the other end, save for a sniffle here or there.

"What, are you crying? Or do you just have some killer drip tonight?" I spat.

"Shut up!" He screamed into the phone.

"Good," I huffed out, "Now you know how I've felt, knowing that you fucking shrugged what happened off like some dirty clothes," I paused a while to regain my wits, "Anyway, no, I'm not gonna say that I want to be with you . . . I just want to tell you that I don't fucking regret it, I never will. I can't go on, here or back home, without you at least knowing that. You can hate me or whatever, but I just needed to know that you know how I feel, and that I'm not backing down from it," Silence still replied, "I love you, Zac, whether you'd believe it or not, whether you respect that or not. But it hurts so much because I know I've lost you in any other manner than an enemy anymore"

"I . . . ," He stuttered, "I'm sorry Tay," He choked out.

"Don't, because it means nothing until I can see for myself if you really mean it," I sighed, "Anyway, that's all I really wanted . . . other than to tell you something . . . "

"What?" He asked, and I could feel something in his voice, but I couldn't find out what.

"Skylar's here"

"What?! Why?"

"He cuts . . . seems you're not the only one who's life I screwed up"

"No way . . . ," He gasped.

"Yeah . . . he's not too thrilled with me at the moment"

"Why?"

I went on to tell him what happened here, or at least as much as I could without getting upset, "I don't know what to do . . . I don't know if I'm actually being released once my thirty days is up, or what . . . God, it doesn't even matter. I can't stand it. Between you and him, I'm going insane"

"Then you're in a good place," He quipped.

"Not funny Zac. It hurts so much, and I don't know what way is up anymore"

"Just talk to him you douche bag"

I nodded even though he couldn't see, "Yeah . . .," I trailed off, "I guess I could try"

"I'll come and beat your ass if you don't"

"Nice to know there's still some brotherly love in there," I cracked dryly, "Anyway, you wouldn't know"

"So?"

A knock on the door tore me from conversation. I sighed, "Well, I gotta go. I think my time is up here"

"Okay," He breathed out and I swear I felt the looming feeling of melancholy as he spoke.

"I hope I'll be back soon," I sighed, "I'll talk to you later"

"I hope you're home soon too," He choked out.

Before he could say goodbye, I slammed the receiver down. Tears were in my eyes and I sat in something of a trance for a good few minutes, just staring at the phone. Then came another set of knocks on the door, "Oh, yeah, I'm done," I got out in staccato, trying to be casual but failing miserably. With a few, curt words to Dr. Jeff, I left and almost ran to my room. The stinging of my eyes was excruciating as I passed everyone then finally closed the door, and let the tears fall. I'm pretty sure that everyone could have heard my sobbing, even over any music or television around. But I didn't care. In fact, I wasn't even conscious of the exhaustion running through my body, winding me in its spell and making everything a haze.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

Even with the Zac thing *mostly* out of the way, the next few days went by and I spent them as a coward.



Over the weekend I think I actually spent more time in my room than Skylar did his. Actually, I'm sure of it. My hair was getting greasy from lack of showering (I didn't want to risk a confrontation in the bathrooms), as I did it for three days straight, and lunch was as short as I could possibly make it. Tuesday came after what seemed a millennium, but Jon actually had to come and tell me that I had my appointment with Dr. Jeff to go to. Begrudgingly, I flopped out of bed and made my way to the door. My eyes were cast down as I walked past the common room. I seated myself in his office, empty again. It was normal for him to step out once in a while, maybe for coffee, or to use the lavatories, or something to that effect. I mean, one leads to the other doesn't it?

I was zoning out when he came in, "Good morning Taylor," He spoke as he sat down and I threw my head in his direction, shocked that he had arrived. He looked at a Post-It on his desk, "There's something that I need to ask you today. Just before I tapped on the door the other day, I heard you say the words "brotherly love". What exactly did that mean?"

I could nearly feel the blood drain from my body, "You listened to my call?" I asked, masking my fear with anger.

"No, I just heard it as I came back. These doors are easy to hear through when you've been scanning for eavesdroppers over the years, no matter how thick they are," He answered quickly, "Now, would you answer my question?"

My brow cocked, "Being able to hear through a door to eavesdrop when you learned it to ward off eavesdropping makes you something of a hypocrite, don'tcha think?" I cleared my throat, "But anyway, this is why people shouldn't eavesdrop, because they don't get the full story," And my acting skills just went up 149993% as I straightened my form and my voice got authoritative to match his own, "I knew this kid since I was like three. We grew up together. He may as well have been one of my brothers. Which is the exact reason we shouldn't have done what we did. It felt wrong because we're so close. The "brotherly love" thing was a crack because we always made fun of each other, all of us, my brothers, me and him, when we'd be assholes to one of the others," I sat back and kept my stone facade, "That answer your question doc?"

He nodded, "I just had to check. It was on my mind after you refused to answer more than a yes or no to my questions on Friday. It just seemed odd to me," He shrugged.

I shrugged to mock his own, "Its not odd to me though"

"Touche," He pointed a finger towards me, "Outside of that, how are you adjusting to the new medication?"

I shrugged, genuinely this time, "They make me a little drowsy"

"How much are you sleeping?"

I shrugged again, "I dunno. A lot more than usual though"

He looked at me as he fetched his trusty notepad, "Could you give me an estimate?"

"Like, ten or twelve hours a day," I told him, staring at my folded hands on my thighs, relieved now that he was off of the "brotherly" question.

He scribbled as he spoke, "That will wear off once you're back into your old routine"

"What do you mean?"

"Your thirty days are up next Monday. I don't see much reason to keep you here any longer than that," I did a silent victory dance in my head as he said those words, "And what I mean is that you'll start being yourself after getting readjusted to living on your own again and whatnot"

I tried to smile, but a thought invaded my mind before I could, and my body felt cold again. Sad cold. That thought was about Skylar and I couldn't shake it, even for the doctor. What was I going to do about him? I cared so much for him, and his well being. I couldn't just desert him. Not again. Tears welled in my eyes as I thought of the alternative reality that would happen if I did leave again, and it wasn't a pretty one. It included a lot of black.

"I do suggest though, that you take it easy for the first few months of returning home. I know you didn't feel it, but living your sort of lifestyle is stressful, and though you may be able to handle it alone, I'd hate to see another unexpected problem ruin you"

I nodded as he spoke, then took my own turn with something I expect to voice, "That's okay, I think I'm going to stay around here for a little while"

"Any particular reason?" He asked, pausing from his writing.

I twitch of a sad smile sparked in my lips before I spoke, "To visit Skylar while he's still here, try to make things a bit less . . . rocky between us . . . and I think it would be best to just be on my own for a bit, no touring, no appearances, no recording . . . no high life, ya know," I looked up to see him scribbling again, "Plus it would probably be a good idea to have check ups done here, instead of up there, cuz I know I'll have them one way or the other"

He nodded, still writing. In seconds he was finished writing and looked to me, "You're right about that. Follow up appointments are a must, just to make sure that our patients are staying on the right track," He paused, "Will you be staying with a friend here, or anything?"

I shook my head, "Naw, I would, but most of the friends here, honestly haven't seen me in years, as sad as that sounds. I would stay with my parents but you know how that one would turn out," I grimaced, but slightly comedically, "I'll just get a paper from one of the guys and check out apartments that I can rent by the week or something"

"That sounds like a good idea. I know that Brad usually has one each day. He steals them from the

nurse's station," He mockingly confided the last part in a whisper, "Anyway, have you talked to Skylar yet at all?"

I shook my head, "I haven't been able to make myself do it"

"Well if you expect to visit him, then I'd recommend at least trying to mend things with him, at least a little"

I sighed, "I know . . . I'm just afraid, ya know?"

He nodded empathetically, "Fear is the only thing that ever stops anyone. It's a nasty thing, though too normal anymore. It would probably be best if you just waved away that fear and did it, because then you would know, instead of wondering"

"I know," I breathed out in another sigh, "But I can't even think of anything to say"

"Who said anything about thinking? Thinking can get you in trouble sometimes . . . besides, what if he blows your script away with something he says or does? Then you're left impromptu anyway, and all that thought would be a waste"

"True . . . plus, none of my fans think much of my mind power," I smirked, recalling far too many times when I'd heard of myself being called ditsy or air-headed.

He laughed a little, "Don't pay them any mind. You're a bright young man . . . just a little misplaced once in a while is all," He winked as he continued to chuckle a little, "Anyway," He said, straightening up a bit, "You go do what you need to do, talk to Skylar, have a few laughs with the rest of the guys you met, whatever. I'll get your paperwork figured out and ready to sign. Your next appointment will come on Monday and we'll finish up everything, have you sign your papers and then you'll be free as a bird once again"

I smiled, "Yes sir," I saluted with a bigger grin.

"All right," He laughed a little, "You get going. I've got another one of the guys coming in less than five minutes and I've still got your things scattered all around!"

"Later," I called with a laugh in my voice as I went out the door. Things were looking slightly up for me, finally.

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## Chapter Twenty-Six

That evening, I summoned up all of my courage and walked towards Skylar's room. It was after dinner, but I didn't even have much of a stomach then for food. Everything in me was in knots as I crept closer

and closer, just under the radar of Jon, who stood as always just outside the hall. I started to lose my will, but Dr. Jeff's words about fear came back to me, and I forced myself onward. I knew he was in his room, because I'd watched him go there after dinner. It had felt a little wrong, like I was spying on him or something, but I shrugged it off as much as I could. I had to talk to him, I just had to.

For minutes on end it seemed that I stood at his door, fidgeting with my hands, looking at my feet. *Just knock already, you pussy* I scolded myself and forced my right hand to raise and rap at his door. I heard him groan as he came to the door, as if he were being bothered as he was doing something important. When he opened it, his eyes went from slightly bothered to completely irritated, "What do you want?"

I drew in a deep breath, "It seems I've gotten that a lot in the past week," I told him in a sigh, looking again at my feet, "Anyway," I started again and looked up at him, "I wanted to talk to you, if that's okay," I admitted, showing no anger like I had with Zac. He glared more and I began to get weary of the situation, "Never mind then," I told him after another minute, defeated and turned away, starting for my own room.

"Wait," He sighed and I turned back. Though he still looked peeved, he waved me back toward him, "I guess I can give you a few minutes"

I sighed in relief as I walked back toward him. Even when he was angry, it was still more than amazing to be near him. I took a seat on the undressed bed across from his own. He had actually opted for the one on the opposite side of the room that I had chosen my bed. He favored the left side, as he was naturally a southpaw, another attribute he shared with Zac, I remarked for the first time since we'd been together. I never tied it so much though. It was usually just a shrugged off thought, one that gave them something to have in common. Now it made my heart heavier.

"So . . . ," He drawled out, some of his Midwestern accent showing through, "What did you want to talk about?" He asked in a much more formidable way than originally as he took a seat on his own bed, crossing his legs Indian style beneath him.

"I just . . . ," I stuttered, picking at a frayed hole in one of my favorite pairs of jeans, "I wanted to say I was sorry about the other day . . . ," I looked up to see he wasn't looking at me skeptically, but instead, interested, "When you kissed me, I - ," I stuttered a bit again, "I loved it . . . there's . . . there's never been anything I've missed more in my life - "

"But?" He asked as I trailed off.

"But I saw . . . I saw Zac. I felt you, but saw him, and it just totally screwed me up, and I couldn't breathe, and something that should have been great turned out a nightmare and I had to go . . . ," I looked up to see that he had a sympathetic expression, "I tried to find you later . . . the nightmare I had when I was awake was nothing to the one after I passed out from it all," I felt the tears coming again.

"What was it about?" He asked softly, afraid that saying the wrong thing would break me.

I told him, my eyes downcast as I do so that he couldn't see the tears falling. I was ashamed of my own

unconscious thoughts, no, I was scarred by them, "And I wrote it all down, and went looking for you, but I gave up, and then it all came back and it just threw me into a spell and I completely freaked out"

"I saw you right after you fell," He said suddenly after a few moments of silence from me, "I heard Jon call your name, and I thought that you'd just done something stupid because you're a klutz, but then I heard you hit the wall. God, it sounded like you fell right through the damn thing, so I came out and you looked like you had a fever or something"

"Doc said I had a panic attack"

"I'll say. It sounded like you were speaking Yiddish or something," He laughed a little, but I just shrugged, "I couldn't understand a word of what you were saying, regardless"

"Neither could I . . . but I did see you . . . but I didn't know if it was real. I didn't know much of anything at that point in time. Hell, I couldn't have been able to tell if I was even alive right then," I paused a moment at the next thought I had, "Once I woke up, all I really wanted was you . . . but I was afraid you were mad at me . . ."

"Well Tay, you did kind of run out on me," He reminded me, but with a small smile.

"I know, and I just haven't . . . God, I haven't known what to say or anything. I feel like a moron," I bowed my head and covered my face with my hands, "I just . . . wanted to say I was sorry before I left"

"Left?"

"Yeah, they're letting me out of this prison on Monday. Apparently I'm not crazy enough to stay longer than the minimum," I smirked.

"I wouldn't say that . . .," He grinned back, "They just don't know everything"

"No shit," I thought out loud with a bitter tone and again my face was in my hands.

"And they don't need to know everything," His voice was on my ear, tickling the sensitive skin of the area and sending chills throughout my body. After the sensation receded, I basically fell into him, seemingly turning to putty as his arms came around me. We sat there like that the whole way until lights out, and even then it was a fight to make me stand and go back into my own room. But eventually, I did, and with the reminder in my head that I was to be leaving in less than a week, and time spent with him afterward would be limited to timed visitations, at least until he got better.

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## Chapter Twenty-Seven

I fidgeted on Monday as I flipped through the paperwork I was given. It was at least a dozen pages that

I had to sign multiple times. I scoured the pages to find the x's where I was to sign. My nerves were shot from the idea of actually being released into the world again. I'd found an apartment by Thursday, and Scott did me the favor of going and meeting the landlord and explaining why I couldn't myself come to see the place. He approved, showing me pictures from a digital camera he'd taken from home. I agreed that it was well enough for such short notice and it was a pay-by-the-month place, no stuck lease, save for a thirty day one. It was a simple one bedroom apartment with a small living room and kitchen and a bedroom that reminded me of the one I'd occupied when I still lived with my parents.

With all the fuss of my discharge, I'd forgotten even to call my brothers until just two days before. I talked to Ike when I did so, and he told me he'd have my bed and other things shipped down with a U-haul. He finally asked the inevitable question after a few minutes of updates of how things were going up there, "So, when are you coming home?"

I blanched at the thought, "I really don't know right now, Ike. I really don't think that it will be too long, but we'll have to see," I told him in the best way I could manage. I honestly couldn't stand to see Zac anytime soon, no matter what I'd promised him. It was still too hard, and I knew the feeling would last for at least some while.

"Well, just let me know, okay man?" He asked, a tinge of worry on his voice. I knew that he was worried about how I'd be all alone, especially after what I'd been through.

"I'll be fine, Ike," I sighed, not bothering to ask what caused the change in his tone.

"I just worry about you man. Promise you'll call often?"

"Sure," I told him, not really seeing a problem with that. Though I was weary of Zac's response once he finally answered the phone, if my luck would just so happen to direct me there.

"All right, well you take care man, okay?"

"I'll try," I answered, a smile clinging to my lips.

When I finally got off of the phone with him, I felt heavy, but not as heavy as I did as I returned the papers to the reception desk. I made my way back to the room I'd had for a month now, all my belongings packed and the bed stripped of the white, static linens that I had become comfortable with. A large duffel bag contained what Ike had sent me after I'd gotten there, and the smaller bag I'd come with was right in front of it. Sadly, I sat upon my old bed, staring at my shoes until a knock came to the door. It was Skylar, and he stood with a sad, but hopeful glance.

"Can I come in?" He asked shyly from the doorway.

"Course you can," I told him, a smile forming as he walked in and took a seat next to me.

"I -, I'm gonna miss you," He choked out and I noticed then the tears welling in his hurting eyes.

I put my arm around his thin waist and pulled him to me, his head going immediately to my shoulder, "I'll only be ten minutes away, and I'll see you every week when I come to see Dr. Jeff," I told him in the most soothing way possible, though it hurt me as well that I was leaving him. We'd gotten closer again through the week, funning around in what ways we could and even spending time with the other guys that I'd met.

"It won't be the same," He sighed sadly, putting his own arms around my waist and tightening his hold.

I knew exactly how he felt. No more hours of whispering to each other, giggles coming every once in a while out of our talks as the night wore out until we were forced to go to our own rooms. No innocently placed goodnight kisses as whichever of us left to return to our own beds. No more toying with the other guys' mind by being just close enough to raise questions but not enough to bring credit to their suspicions, which had always been something we were amused by when we'd actually been together.

But a thought rose my spirits a bit and I voiced it to him, "Just get better . . . I'll make it a point to stay in town at least until you get out," I whispered, placing a kiss on his crown.

"What about your brothers?" He asked.

I shrugged lightly, "I talked to Ike the other day, and he's okay with it . . . He's worried more about me being alone"

"But what about the album, and promotion and stuff like that?"

Again I shrugged, "Him and Zac can handle it until I'm back on my feet completely. Touring can wait. Our fans waited for four years once, remember? I doubt it will take that long, but they can wait," I told him, for once putting something else above the fans.

"Are you sure?" He asked, tilting his head to look at me.

I nodded, not even needing to think about it, "You're more important than my music, Sky," I confided in a whisper, getting lost in the blue of his eyes. Slowly I crept my face forward until our lips met and I brought my hand up to cup his jaw softly.

A knock on the doorframe caused us both to jump. There stood Scott, a wicked grin on his face as a blush ran up both mine and Skylar's faces, "The doc is ready to see you," He told me in a normal tone, but his face had a childish gleam of mischief that said, 'haha, I caught you . . . '

Skylar rose and went out the door, looking back bashfully from just behind Scott. I took a deep breath to help compose myself after he retreated to his own room and stood myself, walking toward the doorway. Scott walked at my side as we made our way down, "Don't worry man. We all had a pretty good idea of what was going on with you two," He shot me a wink before parting with me to return to his table at the common room, which was surrounded by the normal poker boys, save for Richie, who'd been discharged the week before.

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## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dr. Jeff was in his office when I got there and noticed my reddened face, "What's wrong, Taylor?" He asked in confusion.

"Scott walked in while I was kissing Sky," I muttered, but he heard it well enough.

"That's not exactly allowed you know," He pointed out, and I thought of all the times we'd done it in secret, knowing it was forbidden.

Letting out a deep sigh, I gave my apology, "I know, I just . . . couldn't help it. It doesn't really matter though, cuz I'm gone after I leave this room, right?"

"More or less, yes you are," He smiled at me, "And don't worry, I won't hold what you did against you. Being gay and being so openly is the job of those harebrained people that work in "reorientation" clinics"

"Yeah, Scott just sort of shot me one of those "haha I caught you" looks after he knocked. I seriously wished then that I could make myself invisible," I told him as the blush returned to my face fully.

"I'm sure. He's not one of the most modest people when it comes to being able to embarrass others," He straightened himself and changed the subject, "Anyway, today we're going to just have a quick visit . . .," He looked at the portfolio in front of him, "I'm going to keep seeing you on Tuesdays at ten in the morning. You'll be subject to drug testing if there comes any reason to suspect there to be a problem, and we'll continue you on your medications," I sat silent as he said all this, letting it register in my mind. I actually had no intent on doing coke again. I was so silent apparently that he felt the need to ask, "Do you have any questions, Taylor?"

"No . . . not really," I told him honestly.

"Okay, that's good," He smiled and stood, "Well then, my boy, you are free to go. I wish you the best of luck," He added, reaching his hand out for me to shake.

I stood and turned to leave, but a thought came to me, "Um, could you call me a taxi?" I asked bashfully.

"Of course. Cori will let you know when it gets here. You'll probably have a few moments to say your goodbyes and such, that is if you're all ready to go"

"Um . . .," I muttered as I thought it over again, making sure I was all ready, "I don't have my razors"

"Oh, yes. I'll have one of the guys retrieve those for you"



I sighed in relief, "Okay, good. Other than that, I'm good to go," I told him and he wished me a short farewell before I made my way out and into the common room. My first stop wasn't there though, even as I stared at everyone. Instead I continued on down the hall and made my way to Skylar's room, rapping on the doorframe lightly, seeing that he was laying on his stomach writing in his journal. I'd finally made him start writing in the thing, even if he never showed it to the doctor. He looked up at me and I noticed tear stains over his cheeks and his eyes were rimmed with red.

"Hey . . . ," I breathed out as I went to embrace him as he sat up.

"I don't want you to go," He sobbed into my shoulder and I held him tighter.

"I'll be here every Tuesday, and I'll make it a point to stay as long as I can," I whispered as I rocked him a little.

"I don't want you to go," He repeated, this time his teeth were clenched.

I pulled him away a bit to look him in the eye, "Listen to me. I really can't stay here"

"Why?" He interrupted in his sobs.

"Because I don't need to be here. But listen to me. Just work on getting better enough to go home. Socialize with people a bit for once"

"You know I can't . . . "

"You need to. If you want to be able to be around me all the time again, you need to show the doctor that you are better, with or without me here"

"You're what makes me better!" He cried out, the sound muffled because he buried his face in my shoulder again.

"Then just work on keeping yourself where you're at, and you'll be let out and I'll be there when you are," I told him, my voice faltering a bit at the fact that he'd been so upset. It reminded me of when I'd broken up with him, though at that point in time, I forced myself to not be affected by his emotions.

"Promise?" He sniffled out, just barely looking up at me.

"I'm not leaving this city without you," I swore to him, and the idea shocked even me a little. I held him a little longer before I pulled away, "I gotta go say goodbye to everyone else," I told him, and my tone was apologetic, "Come out with me," I suggested, reaching out to take his hand and pull him up. We stopped in my room to retrieve my things before making our way out to say my goodbyes to the people I'd met. They all seemed a little sobered with the situation, as they did with Richie as well, but it was normal for those who'd been there a while, like Pat or Kane. People came and went all the time. I gave my address to them all and openly invited them to come see me when they got out, and that I'd be in to

visit every week, though I didn't mention that my main reason for visiting, other than check-ups, was Skylar. Brad handed me the pack of disposable razors I'd come with and I put them in my smaller bag.

Scott pulled me to the side once I'd finished talking to the rest of the guys and my confusion mounted a little, as was Skylar's as I was tore from his side. His face was as it was always, hiding any emotion he had within his eyes, which were serious and deep, something I'd not seen much in him in the month I'd been there. My brows furrowed a bit as he twisted his own expression to concentrate on what he wanted to say, confused himself at how to word it apparently as he stuttered a little.

"I won't tell the others about what I saw," He told me in the most sober tone that I'd ever heard from him.

I shrugged a little, "Its not like I care much"

"I just don't want one of these loudmouths spreading it around once they get out, you know?"

"I don't think they'll have any ammo by the time any of them get out," I told him and watched as his brows knit in confusion, "This isn't something I plan on keeping in the closet much longer," I gave him a wry smile, "Pun intended," I added, my smile staying as I heard Cori call to me and I knew my ride was here. With a quick hug to Skylar, I made my way out into a world I didn't know for a full month. The thought of what I'd said to Scott pounded in my head and I wondered if I'd keep to my word or not.

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## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The apartment, as I'd seen from the pictures, was small, and I was only confronted by affirmation of this as I stepped inside after withdrawing money from my checking account to pay the security deposit and first month's rent and receiving the key. It was homey though, as anything from Tulsa probably would be to me, and lazily I searched through the place as I waited for the U-Haul to arrive about an hour later, at one that afternoon, or at least sometime around then. You could never know when counting on driving times, something I'd learned while touring the States in a bus.

Even though the kitchen was small, it had plenty of cupboard space, and I was glad of that, as I had little at my home in New York. There was a fridge and stove already there, as well as dishwasher and microwave. The rest of the apartment was left unfurnished though, as most were, and I was glad I told Ike the details of the place I was staying and what needed to be brought down. On the way was a sofa, two chairs, one an overstuffed relic that I adored and the other a recliner, two end tables, a kitchen table, desk, my bed and dresser, my keyboard and guitar, my computer and modem for the Internet, the tv from my living room along with other accouterments to use with it, and probably a few boxes full of miscellaneous items including blank sheet music and my cell phone, which I'd requested with utmost importance, especially since I told Dr. Jeff my cell phone number, just in case. This didn't include my Land Rover, which was being towed behind the truck.

The truck was half an hour late in coming, but I was grateful to have my own things, so I didn't get

aggravated as I usually would. After they got everything into the apartment, which took a good hour and a half, I paid them with a sufficient tip before heading back up to my new home and settled on my couch, relaxing a bit before opening the first of four boxes. This one included my vast collection of CDs and albums as well as the stack of DVDs I'd collected over the past couple years. At least the ones that Natalie didn't take with her, most of which were cartoons and other children's movies and shows. I got to unpacking these quickly, putting the discs in towers and placed them on each side of the television, which stood atop the entertainment stand, and putting the records in the shelf beside the space for the tv.

The next box held music related things. Sheet music, both used and not, took up much of the room, and the rest was two thick cookbooks and a few notebooks of paper as well as a small box of pens. The third I saw immediately to hold my car keys. It also held things like an alarm clock, my I-Pod, a wall clock, a spindle of recordable CDs, my laptop (which was cradled in the bottom and padded with a tablecloth), and of course, my cell phone and charger. I looked to see that the icon to tell me that I had voice mail was blazing at the top of the tiny screen. I shrugged it off for the moment before putting the rest of the things away, first plugging the phone charger into the wall and putting my cell phone on one of the end tables to charge.

The fourth box was full of dishes from my house as well as a set of glasses and coffee mugs, all of which I bought new after Natalie left with all of ours, which were presents from the wedding. I didn't want them. Instead I was faced with black ceramic dishes and coffee mugs as well as a set of eight green colored glasses. Carefully, I picked up the box and carried them over to the kitchen, which was connected to the living room. I was even more careful as I pulled each item from the box and unwrapped them from their newspaper encasements before putting them on their own shelves.

Once I finished that, I went to retrieve the last box, and from its weight, and the common knowledge as it was the last one, I knew what it contained. I opened it to be right, and not have to call Ike yelling that he forgot all my tupperware and pots, pans and baking dishes and pans. But I did notice as I finished unpacking the boxes that he *had* forgotten one slightly important thing, well a lot of important things: Silverware and other utensils. Damn him.

But I was too hungry to waste my time calling Ike to yell about it. Far too hungry in fact, as I felt my stomach rumble at the mere thought of any food. Instead, I took my car keys from where I'd put them on the entertainment stand and made my way out the door, putting the key to the apartment on the ring as I bounced down the stairs. It was a relief to be in my own car, and driving it as well. My seat was moved though, but I knew that Ike must have driven it some to fill the gas tank and get it out of the garage to even hook it to the truck, and his legs were nowhere near as long as my own.

I sighed as I fixed the seat and mirrors, then made my way through town. Instead of opting for fast food, I went the whole way across town to the WalMart Supercenter to get actual groceries. It proved convenient enough as I could get what Ike had forgotten in the same place. My anxiety rose as I parked in the massive lot of the equally huge store, as I hadn't been out in public in far too long, especially for the life I lived, where I was quick to be noticed anywhere, even a convenience store. I sat for several minutes, forcing myself to begin breathing after I noticed that I had in fact stopped for the moment, and then calming myself down to something of a normal level. I still felt my head swimming though, and realized then that I'd completely forgotten to take my medicine that day. Eventually I pulled myself together and got out of the car, locking it with my remote as I headed toward the front doors.

The cool air chilled the layer of sweat covering me from my anxiety. I shook it off as I pulled a cart from one of the many lines of them and made my way first over to housewares. I got a cheap coffee pot, a toaster and some ashtrays before picking up a box of silverware and serving utensils of all sorts, including ladles, wooden spoons and whisks. Dish and shower towels as well as washcloths were next on my way, then paper products before I finally made my way to the grocery department of the store, picking up whatever looked good to me. Which was a lot of things, including a lot of separate things I'd make into a good home cooked meal, something I hadn't had in a full month, as well as things for some of my favorite desserts, another thing of which I'd been deprived.

I probably got way more things than I needed, but I didn't care as I pushed my cart finally down the dairy aisle. As I made my way down, I heard the distinct sound of teenage giggles rising and falling behind me, as well as reprimanding whispers when they would become too loud. I tried being sneaky as I looked behind me, knowing it was a bad idea. It didn't work and the three girls, who looked just barely college aged, gasped. I turned my head away quickly, scolding myself as I pushed the cart on faster, grabbing things like butter and milk without much thought as to what kind or percent they were. It didn't matter much to me anyway, and especially not at that moment, as all I wanted was to get out of there without more attention brought my way.

That didn't seem to be in the game plan for the day though, I realized as the voices became nearer and nearer, though they tried to be quiet about it. I was nearly finished in the aisle, pulling bread from the shelf and putting it on the top of my overwhelming pile of things when they finally made themselves purposely known to me, much to my irritation and discomfort. As one of them tapped my shoulder, I felt the spot she touched twitch before I turned to face them.

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## Chapter Thirty

They all held bright smiles as I put on a plastic grin for them, hoping for just a hello, maybe an autograph and a goodbye. Most fans did that. These ones were not in that bulk. For what seemed like hours to me, they stood, grins plastered over their heavily made up faces, which would have looked better without, but no woman listens to a man when they insist that, not even a gay one. Finally I decided to get this shindig on the road and said, "Yes?" In a polite but expectant manner. I mean, hell, I had frozen, perishable foods going rotten in my cart! Okay, not exactly, but I let me believe that.

"I'm Mandy," The eldest looking one spoke, "These are my sorority sisters Jenny and Brenda. We're huge fans of you guys, especially you," She told us in a bubbly gush. Apparently the hornier part of the fanbase were past feeling bad about my divorce now. How time flies in the world of a Hanson fan.

I nodded to each of them, holding my smile though I really just wanted to smack the Barbie-girl smiles from their faces at the moment. I'm far from being a person who judges a person based on stereotypes, but these girls were in no way out of theirs with their made-up faces, bleached locks and tanned, underdressed skin. Even at the beginning of April, they wore skimpy tops and Daisy Dukes, and I was chilly in a tank and a pair of khakis.

"Is it true that you went to a nut ward?" One of the others, Brenda, I think, gushed out and received a

light smack on the arm from Mandy.

I cocked an eyebrow at the girl for her brash question, "Where did you hear that?"

"The leak," The same girl answered with a mischievous grin. Sadly though, I knew exactly what she'd talked about. The same way unreleased music, relationship gossip (including the break up of Natalie and I), and anything dealing with us was found out. Fans just couldn't keep their mouths shut about what they hear or see by accident, whether it was directly from one of us, or part of our camp.

"Really now?"

"Well we know you OD'ed on coke," The third girl got out in a much quieter, but more sinister tone than the other two.

I shrugged and started off, aggravated highly by this discussion already, "So?" I said as I started off.

"Was it cuz of that evil whore-bitch?" The first piped up as they raced to follow me.

I turned, my smile gone now and in its place a stone cold glare, "Don't call her that. She didn't do anything wrong. We just . . . grew apart," I told them in a much more calmer voice than I'd began the sentence and started away again.

"We heard its cuz you're gay," The third piped up in the same tone she'd used before.

I turned with a more venomous glare than before. I seethed for a moment as their smiles faded from my expression, "So what if I am? Will it make you go away and quit staring at my ass?!" I shouted in their faces, but regretted the words as soon as they came from my mouth. I knew this would cause something of a small riot in just a few days time from the wonderful thing that is the Internet. I began off for the third time since the conversation started, my nerves tweaked now to a new boundary they'd not known before.

"I knew it," I heard the same girl whisper, and she'd done it loud enough for me to hear on purpose.

I spun again, this time a couple yards away and told them, "So fucking what? Is that illegal or something? I'm gay . . . go blab it all over whatever forum you want. I don't care anymore"

"You didn't answer my question," The other girl, Brenda, spoke up with a giggle on her lips.

"Yeah, I was, and I liked it better there than where I am right at this moment, because at least the guys there respected my privacy enough to not ask stupid ass questions or bother me when I'm doing something that includes me and only me!" I spat in her face and started away once again, this time insistent that I'd not turn again.

"Ru-hude," Mandy got out in a cocky manner and was rewarded with a middle finger from me.

But they left me alone after that, and for that fact, I was grateful. My nerves were still on the edge as I waited in line to check out. Finally it was my turn, and I had little patience as the cashier scanned everything of mine. I tapped my foot to note my impatience until finally the man behind the counter told me the total. I swiped my debit card through the small machine in front of me and punched in the PIN, and was greeted quickly by authorization and finally a receipt.

I fled from the store as quick as I could without turning heads and loaded my things into the back of my SUV frantically, afraid that those girls would pop out from between a few cars just to badger me more. Fear rose in my throat as that thought ran through my mind and I quickened my pace just that much more. I was finished in a speed that surprised even myself and I settled into the car, letting out a deep breath as I started the car. They didn't follow me, to my relief, and I started off toward my new home again.

I was considerably calmer when I reached my street and parked on the road in front of the building just long enough to unpack my car. Once I had everything put away, I sank into the couch to relax for a few minutes. That was until a beep came from my phone to remind me of the messages waiting on it.

In the most reluctant, slothful manner I'd used all day, I rose and walked to the farther of the two end tables to get my phone. I pressed the button to get my messages and waited as the electronic voice went through the motions that would take me to what I really wanted. I had eighteen messages, but a lot of them were hang ups, probably from people that knew where I was, but forgot when they'd called, or not realized enough that I wouldn't be allowed my phone in such a place.

The first of the real messages was from my dad, "Taylor, I need you to call me as soon as you get this. Your mother has told me some things, and I just think we need to talk," His voice was authoritative but not angry. Still, I knew I wasn't ready to call them, especially knowing what the conversation was bound to be about and what the end result would probably be, which would not be something that would make me happy. At best it would embarrass me.

The second was from Natalie, "Taylor, what's going on up there? I just heard on MTV news that you were in the hospital, but they didn't say why. Call me. I worry about you hun," Her southern accent was already back, and with a vengeance. I really didn't want to call her either, but I was sure that since there wasn't another message from her, that she'd gotten the story, at least most of it, from someone close to both of us.

The third was from Ike, "Hey man. Welcome to your new casa. I hope you're doing all right. Call me when you're all settled. Later," I probably would call him, and much sooner than the two before his. Much sooner.

The fourth, and final message on my phone was from Zac, "You're staying in Tulsa? Why are you staying in Tulsa? Why didn't you tell me? You told me you'd be home soon! I had hoped we'd be able to talk . . . God you're impossible. Whatever," His voice had gone from frantic to angry. That was Zac though, and I'd learned to live with his mood swings over the years. He was the one I wanted to call least, as I'd rather face the confrontation with my dad than him at this point, even if it would just be over the phone. Though I'd called him, I couldn't bring myself to even want to talk to him about what happened between us, much less actually bring myself to do it.

I set my phone down again and went into the bedroom. It was only seven in the evening, but already I was exhausted from the sum of the day's events. My bed wasn't even made properly, only a fitted sheet covering the mattress and the folded sheet and comforter at the edge. With languid motions, I pulled the comforter to me, reveling in its freshly washed smell, and curled up around the body pillow that laid across the bed, letting my mind drift into sleep, which I so desperately needed after such a day.

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## Chapter Thirty-One

I awoke the next morning just after ten to the sound of my phone. Once I realized what it was, I let it ring, not wanting to really talk to anyone. The phone kept ringing though, with only a few slight pauses for whenever my voicemail would pick up and the caller would attempt calling again. Four times it did this before I rolled over and picked the despicable thing up from the floor. It was Isaac, but I wasn't surprised because only he and Zac would call me all day if needed until I would answer, "Hello?" I asked my throat still dry from sleep.

"Sleeping?" Ike asked with a laugh.

"Yeah . . . ," I got out in a quick tone, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"So how are you holding up?" He asked, and though I knew that he was somewhat concerned, I also knew from the sound of his voice that his concern was not the only thing on his mind.

"I'm good. You forgot my silverware and shit though"

"Shit, I knew I forgot something," He told me in an effort to make decent conversation, "Anyway, I got a call last night from Ashley," He poured out and I knew this was going to be the hidden agenda, "He tells me to get online, look at the forums . . . "

"Ughhhh . . . ," I groaned out, knowing that this couldn't be a good thing, especially with the tone he was using.

"And so I do," He continues as if I've made no sound at all, "And the first thing I see there is a post with three hundred replies and over two-thousand views"

"Okay . . . ," I trailed off when he paused, wishing he would just get to the point already.

"The original poster lives in Tulsa and claims to have seen you at WalMart last night with a couple of her friends . . . ," He trailed off in a pointed, accusatory manner. He went on to continue what he read, though the girls made themselves look lily-white and me the Big Bad Wolf, "Did this really happen, Tay?"

I sighed heavily, "Their version is way off from the truth"

“Then what really happened?”

“First off, they followed me around half of the store and one just blurts out, “Were you really in the nuthouse?” or something like it, just as rude. I turned to leave and they said they knew that I OD’ed on coke, then one of them asks if it was because of “that evil whore-bitch”, meaning Nat, and I told them not to call her that and none of what happened was her fault, not the divorce not OD-ing, none of it,” I took a deep breath before continuing, “And I started walking away again, and them saying that they heard it was because I was gay, that part is true, along with everything after”

“Tay . . . ,” He told me, half scolding, half desperate, “You can’t go- “

“I know, but you know what? If fans are going to be like that, then I don’t care. They’ll get what they give. They should have just left it alone when I made it quite clear that the question made me uncomfortable”

“But they didn’t and you could have kept walking away,” Ike rationalized the situation.

“If they’d have said anything but what they did, I would have,” I retorted.

“But instead you lost your temper and now there is huge gossip about you floating all over the Internet!” He breathed a bit and calmed, “What are we supposed to do about this?”

“Don’t do anything . . . well, don’t say anything,” I told him, “Just erase the thread and have the mods do the same if another one pops up. They’ll eventually get the idea that it isn’t true, even if it really is”

“I hope you’re right,” Ike sighed, “Well, I’m gonna go and do that and get some other things squared away up here. You take care all right? And from now on, watch your temper, please?”

“I’ll try . . . You take care too,” I told him and heard a click as his end disconnected. I sighed heavily, looking at my phone as I sat up.

Once my pointless staring contest ended, I put the phone atop my dresser and headed into the bathroom to shower. After I finished that task, I clothed myself in an old, fitted Pink Floyd shirt that had once been my dad’s, and a pair of baggy, grey pajama pants. Smoothing my hair back into an elastic, I made my way into the living room. I put Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (the new one of course, special edition) into the DVD player and plopped down on the couch. Today was to be a lazy day, I knew that immediately, but also know that I wanted cable and the Internet. So I picked up my phone once the movie finished, and looked for the phone book my landlord had given me. After far too much waiting, I got to set up an account for both digital cable and cable Internet. Of course I told them that I already owned a cable modem, since they always liked to try to make people shovel out an extra sixty bucks for one of theirs. Someone would be sent out on Thursday, they told me once I gave them my credit card information.

Less than two days was bearable though, as I knew I was lucky to not be stuck a week without it, and settled into watching DVDs for the rest of the day. I enjoyed the fact that I could watch whatever I



wanted and got to the bathroom, and eat, and get a drink, whenever I wanted. But I was still lonely, and by late evening I missed the company I'd become accustomed to while I was in the clinic. It had been nice to be around so many people without working or them being relatives, regardless of the circumstances I had been in to meet them in the first place.

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## Chapter Thirty-Two

Despite the fact that I was just released from a place that kept me indoors for a full month, I was a hermit after my experience shopping. Until the cable guy arrived, I kept myself occupied by going through my movie collection. After that, I was consumed for all of two days, flipping through the channels. This ended when, on Saturday evening, I found the only thing decent to watch on tv was Vampire Hunter D. Its not that I didn't enjoy the flick, it just reminded me far too much of Zac, as it was one of his favorites.

I threw the remote down and fidgeted in my chair for a few minutes before willing myself toward the computer. The laptop sat closed on my desk, a mouse connected to it so I didn't have to use the touchpad. It had been like that since I had the internet installed on Thursday morning. I think I was avoiding it so that I didn't surf our forums or even the ones from unofficial sites and say something stupid in response that I'd regret later.

But alas, there I was, and I knew I'd be eventually drawn there sometime, sooner or later. The screen came alive once I opened it and pressed the power button. I was actually impatient as the stupid machine booted up. Finally, it was finished and I clicked the Internet Explorer icon, watching as hanson.net loaded. Warily, I signed on, knowing that a full-scale, digital riot would ensue. Before that would happen, I sent the two moderators that were on then messages to tell them not to delete messages. I was determined to deal with it myself.

On the members side, it only took mere seconds for them to realize my presence (I'm not sure, but I swear that someone must keep watch at any hour of the day). There were five of the usual (Hi Tay!; Come read this Taylor!; etc) before I even realized it, but finally one caught my attention. The subject of it read: Hey Taylor, is it true?

I clicked on it and carefully read its contents:

A few days ago, a girl came on here, claiming to have seen you in Tulsa. I'm just wondering what all is true, if anything of what she said.

Did you really OD?  
Did you go to rehab?  
Are you gay?

I sighed as I gazed at the message. Already there was one reply:

Shut up, its none of your or any of ours' business

It was true, but not genuine. Despite their response, I knew they were just as interested in an answer.

I clicked on the reply button and had a staring match with the screen for a few minutes as I thought of how I wanted to respond. The words actually came sooner than I thought they would and furiously typed it out so I wouldn't forget any of it:

Yes, I am in Tulsa. I needed some time off after being in the hospital. Yes, it was because of a form of drugs, but I won't say what one or ones. That could be anything from alcohol or weed to heroin or meth. Keep that in mind before listening to everyone else's testimonies. I won't tell you anymore than that.

About your third question, I'm just wondering why its even an issue, and such a big one at that. I never said that I was, but apparently the OP from the other day assumed that the answer I gave was a yes.

Honestly, those girls were the brash ones. I'd just been out shopping and ended up followed, then accosted for all it was worth to those three. The first question asked was if I went to the nutward, and I found it rude and declined answering. They then insulted my ex-wife, insinuating it was her fault when in reality she's done nothing wrong, ever, to deserve what they called her.

After that, I began away and one of the girls had the audacity to say, "I heard its cause you're gay," And by this time, I just wanted to be alone because they weren't respecting my privacy at all, so I told them everything that you read the other night for yourselves.

It was an outright rude thing to say, or even assume with no proof at all. I'd rather this rumor, well above any other, didn't spread any further unless by some chance I'd give anyone a REAL reason.

And I don't think anyone will have that reason anytime soon.

Taylor :-D

I didn't even bother to read the replies that had come while I was typing. Instead I opted for sifting through the throngs of email I had waiting for me. I didn't even really respond to most of them, save for a short 'thank you' to those who had wished me well, *I'm getting there*, I thought a bit grimly with a

sigh after sending the last one.

My thoughts wandered as I stared at the screen. The biggest question and concern was if what I'd said earlier was believable. So I went back. It had been just over an hour by then, but already eight full pages were constructed. That was two hundred replies with the filled pages, plus some on a quickly filling page nine. I skimmed the posts, satisfied that most believed it. There were a few though that fought it. I decided to let them be disbelievers. They were few enough in number to squash the rumor mill. Some, I knew, would go to unofficial sites and brandish photoshopped pictures of me with a guy (I didn't worry about the clinic, as I knew no solid proof would be found of my whereabouts for the past month) or what have you, but they were never real enough to cause sensation.

After leaving the moderators permission to keep the thread as long as there weren't huge debates born from it. I'd done that in hopes that the topic would die off by Monday. I didn't really know if it would actually work, but I really didn't care by then. My piece had been said, so I retreated again to my seat in front of the television.

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### Chapter Thirty-Three

It turns out that I was right. By Monday evening, when I again went online, the topic had fallen back past page seven, which was quite the norm for any topic, no matter how interesting they might have been at first they would always fade away, unless getting pinned. This knowledge soothes my mind a bit as I got off the computer and prepared for bed. I was still very much on a schedule, and got drowsy by midnight at the latest.

I awoke the next morning just a little past eight and got showered and dressed, ready to go to the clinic with plenty of time to visit before having to see the doctor. When I arrived, Becca who was one of the receptionists and the one who happened to be at the window when I arrived, gave me a bright smile and greeted me with, "Well good morning Taylor. You're a little early though, aren't ya?"

Matching her smile first, I shrugged, "Figured I'd give a little time to visit"

She smiled wider from my ever-polished charm and let a tiny giggle escape her lips, "Well go right ahead. Me or someone back here will come get you when its time for your appointment"

I nodded silent thanks before making my way down the corridor. Those who were in there still looked sleepy, many of them lounging in sweatpants and worn t-shirts of various styles. One of those people was Skylar, lazily lying across an overstuffed chair, eyes distantly watching the television. A few noticed as I crept up behind him, but before they were able to make it obvious, I put a finger to my lips to let them know that I didn't want them to voice their knowledge.

My face was hidden just out of his peripheral vision and I put my lips right behind his ear. Some of the others stifled laughs as I threw a mischievous glance to those who looked on, waiting to see what I planned to do, "Wake up!" I shouted well over loud enough to startle him. He jumped and turned his

head. Once he saw me, he flipped himself quickly into a sitting position before wrapping his arms around me, “Oh my god,” He breathed out in shock. Then he pulled away and punched me in the arm, causing those around to laugh as I winced, “You asshole!” He cried out and the roar of laughter around us got louder, “You coulda given me a heart attack!”

“Hey, I told you I’d be here on Tuesdays . . . damn,” I replied while massaging my upper arm, “Damn,” I repeated as a bolt of pain surged through my arm.

“You didn’t have to yell in my ear!” He retorted.

A smile came to my face as the pain receded, “You didn’t look awake enough,” I quipped.

”Fuck you,” He pouted and crossed his arms over his chest, “You didn’t have to do *that*”

“Yeah he did,” Kane choked out while trying to muffle a snicker.

Skylar’s face became an almost fluorescent red and he fell back into his laying position, “Yer a jerk,” He pouted more and put his energy into making it seem like he was watching the television.

I made the situation turn around to my advantage as I ungracefully set myself down to sit . . . on his stomach. I couldn’t help the laughter that erupted from me as he cried out, “Oh, am I too heavy?” I asked in a mix of mock sympathy and innocence.

“Get off me you heifer!” He cried while desperately trying to push me off of him, “Your bony ass is cutting off the circulation to my dick!” I laughed and tilted myself more towards his legs, not intentionally to hurt him by that moment, merely because I couldn’t contain my amusement, “AH!” He cried out again, “That’s my bladder you bastard!”

“Taylor,” I heard Becca call from the side of the room. This distracted me and gave Skylar the opportunity to shove me off of his frame. It came too fast for me and I found myself unable to brace my fall. Soon after hitting the floor, a pain shot to all parts of my body, the point of reference being my tail bone. Falling to lay, I let out a cry of pain and grabbed at the furthest back point of my hips as I could, “Fuckin’ A . . . ,” I groaned out while clenching my teeth and grimacing.

“Taylor,” Becca repeated in a much more authoritative tone. I looked her way, still wincing, to let her know I was listening, “The doctor’s ready to see you”

My head nodded painfully, “Gimme a sec,” I breathed out, trying to force the pain away. After a minute or so it finally fell away enough to be bearable and ignore it and stood, rubbing my lower back, “I’ll be back . . . ,” I told everyone in a sore voice before making my way toward the hallway.

It seemed to take forever to make it to Dr. Jeff’s office and he gave me a worried glance once I finally did, “Taylor, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I choked out as I sat in the softer of the two chairs, “I kinda sat on Skylar and it backfired”

“Why on Earth would you do that?”

I let out a small chuckle but found it a bad idea immediately as my body shaking the little it did made me hurt again. I straightened myself before saying, “Well, I kinda surprised him when I showed up,” Dr. Jeff gave me a look that told me that I should explain, “I yelled in his ear before he saw me and it scared him and he hit me, so I sat on him . . . ,” I still couldn’t help being amused from the whole ordeal.

“Should this concern me?” He asked with a brow raised as he reached for my file.

“Nah,” I waved it off, “We used to dick around like that all the time”

He let out a breath, “That’s good,” He smiled, “So, how are you? Other than your posterior injuries of course”

“Been all right . . . ,” I told him but veered my eyes away and my reaction was just enough for him to take notice.

“What made you make *that* face?”

I sighed before telling him about the first night that I was out, in detail. Then I went to describe what I’d said online, “So yeah, other than that, it was all right”

“You’re actions with those girls is a lot more tame than what they could have been, but not excused. Next time you find yourself in a situation of that caliber, try to walk away from it,” He told me after finishing his scribbles, “You’re a relatively outspoken person when you’re backed into a corner and its situations like that, that you shouldn’t be. You could end up in trouble for speaking your mind . . . as you obviously saw well enough,” I nodded absently, “I mean, you obviously . . . left out a lot of the truth when you wrote what you did on your website ergo you were not ready to have that made public,” He caught my eye, “Am I right?”

I let out a deep huff of air, “I’ll say . . . I mean , I just . . . Honestly, I’d have done a line of coke in front of them if it meant that they’d leave me the hell alone!”

“Frustration is normal, Taylor,” He told me calmly, “We just need to find you a better way to vent it than folding under pressure,” He paused in thought, “I know,” He piped up after a moment, “You still have that journal, right?” I nodded, “Take it with you when you go out and write down anything you need to. Run away from whatever you’re doing if need be, but get it out and think about things once you do that if you plan on trying to resolve what’s causing your frustration,” I pondered it a minute, “Will you do that? I won’t need to read it, I just want to have you get it out”

“Kay,” I told him quickly but with a genuine smile.

He drummed his hands on his notebook, “All right, well you do that and I’ll see you next week”

With a quick goodbye, I made my way, as carefully as before of course, out of his office and slow step by slow step, made my way back down the hallway and to the only friends I had in a thousand miles of me.

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## Chapter Thirty-Four

Though I was still feeling a bit impish, my return to the common room was calmly made, completed by plopping down on the sofa where Skylar now sat with Mikey. I came between the two, “So, what’s goin’ on?” I asked nonchalantly.

Skylar’s face lit up with a smile and bright eyes when he saw that I was there, but masked it quickly, fearing people to see him, “Nothin,” He whispered, throwing me a secret smile hidden behind his hand before commencing to chew on the side of his thumbnail.

“Really? I asked in a mock-interested tone, “I can’t believe that,” I crossed my arms and turned away from his gaze with my nose up, “What about you?” I asked as my face fell to the sight of Mikey.

Mikey cocked his brow, “Are you on something?” I shook my head fervently at his question, “Okay . . . ,” He drawled out and his grin showed his disbelief, “Anyway, he’s right, nothing’s gone on to report,” He shrugged, “What’s it like on the outside?” He asked over-dramatically like the convicts in classic films.

It was my turn to shrug, “People still can’t drive, Bush is still a moron, sun still rises though . . . same old, same old,” I sighed and looked around to see a lot of the people looking our way, “Other than that I was accosted by these three evil fan chicks about where I’ve been and why . . . so I told them off”

“Dang, it would be nice to have people notice, or even care, that I’ve been gone,” Pat told me from the chair to my right. A smile graced his expression, but his tone was sadly genuine.

“No, you don’t. Those girls were the type of fan that are just waiting for their idol to fall on their face,” I grumbled.

“Count me out then. I tend to do that a lot,” Pat laughed.

“So do I, so you can just guess how amused my fans are by me,” I chuckled with him. I spent about an hour with them, well until they got up for lunch.

Skylar stayed back for a few minutes. Scott volunteered (uh-huh . . . ) to stay back with us. He was polite enough though and stayed in the doorway of the common room as we stayed sitting on the couch to talk.

“So, other than those girls, how’ve you been?” He asked softly, shyly averting my eyes.

“Bored, a couch potato . . . ,” I grinned a bit, “There really isn’t a lot to do when your only friends are either locked up somewhere or a thousand miles away,” I shrugged, “So I stay home and veg all day,” My face took on a more serious expression as I asked, “How are *you*?”

“Well I was out here today,” He piped.

“I noticed,” I smiled, “And I’m glad you were, but other than that?”

He shrugged and tilted his head down again, “I’m lonely,” He almost whispered, putting his hand delicately just above my knee, “I miss having you around”

Slowly, I let my arms go around him, “I miss you too,” I whispered and placed a kiss on his cheek as I pulled away enough to look at him, “But that should be more reason to want out of here”

He looked me in the eye and I saw tears glazing over his own brilliant orbs, “But I feel like I need you here to do it”

I let out a long sigh, “I don’t know what I can do about that . . . ,” I trailed off in deep thought on the matter, “Maybe I could come see you more often”

“Mikey’s girlfriend came to see him yesterday, and they went out on a walk then too,” Skylar’s face lit up, “They had Jon with them, but still”

“We could ask Scott to go . . . ,” I trailed off, looking toward the doorway. Scott’s face was turned away, but he gave a thumbs up with the hand I could see from my position, “There,” I announced, gesturing toward Scott, “He’ll do it,” I smiled as I looked back at Skylar, “How about I’ll come on Tuesdays to visit everyone, and I’ll come Thursdays and Saturdays just for you?”

“Promise?” He asked, and his face and tone almost seemed desperate. Maybe it really was.

I let my arms tighten around him again, “Of course,” I breathed out as I felt his own arms about my waist. Slowly, I pulled my face away and looked into his eyes. I drank his features in, committing them to memory, an update from the last image I’d had from before I was married. I still couldn’t help but see that melancholy face, those sad, hurt eyes, whenever I’d think of him. Even after seeing him for the first time in over three years at that very clinic, this was the picture I held of him in my thoughts.

Before I realized what was really going on, my face was nearing his and soon my lips connected with his. I felt as if I could cry as my lips molded to fit with his own. It was so simple, so innocent, but I felt a rush of blood run through my veins like it could burst right through my skin. When we parted I continued to look at him before saying, “Well, you better get to lunch,” I muttered then looked at the wall clock: It was twenty until one, almost time for lunch to be over.

"I'm not hungry," He pouted.

I cocked my brow and backed off a little, "I don't think you can afford to skip a meal"

He pressed his head against my chest as he again embraced me, "I just don't want you to go"

"Ohh . . .," I cooed with a little laugh at how adorable he sounded, "I'll be back in two days and if you want, I'll spend almost all day here," I felt his slight nod, "But I gotta go. You need to eat," I stood after placing a kiss on his forehead. He was teary-eyed when he stood as well, "I'll be back here at ten on Thursday, I promise," I emphasized the last two words as I pressed my forehead to his. He nodded before we kissed again.

I'll miss you," He whispered as I turned to walk away, and it was just too much for me to handle.

I pulled him to me and kissed him roughly, my hands gripping his waist, "I'll miss you too," I smiled once we parted, "As soon as you get out of here, we won't have to miss each other"

"I know, I'm workin' at it," He muttered, then brightened suddenly, "Check it out," He pulled up the sleeve to his long t-shirt. All the cuts on his arms were now merely pink, scarred flesh. Those scars would stay though and that made me a little sad, but I was glad that he wasn't picking at them or anything like that, "And the doc said my moods are getting better"

I gave him a quick kiss, "That's good . . . very good. Hopefully it won't be too long before you're out of here"

"And with you," He smiled mischievously.

"Exactly," I muttered and matched his grin before giving another quick peck, "But for now, I gotta go," He walked with me to the door. Other than a hug, though it was a bit long, we behaved in front of the nurses, and of course the direct view of Scott, "I'll see you soon," I grinned before giving a playful shove at his shoulder, "Get to lunch," I told him with a grin, and as he walked off, gave his ass a quick, discreet squeeze. Even Scott didn't notice with his careful eye now that we were in front of the nurses.

I felt a pang of sadness as I watched Scott lead Skylar further down the hall to the cafeteria. I couldn't dwell on it long as I heard my cell phone ring. My blood ran cold as I saw the number. It was all too familiar to me, and the name flashing above it only confirmed my fears: Zac.

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## Chapter Thirty-Five

I was highly tempted to ignore the call, but my conscious got the better of me with the idea that it really would do more harm than good as I flipped open my phone, "Hello?"



"I know you got my message. You got Ike's," I could hear his anger even through his apparently strong attempt to mask it, "Why didn't you call?" He asked while unclenching his teeth, though it ended up sounding like he was about to break down instead of break something.

"I-," I stuttered, "I couldn't. I couldn't make myself tell you, okay?"

"What, did you think I wouldn't notice?!" He seethed.

"No, I just-," I paused again, my voice wavering because of the anger he emitted, "I was gonna tell you . . ."

"When?" He challenged, and when he got no response yelled out, "Damnit Tay!" And cooled off a bit before asking, "Well, when are you coming home?" That tone was just irritated.

"I don't know," I muttered.

"What?"

"I-don't-know," I got out through my teeth, "Right now, I'm staying here mostly for Sky. After he gets out, well . . . I don't even know then"

"What, are you never gonna come home now?" He demanded, "Are you just gonna ignore everything up here? You know, your *life*"

"Oh, I see how it is . . .," I smiled bitterly as I spoke and unlocked the door to my car, "But you see Zac, I told you the day you ran out on me that I wasn't gonna be there when you came around to reality"

"No, its not like that!" He tried defending himself, but it was too emotionally done, and I knew him better. I knew that he got over dramatic when its not the complete truth. Some of it had to have hit the mark just a bit, "We've got a tour to do . . . Hell, appearances that it would be nice to have you present for-"

"And it can wait and you know it. Zac, I can't leave right now. If I leave, Skylar's alone here," I tried explaining as the thought brought tears to my eyes, "I personally don't care at the moment if some fans have to wait a few extra months to see us on tv, or to get a new autograph, because God forbid their old one starts fading-," I cut myself off quick, knowing that I was being bitter toward the wrong thing, "Its not like it will be another four years like last time," I sighed, "Anyway . . . I *do* really care, right now, if Sky goes and cuts himself up more because I deserted him again!" I didn't realize I'd actually begun crying until a breeze hit my face and chilled the tear streaks on my face, "Look," I said and drew in a deep breath to try to calm myself, "I don't know what's going on right now, but-"

"We all miss you so much," He blurted out and I could hear the shaking in his voice, "You know I do. You have to know that much . . . And Lynni's been calling, well was calling. She gave up after I found

out you weren't coming back and told her. And Ike, he's just letting you stay because he knows that he can't change your mind, but we're all miserable. Tay, its been a month. None of us three have been away from each other for that long . . . ever"

"I'll come back. Fuck, its not like I'm running away"

"Seems like it to me," Zac huffed out in a mutter.

"*I'm* not the one that runs, remember?" I shook the anger from my mind, "Anyway, I'm not arguing this. You're acting like we're a couple, but we're not! You made damn sure of that . . .," Taking another deep breath, I continued, "I'll come home Zac, but I'm not leaving Skylar here"

"What the hell are you gonna do?" He burst out and it almost hurt my ear, "Come out? Act like he's just a new part of the crew?"

"I wouldn't even care right now. Hell, we could to both for all I care!" I sighed to cool down, "I'll deal with it when the times comes, but for right now, just chill. I'll be home when I come home," And with that I hung up, tears welling again in my eyes as I started the car.

The whole way home my mind was reeling, running circles around everything that Zac had said to me. He was hurt by my not coming home. I hadn't really meant to hurt him like this, I was just putting my foot down on what I'd told him when we'd fought. I wasn't going to coddle him. But I did still hurt him.

But I couldn't, just couldn't turn away from Skylar. The thought made my heart heavy on its own. I couldn't make it reality. Then I started thinking of him, and how good his kiss felt, how amazing just the sight of him had made me feel. How his smile lit up his entire face when he was truly happy. And he was happy with me.

I'd fully returned to my cloud by the time I'd gotten home. The entire conversation Zac and I had shared was nothing more than a distant memory for the time being. My body felt so warm when I entered my apartment, but it wasn't an uncomfortable heat. Instead my fingers were tingling as I sat on the couch. I'd not had this feeling for years now. It felt good. In an almost drugged way, I reached over to the nearest end table to fetch the remote to my stereo and pressed play, letting The Used's In Love Or Death play through its speakers.

For over an hour I laid there, fighting the comfortable numbness that passed over me. I dazed in and out of consciousness for a while before a daydream stuck in my head. Reaching down, I adjusted myself as my imagination showed Skylar sauntering towards me. He looked as if he'd gotten a bit of sun in my dream, a thing that you could tell he'd not had in months at that point in time, and wore nothing but an almost ragged pair of jeans and even they were pulled as far as they could without exposing everything God gave him.

He entwined our legs as he leaned over me, his kiss rough as it hit my lips. He wasn't usually the one to initiate things, unless it was in my mind, so I always enjoyed my mentally orchestrated romps with him.

His hand (which was in reality my own) ran down my torso and unbuttoned my jeans. I even let out a gasp when I touched myself, picturing and feeling in my mind that it was him. I let out a groan as I gave a quick, rough tug, wishing so badly that it was real, wondering how good it would feel if that had been the case.

"I love you," I felt him whisper in my ear as the sensation 'his' hand gave me rose higher and higher. I tried containing myself a bit as I came, not wanting to make so much noise that any neighbor could hear, but I could help the few loud moans that escaped.

In my dream, I felt as he placed a kiss on my lips and rose off of me. With a pout, I watched as he walked away, seeing as the view came clearer, Zac's face. It was filled with not cynicism or anger, but instead lust and curiosity.

Panic filled me as my body jolted awake. My eyes scanned the room, and no one was there of course. Zac didn't lay sensually across my favorite chair. Skylar wasn't exiting the room toward the kitchen. This vision swam in my head though until I sat up and pressed my hands against my temples, gritting, "Get out," To will the confusing predicament away. Far away.

I stood then, determined to keep myself busy until I exhausted myself enough to not think anymore. It was more than I could stand, even with medication. That evening, I cooked myself stuffed chicken and scalloped potatoes, and cherry cobbler for desert. Hand made of course. Then I did the dishes and put them all away. This was after I had cleaned the rest of the house, and did my laundry. It sounds a bit extreme, I'm sure, and I was up until one in the morning doing all these things. I was beat when I'd finally quit moving, but did as I'd planned, falling into a deep, too deep for memorable dreams, sleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

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## Chapter Thirty-Six

I kept my promise to Skylar and came to see him as I said I would. Scott looked relieved himself to be outside as well in the daylight hours, following close behind us as we strolled all around the complex grounds. I stayed with him through both lunch and dinner a few times, but mostly took my leave before the dinner hour came, or stayed after a bit to wish him my good-byes a bit more intimately.

"I think they know," Skylar whispered once the bulk of our acquaintances and friends departed almost two weeks after my initial out-patient visit. It was the Saturday before and we made a semi-comfortable place on the couch one the room was emptied save for Scott.

"So?"

"What?" He asked, aghast by my calm demeanor, "You, who were so paranoid back in the day . . . ?"

"Yeah, well a lot's changed, you know?"

"Hopefully not too much," And there was that wickedly enticing smile again.

"Nah, I just . . . don't care who knows anymore. Hell, half the fans are hellbent on the idea without a shred of proof, even after I got online when a fan asked about it and told them what's going on with me . . . well, half of it," I matched his grin, "And my parents are unfortunately aware, and Ike knows, so I don't see why I really need to care so much"

"I know, I just-"

"Didn't know exact details until I said them?" I offered with a cheeky smile.

"Yeah . . . "

"But I'm not going to flat-out tell anyone else either. If they see it, fine. But if they ask I'll just tell them that its out of line cuz it shouldn't matter either way and its not their place to ask it anyway," I shrugged, "Like always"

"When did you get so decisive about this?" He asked, leaning his body against me and putting his head on my shoulder, "Its like you're just going with the flow about it now"

I thought a moment before a bittersweet thought ran through my head, "When I realized it was a mistake to get married," I told him in all honesty, my voice soft, "Which was right after Nat got pregnant again. I realized that I was falling out of love with her, if I was ever in love to begin with. I tried to fix it, I really did try to hold on, but it didn't work," I sighed, "But even before that I'd be flirting with guys at clubs, right under her nose or behind her back and have them come back with me when I was away from her for a good fling or even just a makeout session. She and I . . . it was a fire just waiting to burn out and after it did, I swore I'd quit hiding what I felt and for who"

"So I wasn't the only one?" He asked, and though he tried to hide it, I sensed his hurt and could see it in his eyes.

"No, but you were the only one I really felt anything for. The others were just flings," I shrugged again, "Nothing like you," I whispered and kissed his temple.

"Promise?" He squeaked out.

I ran my fingers through his hair and chuckled, "I'm gonna lose track of all these promises here soon," I took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, "But yes, I do promise. Some of them might make my head still turn a little," A smile came over my face, "But none of them could stop me dead in my tracks . . . or make me wanna stay a thousand miles from home for any of them"

"You sure about that?" He asked, though a smile played through his words.

I hugged him tighter, "Positive," Then I looked to the clock. It was twenty after already, "Well, I better

be going," I sighed and he nodded solemnly.

"Tuesday, right?" He asked as we made our way to the front door.

I nodded before leaving a light kiss on his lips after making sure of course that no one was watching, "Bright and early," I smiled and he nodded back at me before I made my way through the thick, metal doors to the outside world.

The bleak day it had been when I arrived had faded into an equally dreary twilight, its grey clouds fading into a dark slate as the night swallowed the city. As I got into the car, I could see a murky, orange haze covering the city from its abundance of mercury lights. There was no rain, though the thick clouds threatened it.

My mood was the opposite of the weather. I was light and smiling. I had been for days. I'd even gone to the grocery store in the past week. No stalkers there, to my utmost relief. I got to see Skylar on a regular basis and I could *see* that he was getting better.

That day, in fact, he'd been playing cards when I'd come in, and he was laughing. I didn't bother to ask why, as I was happy enough knowing he wasn't bored out of his mind and miserable when I wasn't there. He was slowly getting back to being the Skylar I knew before our break-up.

Tuesday came about and of course I'd have to be late. It began bad, as a storm knocked out my power overnight and so reset my alarm clock. Then I had to take a detour the entire way around the city because of wind damages. I ended up having to sprint into the clinic and was still five minutes late.

"The one day he's ready for you on time, and you're late," Cori attempted to scold me, but she was smiling despite her words, "You can go right on in"

"You're late," Dr. Jeff remarked as I walked in.

"I had to go almost the whole way around town to get here," I sighed as I plopped down onto my regular chair.

"As did I," He retorted before clearing his throat, "That's okay though," Smiling, he looked to me, "How have you been?"

"Great," I beamed and told him how I'd actually gone out for once, "And I've finally picked up on my music again. I've got the better part of two songs already"

"That's good," He nodded as he scribbled, "Skylar's done nothing but talk about you, and I wanted to ask you something . . . "

"Kay, shoot"

"I asked him last week about what he'd do after he got out and he said he was going to stay with you . . . ," He trailed off, cocking his eyebrow toward me.

"Yeah . . . ," I smiled idiotically, "I told him he could," I chuckled a bit as soon as the words left my mouth, "Actually, I told him I wasn't leaving Tulsa without him"

"Are you sure this is wise?"

I shook my head in confusion, "Of course. Hell, we make each other feel better, even you have to be able to see that from both of our appointments"

"Oh yes, of course I know that part. I was actually talking more about your occupation . . . "

I waved my hand in dismissal, "I'm not even going to worry about that. Like I told Sky on Saturday, most of my fans are already one-hundred and fifty percent sure that I am, and besides, I'm tired of hiding it"

"Okay, well I've got something else to tell you then," He told me while putting down his pen and dread filled me for some reason, "I've decided to discharge him," My heart lightened a bit at those simple words, "Next Wednesday," He added after a slight pause.

My heart leapt into my throat and I squeaked, "What?" I was overjoyed, much more than I'd been when he told me that *I* was getting out. I'm betting my smile probably couldn't have gotten any wider, "Really?" And I sounded a lot like when I did when I was sixteen and told I could drive our family car for the first time.

"Yes. He's definitely seemed to have done a good turnaround in the two months he's been here, but of course he'll be required still to come here, just as you do"

I nodded, smiling still, "That's awesome!"

"You can't tell him though, you know that? I'm planning on letting him know in our session tomorrow," Then he corrected himself a bit with, "Actually, because you're not family, its against policy to tell you before him"

I nodded but my eyes were wide and I was smiling, "But that's so cruel!" I laughed out, "You're telling me that I can't go out right now and do a stupid happy dance with him? God," I scoffed playfully.

"You'll be fine, I'm sure. Just do me a favor and act surprised when you come in next week to see him, okay?" I nodded, "All right, well I'll see you Tuesday then," He nodded at me as I stood.

I felt like dancing when I go out of his office. But I didn't, mostly because *no one* wants to see that, and made my way as calmly as possible into the common room. Again Skylar was at the table with Scott, Kane, Tommy and Pat. As I neared the table I noticed that they were playing Texas Hold 'Em. Without

much thought on the matter I grabbed a chair from a nearby table as I passed it and sat it, and myself, at the corner of their table between Pat and Skylar, "What's up?" I asked as soon as I sat down.

"Hey," Tommy, Pat and Kane all chorused.

"Nothin much, man. You want in?" Scott asked as he finished shuffling the deck in his hands.

I nodded, scanning the room as I waited for the cards to be dealt, "So who's the new kid?" I asked, desperate to find something other than my news to think about as I looked over my hand.

"He's a pyro," Kane grinned, "Came in on Sunday. He burned down his house while his parents were on vacation"

"Cuz he was bored!" Tommy piped up in an excited whisper. Scott shot him a look, "What? Its true. You read it yourself in Sunday's paper!"

"Then should I say what you did to get here? It was in the paper as well," Scott challenge and Tommy drew back, his eyes cold.

"You wouldn't dare"

"Oh, but I will if you don't cram it. He's not exactly up to talking about it, and until he does, keep your big fucking nose in your own business," Scott warned the boy. Fleeting thoughts went through my head as to what Tommy's secret was, but I didn't dwell on it as Scott looked to me, "His name is Black and he's got quite the record of fire related incidents. Of course what this jackass said is true enough and that's what got him here. Other than that he's not up to blabbing about it," He looked to everyone else when he finished talking to me, "Can we play now?"

Lunch came quickly once we began playing, then dinner. I didn't say much to Skylar before I left that evening about anything even closely related to him getting out, afraid I'd spill it all. Instead I pecked him on the cheek and whispered, "I've got a secret," In a sing-song voice and threw him a mischievous grin before going out the door.

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## Chapter Thirty-Seven

"So what exactly was this big secret that you know?" Skylar asked as soon as we were outside on Thursday. He'd nearly knocked me down with a hug when I walked in, announcing in something just less than a scream that he was being let out.

I smiled brightly, grabbing his hand as we walked our normal course around the looming structure, "I uh . . . kind of knew you were getting out," I muttered bashfully, looking up at the sky and its lazy curls of clouds, "The good doctor told me during my last appointment"

"Why didn't you tell me?!" He screeched, stopping in his tracks to gape at me.

"Because I wasn't even supposed to know," I told him honestly, "Anyway, I already went out yesterday and got a dresser for you. Its getting delivered on Monday"

He blushed as we continued on, "You don't have to . . . didn't have to do that," He mumbled.

"I wanted to," Was my smiling response.

"I don't even think I've got enough clothes to fill a dresser," He admitted, casting his eyes downward.

His words just made me smile more, "Well we'll just have to fix that now won't we?"

"Tay no-," He began to protest.

"Shush. You're shopping, I'm buying, end of discussion"

"Tay-," He argued still.

"I don't care what you say!" I laughed out, "You *need* clothes"

"I have clothes!" He countered.

"Five outfits is not *even* enough," I told him, crossing my arms and cocking my brow.

He scoffed, "You're impossible"

"No, you just never got spoiled before and from now on that's gonna change," I smiled.

He sighed heavily, "Why?" He whined out.

"Because I care about you, you're going to be staying with me and I don't want to live with some scrawny, vagabond-lookin thing," I chuckled as I put my arm around his waist.

He wriggled out of my grasp, "Well that's nice to know," He scoffed, clicking his tongue, "You are so shallow"

"You love it though," I declared while stopping and threw my arms around him, "Plus, you *know* you wanna go shopping with me, cuz I'm just awesome like that," I told him once I pulled out of the hug, in the haughtiest manner possible.

"I hate you," He tried sounding mad, but his smile deceived his words.



"You just hate that I want to take you out in public and that I'm spending money on you," I smiled wider just to spite him. I looped my arm through his after he pouted a moment and we continued out walk. We were silent for a few minutes and he'd lit a cigarette by the time I spoke again, "So what would you like to do when you get out? After I buy you decent clothes of course"

He shrugged, "Go back to being a hermit," Was his muttered response.

I shook my head and laughed, "That's not allowed, damnit!"

"Too bad," He replied.

"I don't think so. I think . . .," I trailed off, wondering myself what we'd do, "That I'm gonna make you a good, homecooked meal, and then we're gonna go out," I smiled wide.

"I don't think so," He said matter-of-factly.

"I do," My mouth broke out into a full grin.

"And where exactly would we go, smartass?"

It was my turn to shrug, "we'll just have to figure that out then," He said nothing, but from the corner of my eye I saw him stick his tongue out at me, "Want me to bite that off?" I asked as I stopped and pulled him to face me.

Shock invaded his features until his eyes focused on my grin, "No, but I could find another use for it if you like," He whispered coyly.

I let out a groan because my head swam with the possibilities and I folded myself into him, my face buried in his neck. I could smell his soap, his skin, his shaving cream, "If we could actually do something right here and now, that would be my hook, line and sinker," My words made my lips just barely brush over his neck and I smiled a little as I felt goose-bumps rise against my lips.

"Really now?" He breathed out, wrapping his arms just slightly around my waist.

I let a low chuckle vibrate through my lips and onto his tender flesh before giving a quick bite to his neck and saying, "Hell yeah," with a grin plastered over my face. I let my teeth grasp his skin again, savoring the sweet and salty flavor as I nibbled softly, making my way up to his earlobe.

"What makes you think I'd actually do whatever your sick little mind is brewing?" He asked, a bit of his composure seeming to return, but I knew him too well. It was feigned for the most part and he was probably just a smidgen away from trembling.

I peered through his jagged, chunky shag of hair to see that Scott had turned his back on us. I put this to my advantage as I ran my hand down his chest and stomach suggestively, saying, "Cuz you know I'd

return the favor," in a sexxed-up growl as I bupped his jean-covered manhood in my hand and squeezing just enough to give him a little start.

My action seemed to work a little bit better than I'd intended as he muffled an aroused groan into my shoulder before sighing, "God, that's not fair," through his teeth.

"God ain't got nothin' to do with this," I whispered, giving him a rougher squeeze before releasing him and walking off with a smile.

Of course I made it no farther than two steps before I heard him grumble, "You're such a fucking tease," And I had to turn back around, just to smile at him victoriously.

"Told you I haven't changed *that* much," I told him, returning to his side and we continued walking, me putting my arm around his waist and my hand in his back pocket.

"I hoped that we could have at least left *that* particular characteristic in the past"

"Oh," I cooed but my taunting smile held strong, "You don't like it? I thought it made things fun"

"No, cuz you only do it when I can't directly do something about it, and that's not fair!" His teeth were clenched until he let out a deep breath, "God I need a cold fucking shower right now," He added in an exasperated tone.

"I'm sure you'll live," Were my faux-comforting words as I embraced him with both arms while we paused.

His anger didn't last long, and we were laughing again by the time dinner came around. I bid him farewell with a light kiss as well as the exchange of promises that we'd miss each other until the next time I came to visit. That day was Saturday, and then it was a mere three full days before he'd be living with me, in the outside world. The thought put thousands of tiny butterflies in my stomach and a long-lasting smile on my face. I couldn't wait.

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## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Wednesday came on quicker than I'd anticipated, first after the lagging feeling didn't come that I thought would, and after I'd realized how often he would really be around. How would he react to *living with me*? Would he like the place I lived? The last question was idiotic, as I knew that he'd been switched around since he was a kid. But the first still frightened me.

It was a sweltering May afternoon when I'd gotten to the complex, waiting patiently in the bright daylight, a thin t-shirt over my (gradually) tanning shoulders, my hair lightened from the sun's rays and sunglasses holding back the strands from my eyes.

My appointments with Dr. Jeff were becoming more and more casual each time, Tuesdays talking more about concerts I'd kill to see than my problems. I took that as a good sign as I sauntered out of the office and spent a lot of my day with Skylar, giving him ideas for the first few days we'd spend together. So many plans that even I had to laugh at the amount. It would take a year's time.

My thoughts were broken as I saw Skylar exiting the building, a cigarette dangling in his lips and toting the worn brown suitcase over his shoulder. I don't think I could have even measured the smile that came over his face when he noticed me in the circular drive, leaned against my SUV. But I could measure the massive weight against me as he dropped the case and sped at me, jumping straight onto me, legs and arms tangled around my form.

No thoughts could cross my mind outside of how good it felt to have him in my arms, even if it was rather awkward how he clung to me, and welcomed his fervent kisses until he paused them to shriek, "I can't believe you came! I thought you weren't coming, you didn't come in . . . *Why* didn't you come in? You scared me half to death!" This came with a smack on my arm that I merely laughed off along with his words.

"Baby, chill. I just wanted to surprise you is all," My words softened, as did my laughter as we stood there, me holding his slender frame easily since I'd been doing minor workouts in my home and playing my instruments. Our foreheads pressed together and noses touched and I couldn't help but nudge the tip with my own, a thing we did often in the privacy of one of our bedrooms, or in my old basement, or the treehouse, or a car, when we were younger.

"Well just don't do it again," He muttered through clenched teeth, but you could tell at the corners of his mouth and in his eyes that he was trying not to smile.

I don't think anything could have stopped the grin that came over me as soon as I caught sight of him, but that's just me, "I'll try"

"Try?" He cried out, jumping off of me, "Try?!" He nearly yelled.

Before we could get any odd/worried glances from any of the staff, or the thousands of people I was sure were in earshot, I grasped his wrist and pulled him to me, silencing his hissy fit with something rather bold. A hurried, sloppy kiss. One that I would probably never give up for anything. I felt the air rush over me as he breathed in a quick breath, nervous? Worried? Unexpectant? But soon he let his lips mold with mine.

When we pulled apart, he stood dazed a minute in my arms before grinning widely, tilting his head back and nearly screaming, "Free! I'm free!" Before we both fell into a fit of giggles.

I gave his hand a squeeze before nodding towards the car, "C'mon, time to go home," I told him while opening my door.

He sighed as he climbed in, a dreamy smile engulfing his features, "Home," He breathed out.

"Yeah, home," I smiled at him widely and took his hand as I put the vehicle in gear.

Lazily his head fell to the left, smile still there, "You have no clue how great it sounds to hear that coming from you"

All I could do is plaster the grin to my face as we headed off, "Well, its home for now . . . cuz you know that we'll eventually have to go to New York"

"We?" He asked, his brows lifting in surprise.

Another squeeze came to his hand once I shifted into a new gear, "I told you before that I'll be damned if I'm going back without you"

"But-,"

"No buts. I can't leave you, and I can't stay here," I paused a minute in thought, "You'll do fine in New York, and besides we're hardly there anyway"

"That's what scares the piss outta me," He laughed, but it was so nervous it could have shaken the most composed of people.

I couldn't help but laugh a little, "Traveling really isn't all that bad. I mean, yeah you live out of a suitcase or a wardrobe rack for months at a time and it does get really repetitive after a while, but you'll have fun," I smiled again at him, "I'm sure of it"

"And how are you so sure?" He countered, face still doubtful.

"Cuz Zac and I will be there and the crew for the most part is awesome. We really do have a lot of fun on the road"

"But . . .," He got out in a squeak.

"But what, baby?" I asked softly as I picked his hand up and left a kiss over his knuckles.

"I just don't wanna . . .," He tried in a huff of air, "I don't wanna be the third, well fourth, wheel, and I don't want you to end up getting tired of me, and I don't want you to see someone else to like better, and-"

"Sky," I started with a deep sigh, looking for somewhere I could pull off at, "Hold on," I told him as I saw a convenience store a few yards away and pulled into a parking spot. Once I had the parking break on, I turned to him and took his hand again, lacing his fingers in mine and kissing each knuckle before talking again, "Baby, I've never stopped thinking about you, so if you can find me someone I'd think about more than you, or like more than you, or want to be with more than you, *please* point that person out to me, cuz I don't think you'll find one," He gave a sad pout as I said that, "I'm serious. For so long

I'd just be sitting in bed, or in the studio, or with friends and you'll just pop into my goddamn head, and you won't leave. I wouldn't want you to leave, but that's not the point. No one, ever, has had the effect on me you do," His features softened a bit before melting completely as I placed a kiss on his lips as if to seal my words forever, "And about me getting tired of you, or you being a third wheel?" I chuckled, "I've worked with Zac all my life, and even though he annoys the piss out of me sometimes, I wouldn't ever be tired of him. And you won't be forgotten, know why?" He shook his head at me, "Because I love you too much"

I watched as his ears and cheeks reddened and the tears well in his eyes, making them glitter like the Pacific, "Really?" He whispered in a shaky voice.

"Abso-fucking-lutely baby," I smiled, "I never quit"

Suddenly his face was in my shoulder and his whole body shook. Barely I understood what he said, but it rang through my head clear as day once it registered, "I love you too"

Once he was subdued enough from his outburst, I smiled at him, "Think you can handle it now?"

Wiping the tears from his face with the back of his hand, he nodded, "I'm still scared though"

"Shit," I drawled out, "So was I, and I was fourteen! Most people outside of our camp will even know you're there"

"Good," He stated petulantly, and it made me laugh, "But what if someone, like a fan, notices something?"

I shrugged, "So what? So it'll be hot news for a week and they'll have a good laugh"

"But what if someone asks you about . . . us?" He seemed scared to say it, *us*.

"I told you already, if someone asks, I'll tell 'em its none of their damned business . . . unless I'm feeling up to dicking with them, then I'll say, 'Oh, him? That's my hot boyfriend. That isn't a problem is it?' and walk away"

"You're awful!" He gasped, but couldn't help the laughter that followed.

My own laughter filtered into his. It sounded so . . . perfect together, "I know, but you know what? The asshole fans gave me enough shit with the Natalie thing, and for the longest time pictures of her, and of the both of us together, were the hot shit topics anywhere a group of fans could be found," I sighed, "I've learned to stop caring. Take the damned pictures, I don't care! Its their loss for being so freakish and obsessive"

"But what if they make fun of us?" He asked in a tiny voice.

I couldn't help but wrap my arms around him, even in the odd position we sat in, "Baby, do you know exactly how many fans would just die to know that I'm with a guy?" He shook his head, "Too many. Besides, I've been made fun of forever, you know that!"

"I guess," He sighed out.

"Just . . . just don't pay them any attention. I'm yours, not theirs, end of discussion," I smiled.

He sat on the thought a minute before smiling, "You're right. You are mine and they could bitch and rant and complain and point and laugh all they want"

"Good," I nodded pointedly before facing forward again, "So, do you think we're good to actually get home?"

His smile broadened, "Absolutely"

"That's what I like to hear!" I laughed after shouting and we made our way back out onto the highway. A comfortable silence swam between us, my hand laced in his, the rest of the way to the apartment building. He was right though, it just seemed to sound even more amazing to just imagine that we had a home together.

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## Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Food!" Skylar cried out at my question of what we wanted to do.

I couldn't help but laugh as we relaxed on the sofa, "Then we'll have to get some take out or actually shop," His face fell into a pout, "Yes baby, that means you have to actually go into public"

"But I dun' wanna," He huffed.

"Well, there is *one* way we can avoid it," I told him, trying to hide the sneaky grin tugging at my lips.

"Delivery?" He piped up with a hopeful smile.

"No," I drawled out, crawling to straddle him and leaned in to whisper, "We could wait to get food, and you could tide yourself over with some of me"

An inward groan came from him then and he gripped my waist, "Don't tell me things like that," He half-whined, half-whimpered.

"Why?" I asked, still clinging to the seductive whisper I'd used before.

"Because its getting me really fucking hard"

I smiled against his neck as I tried to keep myself under control, which was difficult at that moment, "And that's a problem, why?"

"Cuz its . . . its just been too long, and I'm . . . afraid . . . "

I left a light peck just below his ear and couldn't help but smile, "Afraid of what?" I asked softly.

"I dunno . . . ," He shrugged miserably, "Afraid that I won't be everything you think I'll be? Afraid you'll laugh at me for being a horrible lay? Afraid that I'm just getting my hopes up for something that you'll end up not wanting?"

I sat up so that we were looking eye to eye, and his were rimmed in tears. My smile melted then and my fingers laced into his hair, "Baby," I cooed softly, "You were my first, you were the most amazing out of anyone I've ever had"

"Yeah right," He muttered, choking back a tear.

"No, you were, because you weren't just some fuck. You meant so much to me that I cried when we first . . . ," I trailed off, blushing. He cocked his brow in disbelief, "I did, I just didn't let you see it," I told him in the most sober voice I could muster, "I *love* you and I love being with you and nothing's changing that this time"

"But what if I'm *not* as good as you think I will be?" He sniffled.

I kissed his forehead first and went down over his nose and cheeks before finally making my way to his lips, "Baby," I breathed out before giving another kiss, "There were so many nights when I'd have to think of you, think of us together just to stay hard"

He had to laugh a little, "Bull shit"

"No, really," I smiled at him, "I still get chills when I think of us. Its fucking amazing just to remember it"

"Really?" I nodded at him, "Damn, you put me up on a high pedestal"

"Mmm," I breathed onto his neck, giving little kisses for a moment, "No, I just love you and I want you so fucking bad right now"

Another groan vibrated through his neck and onto my lips, "And what exactly do you propose we do?"

I shrugged but kept my assault on his neck, gripping his hair and tugging lightly, "Whatever happens,

happens," I grinned over his hot skin as one of my hands reached down to grab him through his jeans. They were the only pair of decent jeans he owned, I thought briefly, and that made me a little upset. But we'd fix that soon enough, so I didn't dwell on it.

Instead I devoted all of my energies into making him feel fucking spectacular. Our kisses were rushed, breathy, and so many feelings that were bottled up over the past years (and especially the last months while we were together but unable to *be* together) were finally being released. His skin felt so hot under my hands as I roamed over his body, digging my fingers into his torso like I would when we were younger. He bit down on my lip as I did this and I couldn't help but cry out. This scared him and he pulled away, eyes wide.

"It was a good thing, I promise," I got out breathlessly with a wide grin before we molded into one another again. Sometime within our hungry kisses, we switched places so that he was on top of me, still on the couch, sweat soaking our clothes and I felt like he just fit so perfectly against me, his mouth in mine, his hands on me.

His body felt so warm against my hands as they found their way under his white tee, ghosting my fingertips over his ribs as I lifted the article over his body until he had to raise his arms so I could take it from him. My eyes, though clouded as they were from our compromising situation, went directly to his stomach, looking over the pink scars from his past, "I'm so sorry, baby," I whispered, feeling the lump in my throat grow as I counted the marks in my head. Fourteen in all, splayed in all directions and with variations in their depth and length.

Skylar's soft hands came to cup my face and guided me to look at him, "It's the past Tay"

"I still made them . . . even if I was nowhere to be found," I choked out, "Never again, I promise," I whispered as I leaned down as best I could from where I sat and kissed every one. The gasps that fell from his mouth made me smile, even though a few thick tears zigged and zagged down my face, and I lifted him a little in my arms to put my lips at his navel, revelling at the soft feel of his taut skin and the line of coarse hair tickling my chin and lips. My course traveled upward, and I swear I felt his heart pounding through his chest as my sloppy kisses found their way over the muscles, then the hardened nubs. He sucked a hard breath in through his teeth as I bit down on one, flicked it with my tongue and drew away, blowing on it softly.

His hands were in my hair, tugging at the chunks he could manage in his long, thin hands as I continued my assault, pulling my hips up against his as my hands grasped his sides and my lips found his neck, "Oh god . . .," He sighed out as I breathed over a wet earlobe, pushing my groin into his.

I pulled at his jeans at our lips found each other in a lust frenzied kiss, tongues seeming to be in a wrestling match, though there could be no winner. It wasn't until we parted as I gazed down while I pulled the tab of his zipper that I realized I was shaking some. I was nervous, but I wanted him so much, and all of it just combined in me and sent my insides haywire. I used my eyes to gaze up at him as I let my fingers wrap around the swollen cock in front of me, peeking out through the gap in his boxers.

He lurched forward, head on my shoulder as I pumped him to full attention, trying oh-so hard to keep



my wits as his breathing caught in his throat, "Fuck," He groaned out as I gave one more upswing, more pressure than before, "Tay . . . ," He almost whined, "God, please . . . "

"Please what?" I tried my best to stay under control just to toy with him a little, making my voice more breathy and smirking a little as our eyes caught.

My fingers were curled around the elastic of his boxers by the time he cried out, "Please God, please, don't stop"

"Yes sir," I smiled before pulling roughly at the fabric in my hands, down to his knees before he got up to remove them completely.

I couldn't help but stare in awe of his naked form, as even with the scars he was absolutely breathtaking with his mussed hair, sweat-shined skin and heavy-lidded eyes, "Its not fair that you're still dressed," Came his pouted remark as he stood there.

"Then do something about it," I smirked again and did my best not to laugh as he crawled over me again, pulling at the hem of my shirt with little hesitation as we kissed. I was breathless as he rose up to pull my shirt off, lips swollen from our almost violent contact. Without much thought, I leaned down before he could lower himself on me again and took the head of his prick into my mouth, teasing it with my tongue for a little before descending completely on him.

He cried out and threaded his fingers through my hair again to keep him steady as my head bobbed up and down at a torturously slow pace, letting my teeth just barely scrap over the sensitive skin, a thing I'd learned he liked when we were sixteen. I myself couldn't take it very long though and with one final pull on him with my lips I let him go, and he cried out in protest, "Shhhh, don't worry I'll make it up to you," Was my reply to him with an evil smile as I tugged at my own pants with abandon. But I was too into the moment. My brain wasn't on the simple tasks anymore. I just wanted to be *there* already.

He, fortunately had a little more handle on the moment and did me the favor of aiding me in shedding my pants and boxer-briefs. I gasped as our bare skin connected. Never once had I gotten that sort of rush from something so simple unless I was on drugs that were for that very purpose. But damn, he felt amazing, like we were molding together as we kissed and rubbed against eachother.

I felt at his face as my lips went lower, kissing and nipping at whatever I could reach without breaking any more contact than necessary. His breath pounded against my hand as I traced his mouth with my fingers before he took two of them between his lips, pressing his tongue over the pads and scraping his teeth over the knuckles. After a few minutes of this we resumed our lip lock and I dropped my, now, wet hand down his side and behind, pushing the soaked digits into him slowly, feeling and loving the gasp he pulled in through the cracks of our kiss.

When he regained at least a bit of his composure he forced his hand between us and began stroking me roughly and I couldn't help but cry out and throw my head back. It had been far too long since I'd felt him, since I'd felt anything even like him, like this, "I want you," He crooned out in a few notes higher than his normal voice, and at that point all I could possibly do in response, outside of shagging him

senseless *right then*, was nod. One more sloppy kiss found my lips as he pulled his hand off of me before he actually stood up, a whine escaping me unconsciously in the process.

The lack of heat almost made me cry, but my eyes were closed and head back. I couldn't do anything more right then, it was like all my energy left when he stopped touching me. But it was back in a flash as I felt his shins against my thighs again. Though something wasn't the same . . . his ankles were against my hips. Then I felt his ass against my torso, gliding down as he lowered himself against me. *Oh my fuck . . .*, was my most coherent thought pattern as his weight fell on me again.

Just for good measure, I'm sure, he ground up against me and I heard a small laugh, a giggle even, after I let out a groan while I pressed my dick against him, "Please?" He begged once the sensations hit him as well after a moment of moving against eachother and a back bent kiss from him.

How could I possibly have protested that? Everything seemed so right at that moment, like the piece of a jigsaw puzzle that you looked for forever, the one that didn't seem like it was there anymore. But I found it as I lined myself and guided him over me, enveloping me in the heat and muscle. There was that higher pitched voice again, this time half-crying out, half-moaning as we slowly fit ourselves together. We took a moment after I finally went into him the whole way to share another kiss, this one slower, more powerful in the sense of emotion than passion.

An electric wave of feeling shot through me as we moved against eachother, with eachother. So slowly at first that I felt tears stinging the corners of my eyes, but kept myself under control enough to run my palms over his sides, his hips, his thighs as he moved up and down atop me, to kiss his shoulders and neck softly as his breath got quicker and more shallow once again. With him it wasn't like it was with any other guy I'd been with, it wasn't a fling, it wasn't some short fuck-me relationship that I carried on for a month or so behind Natalie's back. And it wasn't like it was with Natalie either. I tried "making love" to her, but it went from slow to fast in a matter of seconds.

I honestly don't know how long we were there on that couch. Time wasn't an issue so we didn't pay attention to it. We were slow together and actually took time to build up gradually to the speed where we were both soaked in sweat and crying out, gripping at whatever we could reach. For him it was my hair, he always loved my hair. His left arm hooked up around my neck and into my locks from behind and his right switched between cupping my face and threading into my hair from near my ear. My hands couldn't quite be so decisive. They ran up and down his body, all I could reach, grabbed his hips, grabbed his waist, my fingers dug into the plush couch cushions, and all over again in no direct manner.

When we finally got to the point near release, they were on his waist as we kissed roughly when we weren't gasping for breath or crying out. He didn't quite need it, but I still took my right hand and wrapped it around his shaft, pumping faster and faster with our rhythm, slicked with precum and sweat.

What I felt was just barely outside of pain when I finally felt like I was going to let go. My hips were flying against him as hard as I could manage, my left hand gripping his hip and guiding him at the same pace. His vocals shot out into the room as he began to come, coating my own hand and our lower halves with four powerful shots before I finally let go with almost a growl in my throat.

We slowed in a bit faster manner, but it still mirrored our rise to climax. Never had we ever just stopped

after sex. It was something neither of us had ever voiced, but it was more common knowledge between us to gradually "come down". Once we finally stopped, he rested over me, all his weight still on me and me still inside him. With barely even a look he rose up off of me and turned, straddling me again and resting his face in the crook of my neck, listening as our breathing and heart rate returned to normal.

"Your heartbeat matches mine," He whispered, sounding in awe of the idea.

The smile I had on my face was one I couldn't have hidden even if I'd wanted to, "That's because I'm made for you baby," I whispered back, kissing his crown.

"I love you, Taylor," He croaked out in a sleep-thickened voice a few minutes later.

My eyes closed on those words and I relaxed completely between him and the couch, "I love you too, baby," I spoke softly back. His breathing became too regular for him to be awake, but I was damned if I was moving. It was too perfect. So instead I merely reclined the section of the couch we laid on and reached (though it was hard as hell) over for the blanket at the opposite side and covered us up. *Perfect*  
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## Chapter Forty

The phone, that damned phone, always the fucking phone. I groaned out loud my dissatisfaction as I reached blindly for the nightstand. It had been nearly a month since Skylar was let out, and we were like newlyweds, lost together in the confines of the apartment. He was still skittish about going out into public, and I'd entertained it well enough, letting him borrow my clothes and such. But he was getting out of his funk today, even if I had to drag him kicking and screaming out into the world and through the glass doors of a mall.

I was tempted to just turn off the ringer when I finally grabbed my phone, but curiosity got the best of me. It was Zac, and I knew that answering it would at some point equal uneasy feelings, but not answering it would lead me to a very pissed off sibling that was capable of coming down, finding me, and kicking the daylight out of me without even breaking a sweat.

"Hello?" I managed to croak out through my sleep-thickened (and hoarse) throat.

"Took you long enough," I could almost hear him sneer.

"Good morning to you too, muffin," I rolled my eyes and curled the arm underneath Skylar around him again, "Anyway, do you need anything other than to bother me at . . .," I peered at the clock, "Eight in the morning?"

"Oh!" He got out as if he'd just realized for the first time what he was calling about, "Yeah, actually, I do," He pulled in a deep breath before shouting out, "We're number one on the Billboard Singles!!"

A whine was let out from the raven-haired beauty on my chest and he fidgeted around before looking at me with a pair of tired, confused eyes, *Zac*, I mouthed, rolling my eyes and he gave a sleepy grin, giving a thumbs up and a wave before falling again to his resting place.

"Isn't that fucking awesome?!" He asked in the same loud voice.

"Yeah, its fucking awesome, now shut up before I kick you in the head!" Skylar cried out, his voice muffled in my skin.

I couldn't help but chuckle as Zac's voice squeaked through the line, "Wh-Who was that?" It hardly sounded like the Zac I knew, save for one from years and years ago.

Skylar heard his words and grabbed the phone from me, his face still half-buried in my chest as he started, "Dude, who else would threaten you with a kick in the head? Fuck man, lay off the pot," He laughed before handing the phone back to me and proceeding to nuzzle again against me.

"Answer your question?" I asked, trying not to giggle as a mass of Skylar's hair tickled my bare side.

"When . . . when did he get out?" His voice was still small, childlike.

"Fuck man, a while ago," I smiled as Skylar finally found a comfortable position and began playing with the fingers of my free hand.

He was silent on the line for a little bit, "Well, why didn't you call and tell me?"

"Zac," I sighed, "I don't call people unless they call me first, you know that. Plus," I added, "You and I didn't exactly end our conversation on the best of terms last time"

I could hear Zac's heavy breathing and knew he was trying not to cry, "Yeah, well . . . now that he's out, when are you coming home?" He demanded my answer in his tone.

"You didn't like the answer I gave you last time," I seethed, trying to keep my temper down for Skylar's sake.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!" Zac yelled into the phone, his voice breaking and I knew it was from both anger and tears, "You said you were waiting for him to get out and-"

I cut him off, "And nothing! God damnit Zac! He's scared to even go out in fucking public right now, and I'm working on helping him, okay?"

"Isn't that what he was locked up for? For help?" He lashed back at me.

"You don't even fucking get it," I laughed bitterly with my words, "I told you I didn't know when I'd be

home, and I meant it!"

"But I miss you," There was that childlike crying voice that he'd had before.

I wanted to feel for him, but I was too angry at what he'd said, "Yeah, well you better get used to Rosy Palms and her five sisters pretty quick, cuz you'll be lucky if you see me by the end of summer. Sky means more to me than you could ever fucking comprehend. He *needs* me here, and I *love* him, so I'm going to do everything in my power to get him better, get him great, before I drag him into the kind of life we lead. Fuck!" I gasped again, feeling pressure in between my eyes, "He used to be your fucking friend and you're just being a god damned dickhead about all of this because I'm with him and not you!" So it was a brave assumption, but I couldn't contain myself anymore.

"That's not fair, Tay," He sniffled a bit, and I knew I'd hit a nerve, "You're going to use that against me anytime we get in a fight now aren't you?" He took a moment to breathe, "Yeah, he's my friend, but damnit, I . . . I just want you back here. So does Ike, but damnit I want you here more!"

"And I'll be back. I just . . . damnit Zac, do *not* make me fucking choose about shit like this. I told you before, I'm not fucking running away! Just give me some time, okay?" Our fighting was draining me.

"How much time?" His small voice was back again, "I don't know how much longer I can stand this"

"I-don't-know, Zac" I sighed out his name, "Trust me, I miss being up there, but damnit, its just not the right time okay? I'll try to be back before summer's over, but I'm not gonna promise anything"

He sniffled a bit, and I had to blink back the tears before Skylar could notice them, "Okay," He nearly whispered, voice broken and staggering, "Well . . . I guess . . . I guess I'll talk to you some other time"

"Sure thing, and don't worry yourself, okay? I'll be home"

"Yeah . . .," He whispered out and then the line went dead.

I let out a heavy sigh and massaged the bridge of my nose with my fingers, "C'mere," Skylar beckoned softly, pulling me down and him up so that we were eye level, "Don't worry about it. He's just being a girl about this," He smiled and kissed me.

"I know, I just hate this! I hate having to fight with him," I shrunk into his arms, letting his kisses engulf me until we both fell back asleep.

My dreams were lucid, flowing like a lazy creek in August. A knock had come to my door, the door I was living behind in Tulsa actually. It confused me. No one should have known where Sky and I were living. *Maybe just a girl scout trying to pawn cookies off on me*, I thought as I neared the door. I didn't bother looking through the peek-hole, and was bombarded once the door was open.

Full lips seemed to completely absolve my own, hunger, needing, and oh-so warm. My shocked face

was apparent to anyone that might have seen it as we parted, and I looked into the tear-streaked face of Zac, "*I-I'm sorry, I j-just . . . I had to see you,*" He confessed bashfully.

It faded out then, and came back to me in bed. So tired, so warm, so absolutely comfortable. Heat cornered me at all angles and my eyes were so heavy, so hard to open. But finally I did, and right below me, on my chest as usual was Skylar's slender, brunette form. But there was an arm around him that didn't belong to me, an arm that was over me as well. Curiosity blanched over my common sense as I looked over and curled against my other side was Zac, his lips just inches from my cheek as I looked at him. My heart was racing at the idea of it, the sight of it. I couldn't help as I leaned down and placed a kiss on Skylar's crown, squeezing my fingers against his side. Then on second thought, I looked back at Zac, and even if my conscious mind might have screamed "Don't!", it wasn't around, so I left a kiss against his cheek as well.

The fading came back and we were all awake again this time when my vision returned. We were still in my bed though. I was half-asleep, I knew it from how I looked at everything. Zac's lips met mine again and I was again shocked about it. I let my eyes open this time, and gazed over at Skylar. He held an interested face that hid another emotion I couldn't quite discern. So I let my eyes close and my mouth fall into the kiss. It felt too good to pass up a second time, even if just in my dreams. Cool hands were against my heated sides from behind before I felt Skylar's lips at my neck and gasped at the overload of sensation.

We were all naked, I soon learned as I felt Skylar pull himself against my back, and when I finally got the balls enough to let my hands search over Zac. But nothing happened besides kissing and curious touching. At least not that my dream would let me know about. I woke up breathless, and hard as a rock. With a sigh, I snaked out of Skylar's cuddling without waking him and snuck off to the bathroom to relieve my "problem". *This can't be a good thing . . .*

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## Chapter Forty-One

"Rise and shine, precious!" I sang as loud as I could to Skylar as he cringed, trying to hide under the blankets. His idea could have been a good one, except that I grew up with siblings, and had gone through this before. First step, ripping the blankets off the bed.

"No! It was warm!" He cried out in protest, curling into a ball.

A smirk came over my face as I remembered the fights he'd give me years before, then walked over and turned the AC on full blast, "Now, its gonna get *really* cold in here give it fifteen minutes or so, so I'd get out of bed if I was you and put that fine ass of yours in the shower"

"Shower?" He squeaked before sitting up. Now I had his attention, "Why a shower?"

"Because my dearest, we're going shopping today"

"No!" He whined out, "I don't wanna!"

"You sound like my kid," I put my hands on my hips, "And we're going because while I do have a lot of clothes, they look stupid on you because you're the tiniest damned thing I've ever seen in a man's body, and damnit, they're *my* clothes," He gave me a pathetic pleading face, "Please? Come on, it won't be that bad?"

"But what if-"

"What if what, baby? What if someone sees us?" I took a wild stab and he nodded furiously, "Who cares!" I laughed heartily before pouncing onto the bed, "Sky, sweetie, how many times do I have to tell you? I don't care. Let people think what they will," I placed a kiss on the bridge of his nose before continuing, "Honestly, if you can outlast any odd looks that we might get today, then you'll do fucking fabulously in New York. No one gives a gay couple a second glance there!"

"Really?" I nodded with a smile, "Wait . . . did you just say 'fabulously'?"

"Yeee-ah, why?"

He choked back a laugh, "My god! If I hadn't known before this, I'd definitely know you're gay now!" And by the middle of his statement he was laughing his ass off.

"Shut up and get in the shower," I tried not to laugh as well.

"Fuck no. I'm a hermit"

"Fuck yes, and if you don't, I'll put you in it," Its amazing how much I could sound like a parent when I wanted to, or was prompted to.

"Yeah right," He scoffed, burying his head under the pillow nearest him.

I sighed loudly, "I'm gonna count to three, and if you're not getting up by three, I *will* carry you right into that bathroom, throw you in the tub and turn on the water so its cold as fuck," I warned him, paused then started, "One," I drawled out, "Don't test me, I'll do it," I added before saying , "Two . . . I'm serious Sky," He didn't budge. He was really trying me, "Three!"

My warning was given, and he didn't believe me . . . until I ripped the pillow from his head, curled my arms under his struggling body, picking him up even as he thrashed and whined, carried him into the bathroom, pulled his fingers off the the door frame, threw him in the shower and turned on the cold water, and only the cold water. He screamed when the icy spray hit him, "No! You asshole! Get me out of here!"

I almost wanted to laugh as he yelled, but didn't knowing it would just infuriate him more, so I merely smirked, poked my head in through the curtain and said, "Get yourself out of there, after you're clean of

course. I'll have some clothes ready," And before he could protest more, I added, "Bye baby"

Twenty minutes later he was trudging from a steaming bathroom, a scowl on his face and towel around his still glistening form, "Why the face?" I asked with a grin, just to play with him more.

"Fuck you. I don't love you anymore," He muttered before snatching the clothes at the edge of the bed. Right in the middle of the room he let his towel go and proceeded to get dressed. The eye-candy was nice, but he was sort of pissed off at me, so I had to fix that before I could enjoy his looks.

"Don't say that," I purred as I came up behind him, wrapping my arms around him, "You don't mean it"

"Yes I do," He muttered flatly, but didn't push me away. I figured that to be a good sign.

"Baby, this won't be any different than you and me going to the mall when we were younger, only I won't be hiding behind glasses and a baseball hat, and we won't be jumping away from eachother when I pull into the lot," I smiled at the memory of that. He did too, "See? It'll be fine. No worries!"

"But what-"

"No buts or what ifs. We're shopping, you're gonna look hot, I'm gonna pay up, we're gonna eat greasy food and have a good time. Am I clear on that?"

He huffed and rolled his eyes as he buttoned his pants, "Yes sir, I will be a good boy and let you dress me"

"Dress you? Where the hell was your mind?" I couldn't help but giggle.

"Well," He picked up his shirt and pulled it on before continuing, "You're taking me shopping, prolly gonna pick out some of the stuff, and you're buying . . .so technically you'll be dressing me"

The thought made a grin spread over my face, "Could I dress you in the fitting rooms?"

His eyes got wide and face went red once the words fell off my lips, "Are you fucking crazy!?"

It was hard, but somehow I managed to smile wider, "Besides that . . . "

"You can't be serious"

I couldn't help but burst out laughing, "Course not baby . . . unless you wanted me to," And with that I wriggled my brows suggestively.

He smiled to, "No hun, no matter what sick little fantasies you have goin on up there," He tapped my temple, "I will not have sex with you in public"



"Who said anything about sex?!" I laughed out, "We could just, you know, have fun"

"No-way," He choked out between chuckles, "Its too risky. I mean, fuck, what if we're in like, fuck I dunno, some store, and we actually would, and we'd walk out all messed up and some fan would see us coming out"

"I told you, don't worry about the fucking fans!" I couldn't help but still laugh, "They a)won't give a shit, or b)will have their hissy fit and guess what? It'll be a hot topic for all of two days before the die-hard Taylor-is-gay fans just seep into the wordwork and the ante of those fans get their chill pill," I smiled at him as I wrapped my arms lazily around his waist, "After a while, fans will finally get the hint that, yeah, I'm with a guy. Yeah, it might cause a little uproar, but you know what? Eventually it'll pass. Honestly, I think that you and I might go over easier and me and Nat did," I pulled a shocked face that made him laugh, "I'm serious though. This won't be that big a shock, really, it won't"

He exhaled a long breath, "If you say so"

"Say so?" I asked with a haughty smile, "Baby, I know so," And I sealed my words with a kiss.

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*Hmmm . . . would he go for it?* I wondered silently as I pulled out a maroon and navy striped polo from an Abercrombie and Fitch rack.

"No fucking way!" He laughed from behind me and I looked back to see him walking toward me with a pair of dark indigo jeans, hand deconstructed, with faux-suspender straps connect to the pants from D-rings. *Only Sky . . .*, I smiled at the thought as he neared.

"Okay, let's compromise. I'll let you keep those fugly, punkadelic pants, if you try this on with it," I gave him my sweetest smile.

He glared, but took the shirt from my hands and shuffled towards the fitting room, being accosted by a snotty looking twenty-something girl about how many articles of clothes he had. I knew it was just because how he'd been dressed, and the overall "bad boy" look to him, as I'd come to the store often when I was in town, and had that girl before and never once did she look so cross, nor did she actually *look* at what I'd had. It made me angry, but I stayed back looking at more things to pull out for him.

After a few minutes though, I got curious so I walked over to the fitting rooms and told the girl I'd gotten more things for my friend. Of course she gave me a sweet-as-sugar smile, looked me over a couple times before telling me which stall he was in. I could have bitch slapped her, honestly, but grit my teeth instead and made my way back. I peeked under the one she told me he was in, looking for his battered sneakers just to be sure I wasn't mistaken and beating down the wrong door before getting his attention, even though I was pretty sure that the store was relatively bare since school was still in session and it was before it would have been let out, "Sky!" I called and got a muted, unintelligible reply, "C'mon, don't be like that. Open up, I wanna see"

"No," He huffed out.

"Please?" I asked in the most innocently begging voice I could muster, and heard his annoyed sigh before the door opened just slightly and I pushed it open. Even though it sounds cliched, and I'm sure it very well is, he looked like a different person in those clothes. I wasn't sure I liked it. He did look good though. I held up the pile of clothes that I'd picked out in his absence and smiled, "Thought you could use some things that were more you," The clothes included more jeans I thought he'd like, a few less-preppy shirts.

He scoffed a little, sneering towards his exit, which was closed again, "I'm surprised that bitch didn't pull out a metal detector and a Polaroid camera to make sure you didn't steal any of that"

I sighed before taking him by the belt loops and pulling him near, "She's just a bitch," I purred in his ear, "She guages people by how they look. Its stupid. Don't think about it," I kept whispering, marking each sentence with a kiss on his neck. I could feel him melting against me, "How bout we give her a taste of her own medicine and we get you out of that shirt. I don't like it on you anyway," I smiled.

"But what if -"

"Shhh, didn't I tell you not to think about that crap? Just go with it, baby," I whispered, my lips just barely grazing the skin on his throat, which was heating up with every word. He nodded, giving a muffled affirmation as his hands rested on my upper arms and my hands bunched the hem of the shirt as my fingertips slid up his midsection. Once discarded, I tossed the garment to the bench and gave him a once over, "The pants are a keeper though," I grinned slyly at him, flashing a bit of teeth before returning my mouth to him, placing random kisses over his collarbone and upper chest, stopping over a hardened nipple to tug at it just enough to get the tiniest sound out of him, "Just listen to me, okay?" He nodded as I purred into his ear again, "You can't be any louder than that, or they'll hear, okay?" Another nod before I kissed him on the lips, flicking my tongue out over his lips and then into his mouth, letting him suck on it a few seconds before becoming more aggressive in our kiss.

My hands ghosted down his sides, causing goosebumps to rise as I tickled his ribs and waist before unbuttoning and unzipping his pants, as I'd become much more adept at controlling my hormones until *after* our clothes were no longer an issue in the past month. He gasped a little in my mouth as I pulled his dick out of his boxers, grazing over the stiff, new, unwashed fabric of the jeans. His breathing and heart rate noticeably sped up as I pumped him up for a moment before breaking our kiss.

His look was desperate, almost hurt looking as I pulled away, but I watched his expression go from that to open mouthed and heavy-lidded as I lowered onto my knees and took his head between my lips, giving a few rough, slow pulls on it before looking up again to make sure he approved of my actions. His brows were creased and mouth a little more slacked than before, so I took this as my okay and descended over as much as I could, scraping my teeth over the sensitive skin just as I did any other time. I was slower than usual, as I didn't want him making enough noise to alert anyone's attention, but he gave small mews of his enjoyment instead. That pleased me well and good enough.

He used his left hand to stable himself against the plaster wall, and bit the knuckles of his right, probably in attempts to keep his volume at bay. I kept looking up through my hair to watch him as I bobbed my mouth up and down over him, kissed down the length, looped my tongue around the head. He was close, I knew it from his knees, which shook a bit.

I wanted to taste all of him, but knew from our past encounters with this particular . . . favor, that it just could not be done. So I took as much as I could, though quite a bit fell over my lips and either down my chin or down the shaft of his softening cock. He was now putting his upper back against the wall, obviously spent from the sheer adrenaline, sensation and need to contain himself. I smiled before reaching beside me and getting the shirt I'd taken off of him, pulling it inside out, and using it to clean off first my mouth, then his slippery member.

His face was frozen in horror, but I merely gave an evil grin before putting my index finger over my mouth, "Shh . . . our secret," I winked over-dramatically as I righted the shirt again and put it back on its hanger. Once I was finished I moved over to him and leaned against his relaxed frame, loving the feel of him against me, and giving a few light kisses, waiting for him to be right himself again, "Try the rest of these on," I smiled to him. Some of what I'd picked out he didn't even need to try on and liked them immediately, investigating the shape, size and fabric to be sure they would fit well enough.

When he was done, I couldn't help but give him another secretive glance as I picked up the short pile of things he didn't want, including the soiled shirt. We walked out, trying to conceal our grins (and his insecurity about the whole ordeal), "Are y'all done? Need rung up?" The girl asked, sugary smile still plastered on.

I hung the clothes on the hanger and just for thrills wiped at the corner of my mouth with my thumb and chuckling. She wore a slightly confused waver in her plastic smile, but she'd get the joke later on, I was sure, "Um, yeah. I think we're done. Baby, you done, or do you wanna look some more?" I asked Skylar, who blanched a little.

"Er, um . . . no, I think we're good," He nodded nervously as the girl tilted her obviously empty head in more confusion before we headed to the register. His eyes bugged out as the total came up, a ridiculous price for six outfits plus an extra pair of jeans, but I didn't really care much, just whipped out my Visa.

"Y'all have a good day now," She grinned broadly, probably as she was trained to do.

"Oh, *my* good day is a sure thing," I gave a pointed sideways glance to a very shy boyfriend, "*You* have a good day," My grin was slightly wicked, though I'm sure she didn't catch that part, though her head tilted again as I winked. She'd get it someday, well, that day, when she would go to return unwanted items from the fitting room rack to their place on the main floor. I just wish I could have been there to see her face. Regardless, that's how she gets for treating an awesome person like dirt just because of how they look.

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## Chapter Forty-Two

It seemed that the dream I'd had about Skylar and Zac, and myself of course, would be a solo mission on the attack in my brain. Dr. Jeff told me at my next appointment that it was merely nerves, my anxiety manifesting itself in my subconscious and a bunch of other professional blather. My worries are attacking my brain while I sleep now, gotcha doc. He said it was all right and that they would probably

continue happening until I confronted "this problematic other person" as he had put it, and buried the hatchet once in for all, which I could apparently not do until I got back to New York, because phone conversations seemed only to lead to more unanswered questions. I would have to face him head on, with no exit to hide through, and the thought scared the piss out of me.

In the end, he told me to maybe keep distance between myself and this "other person" until the time came to return home up north. Gladly, I followed that order, spending time at the apartment with Skylar, wrapped up in his arms and almost forgetting the outside world completely. It wasn't until two weeks after taking him shopping that I even brought up the topic of my other "hurdle" with him, getting him to go out for *fun*.

"Baby, quit pouting. You used to love partying with me," I cooed into his ear as he pulled a tight black tee over his shoulders. Finally, after weeks of eating carb-loaded foods and rigorous "exercise", he was filling out a little more and no longer a stick on the berm of anorexia. He was wearing the only pair of leather pants shipped down to me, my black ones, the ones I never wore anymore but still loved to see in my closet just for kicks. He looked hot in them, I could say nothing less than that about them, and could say more but won't.

"I feel like a tool," He muttered as he smoothed down the few remaining ripples in his shirt, "Back when we were kids we thought we were cool as shit going out to a party where we'd get drunk as fuck and puke everywhere. Where I could wear eyeliner and just fit in with the rest of the goth kids around"

Something clicked in my head then, "I'll be right back," I smiled as he pulled his lips into a confused frown before I made my way out into the living room, pulling my messenger bag from off of the often unused couch. Digging in it for a moment, I snatched a small, generic plastic bag from under my notebook and sprinted back into the bedroom, where Skylar was trying unsuccessfully to dry his hair by shaking it with his fingers as much as possible, "Here," I piped up as I neared him, a smile on my face and holding out the bag to him.

"What's in it?" He cocked his brow suspiciously as he reached out for it.

"Just look," I smiled more broad at him.

His eyes went wide as first he pulled out an automatic stick of black eyeliner, the same brand he'd used when we were younger, and then a bottle of almost black, dark blue nail polish, "Oh my god!" He gushed, hugging me, "When did you get these?!"

A bit of color went to my cheeks as I looked at my foot sweeping over the floor lamely, "The other day after leaving the clinic . . . I needed more deodorant and when I passed the makeup I figured it might make you feel a little more you again if I got it"

The shy, grateful smile that came over his face was enough to make me feel like a million bucks, but the hug he gave me melted the bones in my body until I was a pile of mush, "Thank you," He whispered, kissing my jawline lightly before pulling away a bit and smiling wider, more teasingly, "But you coulda grabbed me some gloss too, y'know?"

I couldn't help but pull his strings a bit and shrug, "Its too messy for when I wanna make out"

He scoffed, mouth in an exaggerated 'o', "Jerk!" But we both soon fell into a fit of laughter in each other's arms before finishing our "primping".

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The club we'd decided to go to wasn't much more than a glorified bar with a mediocre dance floor. Being a Saturday night meant bodies packed together and no choice but to grab a quick beer/shot and move on. I'd chosen a pair of deconstructed bootcut jeans and a simple black wifebeater to wear for the night, and was glad, as though it was at least seventy five degrees outside even after the sun had set, it was at least ninety inside the bar. The music was loud, pounding bass through the speakers set up all around, pouring crappy techno-remixes of a mess of different songs into my head. After three shots and five beers though, I didn't care. I didn't even think twice about how Skylar felt it just absolutely necessary to put a splattering of eyeliner on me before we left.

He looked like a deer caught in headlights as I tugged on his hand after picking myself up off the stool at the table we'd fought to grab after twenty minutes of searching, "C'mon, let's dance," I ordered lazily, still tugging lightly at his hand.

"Are you insane?" He squeaked out. I could barely hear him over the music.

"We went over this already, and outside of the fact that yes, I'm a little nuts, I wanna dance!" I laughed the end as I gave a sharper tug at him, and finally he pulled up off of the stool.

"No way!" He protested, trying to take back his comfortable seat by the small round that was against the wall of the building.

"Yes way, now come on," I kept smiling, "If you don't, I'll just pick you up, and you know I can do it"

He grumbled something incoherent but begrudgingly followed me out onto the dance floor. Some, probably viewed as scantily clad and luscious, girl crooned upbeat r&b jams over the speakers, her voice lost behind a couple of rappers every so often, as well as the bump of the bass. It had a decent beat though, and I was buzzed well enough to enjoy it after chugging the last beer.

When I felt we were deep enough into the swaying, bouncing, writhing bodies, I stopped abruptly, pulling Skylar to me with a rough pull. Our lips were inches apart and I could smell the vodka and sweet cranberry juice from his last drink as he gasped, "Hey sexy," I purred against him once his breathing became a little regular.

"Hey to you too," He got out in a shaky, quick exhale.

"Still feel weird about going out with me?" He nodded rigidly as I moved my hips against him, "Well don't. I'm just me here. I'll ignore everyone but you if it comes down to it. Hell, I basically have already. Even if someone recognizes me, I won't answer to my own name unless its coming from you," I smiled before coming in for a light peck, "And your lips are so much better without gloss"

"But they look nice with it," He pouted before smiling a real smile for the first time that night.

"That's better!" I laughed before giving a real kiss to him, wrapping my arms around his waist, "Feeling more comfortable now?" I asked a few minutes after we'd parted, noticing his hips going along with mine.

"Some"

"Some? Just *some*?!" I asked in exasperation.

"Yeah," He smiled coyly.

"Ohhhh, I see now. You're just going to act like a sore fucker because I was right, now aren't ya?"

"Shhh, I'm being sneaky," He grinned, and I realized that the alcohol was finely getting to him. Cranberry juice and vodka usually did sneak up on people, and he'd had three, plus two shots with me.

"Well, I'm happy you're finally feeling better about this stuff," I smiled into his hair, "I hated seeing you being a fucking shell of how you used to be," I frowned a little, but wiped it off my face before looking at him again, "I'm finally seeing that old spark of you, the one I fell in love with when I was a kid," His smile beamed bright against the moving, colored lights of the room and it was like he actually was just as we were when I was fifteen and he fourteen, back when I first told him I thought I was falling in love with him, "*That* look, that one right there," I pointed as best I could between us, poking his nose a little with the tip, "That look is exactly how I remember you, and how I always want to remember you"

"What? You mean completely in love with you?" He almost laughed at how corny his words could have been if they hadn't meant so much.

"Exactly"

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## Chapter Forty-Three

So even though things were finally next to normal again, as normal as they could be at least with Skylar, there was a little hitch, "*Three weeks*?!" I shrieked at my brother Isaac over the phone just over a week after getting Skylar out of the house for the first time again.

Ike muttered some sort of affirmation into the phone. I couldn't believe it. He talked to distributing and told them to have the new album in stores three weeks from Tuesday. That wasn't very far off, as it was Sunday. *Three weeks*, The thought replayed over and over in my head and hardened my heart. That meant that I had very little time to prepare Skylar for such a trip, let alone myself. That meant also that there were *less than* three weeks until I had to face Zac, because three weeks was when the album would be *out*, and we had a CD signing that day.

For all I know, and my intuition was usually right, Zac had pressed the dates. I know that Ike was shooting for an early September release, not wanting to rush it, let the single have some time to get the song in people's heads. He was smart like that. But Zac is clever, and sneaky, and persistent. He knew that something like that would bring me back. A good backhanded slap would be in order for him if I could keep my wits when we were finally "reunited".

Eventually, I did relent and told him I'd get everything set so that we'd be leaving in two weeks. That was going to take a lot of work, I realized looking around at all of my furnishings. But it could be done, oh yes, it could. I just really didn't want to. For once my mind wasn't on music. It was on the amazing piece of man that was in the shower as I talked, more or less a hissy fit to be honest, to Isaac.

The water had stopped by the time I ended the call, and put the phone on the end table, "Tay? What's wrong?" A soft voice asked as I rubbed my face with my palms. I looked sluggishly in the general direction of the voice and watched as Skylar took a place beside me on the couch.

"I just got off the phone with Ike," My voice was heavy and raw, like I'd just woken from a three day sleep. He wrapped an arm around me but stayed silent, obviously noting the grave nature of my voice and not wanting to push me into words. I sat there for a moment, loving the feel of his comfort, the smell of his freshly cleaned skin, "The album's getting released in three weeks," I whispered, hardly able to force my voice to do even that. His arm flexed and hand gripped my waist almost painfully, and I felt the tears well into my eyes, "I'm sorry, baby"

It took him a few moments, but he did finally relax some, and even though he sniffled first, said, "Its okay. I mean, I knew it would be coming, you know?"

"Yeah, but its not fair to either of us that they pushed it up a month"

He took a deep breath after a few thick tears escaped his eyes, wiping them as soon as they were visible, "I'd have probably acted this way anyway, no matter when"

"Ohhh!" I cooed, wrapping my arms around him, "Honestly, when Ike told me I was screaming inside, saying 'no, no, let me just fucking stay here!'," I ended up laughing from how ridiculously childish my words sounded, and even he cracked a smile too, "But I knew I couldn't. I love you, but I love my music too"

"I understand," He smiled again at me, "If I didn't do you think I would be coming with you?"

"That mean you're still coming with me?"

He gave a full-on grin this time, "Of course!" He laughed, "Do you *really* think that I'd give you up for anything right now?"

I tried to smile even though the idea of him leaving did pain me, "No, but I just . . . Worry about how you feel about all of this. I feel like I'm just throwing you head-first, ass-end up into this"

"Well, you would have eventually anyway, right?" He was still smiling. I loved that smile, and should have thought deeper on it at the time that if he was grinning so brightly, then there couldn't possibly be something so wrong as to keep me on the verge of tears. Meekly, I nodded in his arms, folded against him as best as we could as we both sat, "Then there's nothing you could do anyway!" He laughed, "There's nothing that anyone could say to prepare me for this, whether it was then or now, and nothing would be stopping me either"

"Promise?" I squeaked out in his arms.

"Of course," He smiled, always that smile...

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We started making plans the next day between being completely sluggish, college-student-like creatures with a shared two-litre of rootbeer and cold, day-old pizza. First we made a list of people we had to call. Cable company, moving company, land lord, etc. The phone and Internet would be shut off on the 25th of the month, two days after we would have loaded a moving truck and began the trek back up to New York. Our landlord was actually a bit sad to see us go, as we were decent tenants for "being so damned young," as he'd said. But we paid him for the last month the day before the moving van came.

I made one last look around the apartment, making sure everything was packed and the space was in the condition it was whenever I'd come. The couch, the bed, the chairs, my desk, our clothes, the boxes Ike had sent, all of it crammed into a twenty foot truck like Tetris pieces to be sure it all fit. Everything around me was bare and pristine again, and instead of hopeful possibility, my mind only registered the end of the leisure Skylar and I had shared there.

When we'd get back to New York, we'd have just less than a week to situate everything to our liking in my house. Then there was the CD signing, which would be mad like always, and he'd stay in the background, watching for the first time, first-hand what my life was about. Then we'd have whatever appearances my brothers and our company had planned out for the release, which would probably take up a few good weeks at least. A small, maybe two week break would come before we would gather as a band to get touring plans and dates out of the way.

It all seemed so crazy to me to think of it all. I finally saw the outsider's point of view and wondered what the hell Skylar would think of it. I just hoped that he could absorb it and fall into it a bit easier than I was thinking he would. Maybe he'd surprise me and be fine. But then again, he might go batty with it all and become a nervous wreck. I didn't know what was going to happen, and that scared the piss out of me.

But Skylar's face was bright with excitement as I finally got outside and into the truck's front, my Land Rover hitched onto the back. It made me feel better to know that he was beaming about this, "Ready baby?" I asked as I started the truck.

He nodded furiously, "Ready as I'll ever be," He laughed and I put the vehicle into gear.

We talked on and off about nothing really. He asked some about New York and what it was like, and I told him readily, my words seeming like I'd not been there in ages. Sitting patiently and attentively, he



listened to my description of the madness that was Manhattan, then onto what my own house in Brooklyn was like. He said it all sounded frightening but wonderful. That made me smile. When we weren't talking we were belting out whatever songs we could find on random radio stations, mostly classic rock as he played DJ with the tuner. I didn't have a damned problem with that.

It took a full two days to get through Missouri, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania. We stopped to rest at a Motel Six at the end of the first night, somewhere in the north-eastern quarter of Indiana. Then we were off again after a breakfast via Waffle-House. Ohio always seemed to take forever to navigate on the road between Tulsa and New York City. Finally, we were crossing the Delaware into Jersey, then finally settling into the insanity that is forever Holland Tunnel.

Skylar's face was like a kid's on Christmas morning when we finally out of the tunnel, able to see the lights and giganticism that is the City. Even I have to admit that there was nothing else like my first real view of it. The smile I had over my face kept rising as I made our way through downtown, purposely just to give him a taste of what he'd soon know like nothing else, "I'll take you and show you around once we get everything inside," I told him as he stared bug-eyed at everything. It was night time there, and I couldn't have picked a better time to have gotten there.

He only nodded at me, gaping at everything as we moved through it, until we were leaving the metropolis behind and heading over the bridge to where he would be living. Where he would be living *with me*. The thought made butterflies flit around in my chest as we neared the place. I hoped he would like it. The house wasn't anything special, looking like most houses in that neighborhood, a garage, a small back yard. But it was home.

Once I pulled into the driveway, thanking my lucky stars the bulky vehicle *and* my own car fit in the space, I climbed out, readily taking his hand as I unlocked the door and pulled us both inside. It was just as I'd left it, thankful that Ike hadn't strewn everything everywhere when getting the things I wanted. It was more bare than usual, but still so much home. My heart swelled as I saw the photos of my children still displayed in frames over the mantle, and I remembered then how much this place still hurt.

Skylar had gone off by himself, inspecting the house like a child or newlywed would. Once he'd finished his rounds, he bounded back to me, a bright smile on his face, and I'd myself calmed enough to smile at his enthusiasm, "Its fucking great," He declared, throwing his arms around my neck and planting a kiss on my lips. When we pulled apart, he blushed a little, stating, "But uh, we have a problem," And I tilted my head in confusion, "Our bed . . . its out there," He pointed to the window that showed a silhouette of the truck, "And its dark out and stuff"

"Well," I sighed out, "Looks like I'll have to figure something out huh?" I asked, my smile a bit lost in my thoughts. I knew there was only a few solutions. Rent another hotel room for the night; Stay here and sleep on the hard floor with the few spare blankets I owned; Or . . . I sighed as I filed through my phone's address book, pressing send and having a short conversation with the person who picked up. It wasn't my cup of tea, but it was better than the thought of hard floors, or used motel beds. A heavier sigh escaped my lips as I ended the call, "Okay, looks like we're gonna go back into the City and shack up on the guest bed at casa del Ike," I tried to get out brightly, but the rest wouldn't escape me, "And Zac"

He nodded in a way that showed he understood my discomfort, "Its okay, we'll make sure it stays okay," He smiled, but it was tight, and hugged me close, "We'll just . . . try to sneak under the radar a little for tonight, kay?"

I nodded and pondered unhitching my SUV, but instead called for a cab, noting that it would be more convenient, especially with where we had to go. It was decidedly quicker with the taxi, though Skylar seemed a little afraid of how people drove in downtown. We finally made it to the complex my brothers lived in and I drew in a deep breath as we made our way to the intercom, waiting to be buzzed in by Ike. I only prayed that Zac either wasn't home, or that he was passed out. If not, this was bound to be one hell of a night.

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## Chapter Forty-Four

Ike sleepily answered the door in a t-shirt and pair of sweats. I couldn't blame him. It *was* almost two in the morning by the time we'd even headed out to his house. He gave a sluggish wave as we came in, muttering about the bed in the guest room not being made up, but he put a set of sheets and a cover in there for us. Then he told us he was headed back to bed and to make ourselves comfortable.

I didn't see Zac anywhere so that made me feel a bit better. We made our way quietly down the hall towards the spare room, passing Zac's closed door on the way. I prayed that he wouldn't notice our presence, and if he did, that it wouldn't be until we were already gone. I wasn't ready to face him, not yet.

We awoke pretty early, as we were both still used to rising around eight in the morning at the latest, and I left a note for Ike, thanking him for letting us stay, and telling him to get ahold of me if he needed to.

The rest of the day was taken to just haul all of our things into the house. It proved reasonably difficult, as we were both relatively smaller guys. But we got the job done by five that evening. Well, at least getting everything in the house was done by that time. I took the truck and returned it to where I was supposed to in the City, then returned to see that Skylar had already moved the couch and chairs back to where they were actually supposed to go, "Wow," I smiled as I walked in, "How did you know where to put it?"

He smiled bashfully, "The indents in your carpet pretty much gave it away"

I felt very stupid all of a sudden, "Oh, duh," I laughed, jokingly smacking myself up the head. We, my ex-wife and I, hadn't moved the furniture since maybe a little over a year before the divorce. It was her silent way of saying there was a problem with us, as before the couch and my favorite chair were separated by the smallest end table. She'd moved my chair to the other side of the room one day while we were home, but I was out. She was almost detached that day in conversation as well and I'd found out from Zac that she'd been talking to his girlfriend at the time, who was her best friend. That was the day that she'd made the decision that something was so incurably different in our marriage, and a little later I first muttered the idea of divorce.

My mind was rattled back into the present as he walked over to me and put his arms around my shoulders, latching his hands under my hair at the base of my neck, "Its okay baby, we all know you're a bit too blond sometimes"

"Jerk," I scoffed, but still held a smile as I kissed him. When we pulled apart, I stared for just a moment before scrunching my nose, "I stink. So do you"

"Wash yourself more than once a week and that wouldn't happen," He joked, pushing my shoulder playfully.

I tried to feign being aghast, but it didn't work as a smile tugged over my lips, "I do, ass," I spat, but by then a full grin spread over my face. A thought came over my head and my eyes pulled into slits to show mischief, "C'mon you," Was all I said before tugging his hand and pulling him toward the stairway, up the level and into the main bathroom.

Even though I found the thing an utterly and ridiculously trivial thing to buy at the time, Natalie had begged and pleaded when we first moved to New York for us to get a jacuzzi style bathtub. It was a light seafoam green, marble, with jets and the who shebang. The basin of it was large enough to fit four people sitting, so surely it could hold both Skylar and I.

He and I were both soaked in sweat from the labor we'd accomplished through the thick heat of the day, and even though the whole house was air conditioned, we remained with a sheen of sweat over us. Steam rose after I turned on the hot water, letting it fill the tub.

I don't remember caring, but that could be because he and I were kissing after letting the water run for about thirty seconds. Slow, deliberate kisses as he ghosted his fingers over my arms and torso. They tickled my skin and goosebumps rose though there was no way I could have been cold. His hand found their way under the second skin that was my tank top, massaging the pads of his fingers against my skin.

He was too much for me, but I loved it. Loved every second and voiced it with quick, shallow breaths and a few squeaks of noise as his touch came rougher and tongue slipped through my lips. I felt my temperature rise where his hands had been. I didn't know if the water would be hot . . .

*The WATER!* I broke the kiss and looked to the tub. It was just a little more full than I'd expected, so I reached over quickly and turned the knob off. My smile was bashful, a true, non-sex driven blush running on my cheeks now.

"What's that face for?" He asked softly, a smile playing over his lips as I averted my eyes.

"We almost had a mess here," I couldn't help but smiling over how ridiculous I sounded.

His arms went around my waist as he pulled me near, "I'll show you a mess," He crooned in my ear, making me shiver in anticipation of what he could have meant. Lips were over my neck as his hands went under my shirt, pulling the fabric up as he went.

I fell back into the moment. I didn't have to worry about flooding my bathroom and ruining a floor and ceiling with gallons upon gallons of water. Instead I concentrated on undoing his belt as his hands raced up and over my waist, stomach and chest in circles.

Just his touch had me completely hard by the time we'd both been shed of our clothes and stepping into the steaming bath. He sat atop me as soon as I was comfortable, the steam making our lips more wet and sweat began to rise into drops on the skin we didn't submerge.

I pressed the button for the jets, keeping them low but still enough to keep the heat of the water constant. It felt unreal, dreamlike as we kissed, melded together as the water moved around us. I felt weightless personally, but could feel his over top of me. His skin was slick as we rocked together, breathing quickened by the minute.

"Tay . . . ," He whimpered against the shell of my ear, "Please?" He breathed out as I grasped him under the water. His voice set me on fire from the husk in it, the pleading. Slowly he rose up, goosebumps coming to the skin that was wet and now above surface. With much care taken, I was in him, his legs around my waist and our lips connected.

Kissing during sex was usually more an annoyance than anything with me. There were only two people in my life that I could bear to kiss then, and one of them was right there. The other I really didn't know about, but was sure I'd be able to handle it. But let's not think about that.

Instead, I'd rather concentrate on the fact that he was pumping himself up and down like a piston, up, over, down, up, over, down. Not like a porn-star, just enough to keep a rhythm on tap. My hair was half drenched from the depth of the water and the waves we were creating. The mirrors were fogged to complete opacity, as was my mind. Anytime I opened my eyes it looked more and more like we'd stepped into a cloud.

His breath was hot against my shoulder when we parted for a breather, still keeping our movements gradually increasing in speed. I couldn't take it, couldn't have his lips so far away. Before he was ready for it, I'm sure, I put my hands on his face and directed his mouth back to mine. A groan escaped just after his lips hit mine, the breath hot over me as he exhaled.

I felt like I was on fire, literally on fire. The heat from the water and our bodies was getting to be too much. But I couldn't just stop. I wouldn't just stop. Instead I picked up the pace a bit, relishing in the soft, high pitched whimpers Skylar gave on each thrust, his face contorting to show how hard he was trying to not break the kiss.

It broke though, just as I got to the verge of absolute climax. Again, I couldn't do it, couldn't stay away from those lips and pulled him close as I released inside him. The kiss wasn't long at all though, as he cried out on my orgasm, gyrating desperately against me to have his own. He nearly collapsed atop me once he let go, heaving his breaths, trying to find oxygen in the thick air.

My head cleared as our breathing got back to normal and I peered around lazily, smirking as I looked at the water, "Well, so much for actually getting clean, huh?"

Half-lidded eyes looked at the water as well before turning to look at me, "Not unless you're really brave enough to stick your head in that," He laughed.

We stayed there for a bit longer, arms around each other, reveling in the heat surrounding us. Finally we did ready and get out, "I'm gonna go get an actual shower downstairs. You can use this one," I smiled, giving him a light peck on the lips before he nodded, "Towels are in the closet right there, okay?" I asked softly, threading my fingers through his damp hair, kissing him again once he nodded for the second time.

It took all the willpower I had to not stay there, stay connected to him like that. But I did it, smiling before I sauntered toward the closet, grabbing out one of my own towels. A blur of smoke came with me when I opened the door and stepped out, dissipating as if I was coming back to Earth after a wonderful roll in the clouds. Nothing could knock me off of that mentality though.

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## Chapter Forty-Five

The phone is no longer my enemy. Now its the doorbell. And I'm groaning my annoyance as I slip my arms out from around Skylar, out from under the sheet we were covered by, and into a pair of sweatpants that I'd worn the night before to cover my ass. It had been three days since we arrived. Skylar grew wide-eyed as we walked around Manhattan, hopping into a cab when needed. He'd never been in a taxi, or on a subway. Ike had called just before we went underground, laughing at my ability to ride a subway without getting lost. It wasn't funny. My getting lost on a subway was *not* all my fault. Someone could have told me, since I was with about six people I knew, that we were at our platform. Jerks.

Groggily I clambered down the stairs, muttering about how my rude awakening had better be important. Shock invaded my senses as I pulled open the heavy front door. Zac stood there, his hands fidgeting in the wide pocket of his hooded sweatshirt, "What the fuck . . . ?" I groaned, not wanting drama so early.

"Woah man, I come in peace," He stopped me before I could go on a tangent.

"Its the asscrack of dawn! Come in peace later!" I squeaked out incredulously, readying to close the door. His hand stopped it, palm down on the wood.

"Wait," He said, and something in his voice was off, desperate, pleading. I relented, letting go of the door and wandering into the living room, grabbing my four pack of Black & Milds, taking one out and lighting it after sitting on my recliner. He took a seat on the loveseat, the farthest piece of furniture from me. At a good look of his face, I saw something etched deep in his eyes, "We've got a slot for Conan on Monday," He muttered softly, failing miserably at trying to make small-talk.

Monday was the fourth, the day before the album was released. It was a week away, but the prospect of getting back to work jittered me a bit. I shook the thought away when I remembered the dark look in

his eyes, clouded with tears, "That's great, but what's the real reason you came over Zac?" I asked softly, being careful to not flare his temper.

He silently stuttered, his lips moving but without sound a few times before he got out, "I-I missed you," in the same broken voice he'd used to get in the house in the first place. But it didn't stop at that, "I don't . . . I don't want to fight with you anymore. I-I'm sorry I treated you like I did, and I want my best friend back," His last two words were shaken whispers, almost whimpers as he tried unsuccessfully to snuffle back his tears.

I sighed, not wanting to hurt him anymore, but having to get it out, "That might take a while Zac," I used the same soft tone as before, "Its all sorts of messed up now, but I want it too," I admitted, tears stinging my own eyes. I forced myself up and over to the small sofa, putting a hand on his knee and squeezing gently, watching his brows crease and shut eyes glitter with the wetness escaping them, "I do, Zac. I want it back so badly, but it still hurts"

A sob choked through his chest when I said that, and his eyes were forced open, red-rimmed and silvery, "I'm sorry, but what could you expect? A steak and eggs breakfast in bed? It wasn't something that normally goes on Tay, it wasn't something normal period. I freaked out," He took a few deep breaths to calm himself, sobs now racking his body, "But I care about you, I do," He whispered out, "And I want you happy, and Sky apparently makes you happy, and I want to be back to when us three hung out and had fun"

I put my arms around him, "We'll get there. It might take a bit, but we'll get there, and when we do, its beer and a movie night!" I cracked a smile as did he, and that was the reaction I was gunning for.

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I felt less tense, less nervous after Zac came and visited. He left after a few more words exchanged, and I went back to bed. I told Skylar about it when we woke back up, and he praised me, said it was great for us to be making up. Then we made a few jokes about how promotional shit and the tour would be if we didn't. That wasn't something I wanted. Not at all.

The week went by slowly, lounging in bed or on the couch with Skylar when not on the phone with Zac or Ike talking about the promo tour. That took up a lot of time. On Thursday we had a webcast chat, answering questions that were pre-chosen like always. Rather boring.

A brilliant plan came to me that day, after a fan asked if we had any regular schedule when it came to touring, like if we went out to eat after or whatever. That would be a no, but the idea I got from it lit up my face and confused my brothers until I filled them in.

My plan was to take Skylar to dinner once we were finished with Conan, and after a photoshoot that Ike had informed me of the day of the fucking chat. Jerk. It didn't damper my idea though, and called a steakhouse in Manhattan that I'd loved since I'd first been to the City, making reservations for eight that evening. It gave me plenty of time. Zac looked shocked that I was so casual about my relationship, and how little I wished to hide it from the public, but eventually smiled and said it sounded like a great plan.

Conan O'Brien was a breeze. Performance of the single, short interview. We were out of the studio by

three, signed a few autographs before jetting off to the photoshoot, which was scheduled to begin shooting at five. I had a nice, dark blue button down shirt and a pair of black slacks to change into once I was finished there, ready to hit up a taxi and spend the night having a nice dinner with my boyfriend.

It was seven. We were on the last wardrobe change of the night. I was straightening the collar to the jacket I was clothed in while a hairdresser tossed my hair around, lifting it for volume, making it look real, but perfect. Right. My mind was concentrating on whether I wanted to button the cuffs of the jacket or leave them like the fashion consultant wanted when I heard an aggravated grunt, almost a growl, then "Shit! God damnit!"

My head spun to see Zac clutching his hand between the thumb and forefinger. Red swelled around it. He'd cut himself somehow. From the ruckus that soon enveloped him, I learned that he'd leaned against a pair of scissors on one of the makeup tables, stabbing himself a bit. I looked to the clock after a few minutes had passed. It was nearly seven-thirty. I flipped open my cell and called Skylar, "Hey baby," I sighed out in greeting, a smile to cover the sadness inside as I told him I'd probably be late and to meet me, to get a few drinks at the bar even, "I'm so sorry my brother's an idiot," I told him, and he said it was okay, "I love you, I'll be there as soon as possible. Keep your phone on so I can get a hold of you when I'm on my way"

"Okay," He told me, and I could tell a bright smile was washed over his face. It made me feel better to know he held no hard feelings about my misfortune, "I love you"

"I love you too, I'll try to hurry," I told him and thus ended the conversation. I busied myself playing a few games on my phone and tinkering around with things in my immediate reach. It was nine before they had the bleeding stopped, as Zac was naturally a bleeder and he was cleaned up and bandaged lightly by quarter after. We weren't out of the shoot until eleven, as we had to be careful with Zac's hand placement to not show the bandaging so much and therefore the photographer was frustrated because her vision had been marred. Melodramatic much?

I rushed out, hailing a taxi as I whipped out my trusty cell, dialing Skylar's number as I climbed in the car. It went straight to his voicemail. There was probably no signal, as the bar was in the back of the restaurant, and that's most likely where he was. How did I forget that? It didn't matter though, as the cab sped toward the steakhouse. No, not sped, more like jolt-stop-jolt-stop as there was quite a bit of traffic on the way.

I paid the driver almost blindly, probably giving him much more of a tip than he really deserved. I didn't care though as I opened the door, welcoming the smell of charcoal-grilled food and liquor. I asked the hostess if anyone had come for the reservation I'd made (under Skylar's last name of course), and she told me no. The crowd was winding down. The kitchen of that place closed at midnight, but the bar stayed open until three. I looked around to be sure he wasn't lingering in a corner before making my way to the bar, seeing only four people there, and none of them were Skylar.

My heart pounded with worry, until I put it in my mind that he'd maybe gone home, given up on waiting. That hardened my heart a little to think, but it was unbelievably better to think of than anything else. I got a twelve-pack of Corona before heading out, paper bag in my hand to conceal the bottles, and getting a cab to lead me back to my home.

It was dark there. The door was locked, but that wasn't anything spectacular as I'd made Skylar a key the day we went sight-seeing and told him to make sure the door stayed locked. I made my way in, looking around and seeing no sign of him as I searched the entire house. Worry filled my mind and cause a lump in my throat to break my voice as I called his phone again. Once more it led straight to the voicemail and I left a shaky message, pleading for him to call back, that I was worried, and incredibly sorry for not meeting him.

I got no call-back after two hours. Seven beers were dispatched in that time, and the rest within the next hour. I was trashed, forcing my eyes to stay open until I literally passed out in my recliner.

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## Chapter Forty-Six

Sunlight makes hungover people disgruntled. I tried to knit my eyes shut as hard as I could, but the light still got through somehow. I was still on my recliner. Skylar hadn't come home, I knew that from the fact that I wasn't woke up. He'd have made me stir, and I'd have asked where he was, crying like a little girl about how worried I'd been, and we'd have eventually gone to bed.

I trudged into the lower-level bathroom, pinching the bridge of my nose as the glaring light from above the medicine cabinet stung my eyes. After doing my business I pulled out the bottle of Tylenol from the medicine cabinet and took three dry before going out again, closing the drapes and blinds to save my head as much pain as possible. The kitchen was my next stop, pulling out a bottle of water from the fridge and opening it, quenching my thirst with half the bottle unconsciously. I looked at the remains before deciding I should grab another.

It would be an hour before my phone would ring. The name flashed across the top. It was Skylar. I'd put him on my cell phone plan earlier that week, "God Sky, where the hell have you been?" I began my tangent with a sigh of relief, "I've been worried sick about you! I tried calling you twice last night. I went to the restaurant at about eleven. You weren't there! Where the fuck are you?"

A sob came through the line, "Tay, c-come get m-me," He pleaded in just a breath over a whisper.

The anger rushed out of my system when I heard his voice like that, "Where are you baby? What happened?"

"J-just come, please. I'm at some coffee-shop, i-its like a b-block from the, the restaurant"

"I'll be there soon baby," I told him, nodding though he couldn't see me.

He gasped, a sob raking him again as he pushed out, "H-hurry"

I didn't bother with calling a cab. Yes, it probably would have saved me some irritation at the driving conditions of the city, but I'd have had to wait an extra twenty minutes to get where I needed to. I knew



that from experience. I didn't even stop, merely opening the door, as I was on the side of the street he was, and shouting at him. He was redfaced, streaked from tears as well as he rushed into my care, seeming to take a breath for the first time since I'd gotten off the phone with him.

Nothing was said until we were back in Brooklyn. He was shaking, tears running down his face as his chest heaved with muted sobs. I wanted to take him in my arms as soon as I caught sight of him, but Manhattan had enough motor vehicle issues without me causing a traffic jam.

"Baby," I crooned as he fell into my arms as soon as I closed the door. His sobs eventually broke out, wailing almost as he folded into me. I led him into the living room and onto the couch, not letting our contact break the entire time, "What happened baby?"

"I-," He stuttered, sniffing a bit, "I don't r-really know," This caused me to pull away a bit and give him a confused glance, "I was . . . I was at the bar, and I was ordering d-drinks. I only had twenty d-dollars on me, and I ran out o-of money around n-nine," He paused to breathe a bit, "S-some guy was there, and, and he was hitting on m-me. I didn't s-see any h-harm in it, a-and it would get me a few more drinks I figured, and i-it would p-pass the time. We were . . . we were l-laughing about something and . . . and that's all I r-remember r-right until I woke up th-this morning," He sobbed into my shoulder for a moment, "I w-was alone when I w-woke up," He sniffled, "And n-naked"

I pulled away again, my face angry this time, "What do you mean it was the last thing you remember right?"

"I-I was dr-drunk T-Tay! I d-don't know what was real and w-what wasn't," He sobbed miserably.

I was getting more angry by the second at his avoidance of the topic, "What do you mean? What is up there in your fucking head?"

"I-I-I . . .," He stuttered before sobbing miserably again before hushing to a whisper, "I think I had sex with h-him, but I d-don't know!"

My own breath hitched once what he said finally registered in my mind, "W-what?" I asked in shock as I pulled away from him. His face looked as though I'd just slapped him.

He came back into me though, but I was rigid. This started another chorus of sobs, "I'm so sorry Tay, I'm s-so so sorry," He cried into the breast of my shirt, "I d-don't even kn-know if I did . . . but . . . Oh God, I'm so sorry"

I was silent for the longest time, an inanimate slab of flesh that he cried on. I was shocked, upset, angry and yet still felt so much sympathy for him, "Its okay baby," I whispered, but my voice was flat, "I just . . . I need to go lay down for a while," I shook my head.

He clamped onto me as I tried to stand, wailing now against me, "Please Tay, please don't be mad at me, please don't leave me. I need you"

My voice was deep, thick like stone, "*I* need to just . . . I need to be alone right now," I sighed as his cries got even louder. I couldn't do this to him, "I don't hate you, I love you baby, I just . . . just an hour or two, okay?"

He quieted until he was just hiccuping and breathing hard, a snuffle here or there, "Okay," He whispered in a tiny voice, letting his arms fall from around me.

I stood and started off, pausing to wince just before I reached the stairs as I heard his pathetic sobs. There was no wailing, only heartbroken cries. Half of me wanted to run back to him, tell him that it was all all right. But I knew I couldn't. I had to give myself time to cool down.

My mind raced as I laid in my bed. It felt so huge now, without him in it. *Someone else had him . . . Someone else had him even though he was mine*, Repeated over and over in my mind. Soon tears stung at my eyes and I batted them away angrily, *He's mine, not some whore!* I wanted to scream. I wasn't even mad at him anymore, I was mad at whoever did it, and if I ever found out who did that to him, they'd beg for death.

My eyes were growing heavy, but my fists were still clenched tight with anger. I didn't even know how to face Skylar after this. I was sympathetic, but I still wondered how, why he would ever do something like that to me. This wasn't some dream, not even the horrid one I'd had in the clinic where he and Zac bled eachother out and had violent, angry sex in front of me as I cried. This was something real. Something that hurt me more than I could ever imagine. He was mine. He was mine . . .

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## Chapter Forty-Seven

I woke again to an eerily silent house. I searched the upstairs rooms when I found myself alone in bed, wondering if maybe Skylar had come up and fell asleep as well. No avail. The same could be said for the rest of my house. A note laid upon the coffee table, saying that he was out walking, trying to clear his head. He'd also stolen the open pack of cigarettes and twenty dollars, it said so in the note.

He wasn't a big smoker. He was like Zac, smoked when needed. I knew I'd hurt him, but knowledge that, even drunk, he'd been with someone else hurt me as well. I wasn't angry, or crying. Just there. Bland, bleak, apathetic.

This feeling continued through me getting something to eat for the first time since just before our appearance on Conan. Then through picking out something to wear. And showering as well. It wasn't until I looked at the clock, reading quarter past noon, that I started to worry, started to feel bad.

We were to be leaving at one to go to the signing. This meant that I had less than an hour to find him. I went through the whole neighborhood, street by street, even asking a few that I was familiar with if they'd seen him. Worry etched over my face more and more as nothing came up. I'd scoured half of the borough before giving up, stopping alongside the road I'd turned around on to call his cell.

It rang three times before going to the voicemail. He was ignoring me, I knew because many more rings should have come before then. I left a message anyway, "Sky, baby please don't do this. Call me back, I'm worried about you. Or at least hop a cab to Virgin Records," My breath hitched as I said, "I . . . I love you baby"

Resting my head against my arms, which in turn were against the steering wheel, I tried to will back my tears. Quite a few times as I sat there, I hiccuped back a sob, but only a few tears made their way out of my eyes. I didn't bother wiping them away, letting them fall down my face and onto my pant leg below.

After about fifteen minutes of sitting there, I was finally composed enough to drive. I'd be late to the signing, I saw once I gazed at the clock in my CD head unit. It was already one-thirty. I'd get reamed out for making the band late, but they'd get over it. At least I hoped so.

As expected, I was yelled at by both brothers and two people from our camp. Zac yelled the least. His brows creased in worry when he saw my red eyes and downcast glance. Ike went on a full tangent, nearly ready to hit me. That wouldn't be new. We've gotten into fist fights before over something like this, something that involved the whole band. Zac, though the biggest of us three, never hit anyone. He's lost his temper a few times, but not as much as Ike or I. He's actually relatively calm, even when angry.

I noticed him throwing me subtle glances as we were rushed into a herd of fans. They've always been a little over-the-top. Today was no different. Three fans had actually come from New Zealand just to get a copy signed. Two from Finland. A group from the UK. I tried to look interested, really I did, but it was like I was just going through the motions now.

Time and again my head would fly up if I saw a shag of raven black hair. Never was it Skylar. Only once actually was the person even male. This cracked my heart a little more, spidering off like glass or ice with too much weight on it. The lights of Manhattan were bright as the actual day as we wore down. The store was closing and we were still signing, Ike chatting the most with fans. I feigned smiles, seeing Zac's frown deepen in his face from the corner of my eye.

Finally we were allowed to leave, me slumping my way over to my car, feeling like I was in a dream, a moot dream, or a boring film. A thick hand wrapping around my arm stopped me just before I climbed in. I spun on my heel, looking into Zac's worried stare.

"Huh?" I asked, no emotion in my voice. Though I had to keep my phone on silent, I checked for missed calls and messages on my way to the car. Nothing. I'd resigned to the idea that Skylar hated me. I hated me for making him feel that way.

"What's the matter with you today?" He asked, though his voice only held curiosity and worry.

"Get in. I don't wanna say it right now, or . . . or I'll never be able to get home, but I'll tell you when we get to my house," My breath hitched on me, a little and I looked at the pavement below my feet.

"Okay, let me run and tell Ike," He squeezed my arm supportively before jogging off to where Ike's car was parked.

I got in the car while he was away, starting it and letting the cool breeze from the blasted air conditioner hit my skin. I felt like I could collapse right there. But I didn't. Instead I opted for resting against the steering wheel, silently thanking whoever made the medication I was on.

I was so in my own zone that it jarred me when Zac opened the door. We said nothing the entire way to my house. The CD playing was the only sound in the car, and it was low, a background rustle only present to keep my own sanity. The house was dark when we'd arrived. I prayed that Skylar had come home. That he was asleep in the bed that had welcomed him.

But I wasn't even remotely ready to look for him. I needed to get out how I felt, truly and wholly, and Zac was there to hear it. We sat on the couch, lights dimmed, silence around unless we were speaking. He waited patiently for me to begin, and when I did, it seemed I'd never quit.

Only after I'd exhausted myself of all words to describe how I felt about everything did I stop, and by then I was in his arms, head buried between his shoulder and neck, crying, not much unlike Skylar had been doing early that morning. It only made me feel worse to know how he felt.

"Shhh, its okay Tay," He whispered as close to my ear as possible as he held me. His arms were so big, so warm. I felt safe, and comfortable again with him. It was relieving to think that, and it was just the start of an onslaught of good thoughts. Soon I wasn't sobbing anymore, silent tears making their way. Then no tears, just shaking. He rubbed my back, running circles over the exposed flesh of my lower back with his thumb. How I missed this.

"I-," I began, not knowing how to word what I said. He was patient with me, not stopping his motions or differing his breathing to show annoyance as I stuttered, opening my mouth and having it flap silently. I felt detached from my own brain, unable to will it to make coherent thought, "I want him to come home," I whispered, and before he could interject, I added at an even softer whisper, "But I don't want you to go"

"Why would I need to?" He asked, his voice soft.

"That's not what I mean," I muttered miserably into the crook of his neck, "I don't want you to leave *here*. I like this too much," I finally admitted.

He sighed heavily, tightening his grip on me, "I like this too," He told me, daring his lips to kiss my crown.

Shivers went through me that I couldn't conceal. Then I let go of his embrace bravely, looking at him, "I'm sorry for being such a dick to you these past couple months . . . it hurt though," I looked down at my hands.

"You had your reasons," He told me softly, nudging my chin with his fingers to look at him, "It was

your right to be mad. Sometimes anymore, I just want to set back time and not react how I did. I wonder what would happen, what could happen. But then, you sounded so happy to have found Skylar again, and I felt like such an ass for having those thoughts and -," My lips covering his quickly silenced his admission. It wasn't that I didn't *want* to hear the words, I just *needed* to feel his kiss again. It was too much to restrain myself any longer.

Suddenly I felt like I was a million times worse than Skylar, but for the life of me, I couldn't stop myself. Zac didn't try to make me either. His actions were fervent against me, moving almost immediately in response.

His lips were so swollen, so warm, so wet against mine. My tears fell into the kiss as our tongues touched, making it salty to taste. I didn't care anymore. As much as I loved Skylar, I loved Zac too, and damnit, I needed them both. I didn't even care at that point *how* I had them. Of course I had no qualms with how it seemed to be going with Zac . . .

I just wondered still what Skylar would think of me. Would he hate me? Could he embrace me again if he found out? I didn't know, but unfortunately, I was too into the moment to let that stop me.

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## Chapter Forty-Eight

The sound of heavy breathing, lips and tongues moving over one another and the rustle of our hands moving our clothes in desperate need to touch the other. Zac had let out a few mews from being so into the moment as I'd graze just a little too lightly or kiss a bit more fervently than what he was used to. My brain was swirling with sensation and emotion. It was sheer insanity, and if this were any truer a statement I'd need a straightjacket wielding, paddywagon driver to come take me away.

We found our way to a laying position on the couch, legs entwined between eachothers', thighs pressing into our now very prominent erections. He was atop me, elbows on either side of my shoulder, fencing me in (which was done rather willingly and was enjoyed quite heavily), his forearms bent to allow his hands in my hair.

One moment his lips were on mine, clumps of hair twisted between his strong fingers and fists, moving in rhythm to music only present in our heads. Then he stopped out of nowhere, his head falling low, a crown of light brown locks showing themselves full view in my face. His breathing was labored, but that only lasted a while, exhaling a heavy sigh at its end.

"Zac, wha-"

"I can't do this," He cut me off in a miserable mutter, his head still down.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my brows knit in confusion at his sudden change of heart.

"Its wrong Tay," He whispered, and it sent my blood boiling quicker than if I walked right into the sun.

"What the fuck do you mean, its wrong? I poured my fucking heart out to you, and you did the fucking same, and now you're back at this bullshit denial crap?" I hollered, pushing at his chest as hard as I could, hearing him grunt back the pain as he felt the blow course through him. He abruptly got off, "You think I'd even think of putting up with your shit Zac? I have half a mind to-"

"*Shut up, Taylor!*" He screamed back at me tears stinging his eyes and swelling them red, "You just fucking assume shit and its-"

"Fuck you, after what you did to me, I'm allowed to have some fucking caution when I'm with you!"

"I fucking did it Taylor! Its my fucking fault!" He screamed at me.

"Then why the *fuck* are you yelling at me about this?!"

"Not what you're thinking moron!" He yelled back with venom.

"Then what is it?" I countered, crossing my arms as I sat up, folding my legs up to my knees and leaning against the end corner of the couch.

"Skylar," He muttered, much more muted than before, thinking that a simple word, a name, could clear all confusion.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked, my brows creasing again in my obvious confusion.

"I . . . ," He stuttered a bit, "I got drunk the night you told me when and where you were taking him to d-dinner," He whispered, as if as ashamed about his actions as a person in confession, "I talked to a friend . . . he works there as a waiter," He sniffled a little bit, "I told him to hit on him, told him . . . I told him that Skylar had had a bad night and needed a few drinks, maybe a smile his way. I wanted him to flirt with Sky.

"I-I cut my hand on purpose Tay. I did it to hold you late, so that you'd walk in and see Skylar getting touchy feeling drunk with some random guy," Angry tears welled in my eyes, and I clenched my fists under my arms. He didn't see this though, his head was bowed. *Fucking right, asshole.*

"I didn't know th-that they slept together. Hell, I felt terrible after knowing it had gone through, the whole shebang happened. I just . . . I wanted you to know how I felt when I first heard about you and Sky. When you told me over the phone how much he still meant to you," He breathed back a sob, holding the air in his lungs until the apples of his cheeks turned red.

"That wasn't even the worst part though, Tay," He admitted with a teensy bit of sob thrown in his words.

"What is then?" I demanded, angry, yet still curious as to what else he could throw onto my platter.

"I don't know if . . . if I c-can say it," He whispered in a tiny voice.

"Since you've already told me that you've got more, I'd suggest you tell me now," I got out through clenched teeth.

He bit his lips inward, making them tight and thin instead of loose and plump, sucking in a deep breath through his nose the air almost hissing its way into his airway. Finally, just before he turned blue from holding it in I'm sure, he blurted it all out, "Its that . . . damnit Taylor, anymore its Skylar this, Skylar that. And I haven't even *seen* him since you got here. He used to be my *best friend*, Taylor. You used to be the other one. It was always us three if we were out just being kids. Now its you two, and its like you've forgotten me, even though I love both of you so much, you don't even understand. Skylar definitely doesn't. Hell Tay, he was my first crush ever, and of course when else should it strike but when you were *dating* him way back when!"

My jaw was slacked. He really felt that way? That we just forgot about him? Perhaps in recent days we had, but that was mostly my fault, our fault (Zac and mine) as we were on bitter terms with eachother lately. And what else should fly from his mouth but that his first crush had been my first and only boyfriend? Why, why, *why*?!

A muted gasp from well outside the confines of ourselves filtered in. Both Zac and I shot our heads in the direction of the sound, seeing a folded body perched on one of the topmost stairs visible from the living room. Even in the heavy shadow I noticed the stark contrast of fair and dark that was Skylar.

He *had* come home, but I hadn't been wondering about him. So selfish of me, and I'm sure he caught quite a bit of what had happened once we got home. I wondered exactly how long he *had* been there. Had he heard what I'd said? Did he watch us kiss and grope so openly? He most likely heard our shouting, as I'm sure that was audible from outside.

His fingers gripped two banister rails when we'd looked over. Apparently it didn't take him long to realize that he was caught and that there was no way he could sneak from the battlegrounds. Rising slowly, shakily, he lumbered down the remainder of the steps, as if too weighed down with emotion to move lightly as he usually did.

*Awkward*, a voice inside my head sarcastically noted. I wanted to hit myself for bringing it out clearly. As if I didn't feel it in every ounce of me. Zac curled up thigh and shin folded toward him, his arms wrapped just below his knees, "I-I'm sorry . . . to both of you. I wanted you both back so much, a-and I figured that if you were . . . if you were mad at eachother you . . . you might come to me to vent about it, a-and I'd have you b-both back," He began sobbing softly, head buried in the hoop he'd created with his arms.

Skylar sighed back his own tears, sniffing heavily before opening his mouth, let it shake with silently erred preparations of what he wanted to say, "I know . . . ," He began slowly, unsure, "That neither Taylor or I have really included you anywhere . . . ," He breathed in deep, as if bracing himself for a

blow for his next words, "But how should I feel Zac? Openly ecstatic that my first boyfriend was with my old best friend? And that my old best friend had hurt my first boyfriend as badly as he had, even if it was unintentionally so bad?"

"I-I know, but I was desperate, and stupid and I just want to fucking curl up and die now, thank you," Zac spat miserably from the hole he had his head in.

"But I . . . Zac, Tay obviously fucking cares about you still, or he wouldn't have said what he did! He'd have just told you to . . . fuck off or something," He breathed in deep again in anticipation of his own next words, "And me? How the fuck am I supposed to forget the first . . .," He blushed and I cocked my head a little in confusion now, "The first boy I'd ever kissed," His words were soft, bashful.

My eyes slowly grew wide as the depth of his words set in, "Since fucking when?!" I hollered out incredulously, not meaning to be as loud as I was, but the shock was just too much. Zac's arms tensed as I looked back and forth to each of them.

Skylar sighed as he realized that Zac wasn't going to interject and validate things for him, "Since . . . like, a couple months after I moved into your neighborhood. He . . . he was curious about it, and so was I, and so, we did it," He blushed an even deeper crimson with the last three words, "It was before I met you," His bright blue eyes pierced my own, "And . . . and I liked it, but Zac was almost two years younger than me, and I met you like a week later, and you were nearly my own age . . . and even though I said it was just out of curiosity that I tried it, I've always counted it as my first kiss"

A random memory from my past with him came back, how bashful he'd been when I'd asked who his first kiss was, and if it was anyone I knew. He never answered straightforwardly, beating the corners smooth with, 'Oh it wasn't important, really. You wouldn't know the person anyway,' or some variation of that sort of answer. No matter how hard I pushed, it was always the same result.

I couldn't help but stay gaping as all of this dirty laundry was spilled. My brother's first boycrush was my first boyfriend. Skylar was my first kiss with a boy, and Zac his. Zac's first kiss came from Skylar. It was swirling in my mind at supersonic speeds, I couldn't get out of the race, couldn't see more than a blur of mental clarity.

"Do you still hate me? Either of you," Came Skylar's sweet, tiny voice.

Zac's head shook, still protected by his arms and knees from view, "Not as . . . as long as you don't hate me," Was his muffled reply.

Skylar sat down on the floor between us, "Tay?" His frightened whisper swept into my ear like delicate bells.

"No baby, but you have every right to hate me, to forget me after tonight," I looked down in shame, my mind running through all of the mess that had been not only the last few nights, but the last few months, "Even though . . .," I breathed in deep, trying to conjure the strength to say it, "Even though I can't force myself to choose between the two of you. And I know that's not fair to either of you, but I



just can't. I don't know what to do anymore, and I'm all mixed up inside again. Its like I'm destined to be in a nutward forever and I fucking hate it!" I growled out my frustration, tears of anger and desperation both flowing from my eyes.

"No Tay," Came Zac's soft voice, "You don't need to be in a nutward. We just . . . we need to settle this somehow, once and for all," The tone was still shaky, but sounded just as refreshing as Skylar's. I still hated myself though he attempted to soothe me, placing a soft hand on my upper arm, squeezing just enough to let me know he was there. He was silent for a while, biting on his lip in thought before sucking in a quick breath. This was a foolproof sign from ages of knowing him that a lightbulb had at least flickered in hid mind. Then he spoke, "I . . .," He faltered only at the beginning, but spoke slow throughout the rest, "I think I have an idea"

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## Epilogue

*Just over three months later . . .*

I took my time in the shower. It was hot, the water pounded onto my back with just enough pressure to be perfect. Just over a week before had I raced to be back in my own shower, in my own bed, in my own house. There wasn't much of a break between promotion and actual touring. We were leaving the next afternoon for San Diego, followed by a slew of California venues, then up to Washington, down to Texas, and over and over more through the western half of the country before going again west to do two more California shows, and a few in Colorado, Utah, Wisconsin to name a few. We were trying to hit everywhere. Then we'd go to Mexico and South America, to Europe then Australia and finally Asia. Nothing out of the ordinary really, with one exception.

I was lucky to have been the last one to take a shower before sleep. The hot water was used up and the room filled with a haze as thick as river-side fog. I relished the heat, the moisture as I wandered around the cloudy room, a towel about my waist for good measure. My hair got combed through, my nails clipped (the ones I hadn't bitten off), deodorant applied, shaving cream settled over my face. I was getting prickly, and definitely wanted to start the tour looking fresh and leave the scruffy look for times that I could afford it with reasonable purpose, like being exhausted from the six day, six show stretch we had to go through once we reached the east coast again. Insanity.

A hand towel came blindly from a drawer beside me as I washed my free (and foam covered) other hand. I wiped down the mirror before realizing that I'd not retrieved my razor, which was in the linen closet, which stood about two feet to my right. I shuffled over slowly, pulling my razor from the shelf that held the rest of my things.

Upon looking back in the mirror, movement in its reflection jarred me from the task I was attempting to accomplish. The door was creaking open slowly, and I heard hushed, giggly voices. Zac's broad frame was pale, almost ghost-like as he backed his way in, a muted giggle on his lips and hand connected to someone else's.

Enter Skylar with the same disposition as Zac. They were apparently unaware of my presence upon entering. If they'd have known I was in here, they'd have at least knocked first. I watched from my decently safe place, just behind a wall separating a changing room and the actual bathroom, the reflection of the mirror my only view. My breath caught in my throat as I watched them kiss, a goofy smile still plastered to their lips. Heat swelling between my legs, the fabric of the towel soon rubbed against the sensitive head.

It was a battle in my mind between getting caught right then by moving to conceal my problem, or being caught with a raging hard-on when they finally made their way farther into the room. I took my chances with the latter, hoping that the fog could mask my erection.

Zac stopped cold, and I knew he'd spotted me. The reflection of my eyes were captured in his stair, and I felt a blush run over my face as I swallowed hard. *Please don't look down, please don't look down . . .*, were my frantic, embarrassed thoughts as our stare down continued.

"What-," Skylar began as he bumped into Zac's side ungracefully. He found easily what Zac looked at, his mouth becoming an 'o', "We, uh . . . we didn't know you were still in here," He blushed.

An awkward silence invaded, thickening to the same density as the fog (at least!), growing thicker when Zac finally drew his eyes from mine. Then they went south, and I felt like crossing my arms over the bump in my towel. Never had someone outside of Skylar made me feel so naked, even if I had been bundled for a whooping from a winter nor'easter in New York. A mischievous grin spread over his entire face, eyes glittering as he licked his full lips, "But, yeah . . .," He drawled, "We wouldn't mind adding another person to the equation, would we?" He gave Skylar a glance from the corner of his eyes.

Skylar, and the naturally shy disposition he held made him blanch. But I was not shy, not even close, and matched Zac with my own naughty smirk, "Not like it would be the first time"

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## WINTER HEAT

*Short Following SHM*

I was caught off-guard by the lack of light in my house. Zac's car was in the driveway, and it wasn't too late, but there were no lights. My shoulders were heavy from the tension of my entire trip. That night was the night of my twenty-fifth birthday. For the first time in nearly two years did I get to see my children. Natalie said she didn't trust me to see them, thought I was too fragile. Maybe I was. My heart was heaving with blood, thick with emotion when I'd both come and gone. The past week had been spent in Georgia. Natalie was very static with me. There, but not there. Clingy but cautious.

She was bitter and distant in her words and in her eyes when I'd meet them. She had a boyfriend. Ezra ran into my arms when he'd seen me. Asked why I'd been on the road so long and why he wasn't allowed to come anymore. So that was the lie she told him for my absence? I sent a quick, electric spark of a glare her way when he'd asked, then explained to him that he had to be in school now. Natalie had put him in public school. I had no problem with that really. If we were still together of course, my mother would be homeschooling them.

Of course as well, if we were still together there wouldn't be such a long unfolding of events that has been told in detail once and I'd rather not relive. He seemed fine with that answer. "Papa Chuck", as her boyfriend was referred to by Ezra, was the only dad Penelope could remember. Tears welled in my eyes at that fact. I was a stranger to her and when my son ran to me so joyfully, she merely creased her little brows.

I shook it off as best I could for that week, her confusion and his untainted appeal to me. They were both my children physically, but only one now in theory. The day I left Georgia Ezra stormed into my room, the latest Power Rangers emblazoned on his t-shirt, hollering that they had a surprise. Natalie had taken the time to bake me a cake and they'd bought me presents. I ate a piece, thankful for the the sweetness of it, missing the taste of noncommercial cake.

Ezra had "gotten" me a trendy lamp, because I'd been laughing with Natalie about how we'd never bought one for the treacherous hallway upstairs. I smiled her way and she came up to me with a rectangular box wrapped in metallic aqua paper. Her smile confused me, it was soft, deliberate and genuine. We'd been at odds all week, in silence of course. It had been weird with us since I'd come off touring for the last album. She said she didn't know if I was really "ready" and that hurt. Not once during the time I'd spent in town with her and the kids had she been openly cold, but she'd also not gone out of her way to be nice either, which even I tried to do.

But now she handed me this box with that smile, and so slowly I opened it, afraid of what was in there. My hands were careful as they peeled away the tissue inside, revealing a hand-crafted silver photoframe. Over the top it read in obviously hand-twisted words, "No Matter How Far We Are Apart" and on the bottom it read in the same sort of script, "We'll Always Love You". Inside its glass casing was a professional portrait of the three of them, taken just past the new year I'd guessed from the appearances.

I hugged her before my tears became visible, letting them drop on her sweater, "Thank you," I whispered shakily as her arms came around me. I'm sure I didn't make Chuck feel very good by holding her so long, but I couldn't help it.

Her smile was still the same when she pulled away, "Its no big deal. I figured you'd like a reminder of that," Her drawl was back.

Those words stuck in my head through the flight and when I picked up my Rover. They muted a little as my interest and confusion set in about my lifeless looking house. I sighed as I shut off the ignition and fiddled with my keys to find the one to open the front door. It was silent in the house, that was another odd thing. Usually Zac had music playing, even in his sleep he'd have a CD on repeat. But no, there was nothing. I switched on a table-lamp, threw my keys beside it and removed my coat and shoes.

"Hello?" I called as I made my way into the kitchen. There was nothing, as I knew there would be. We hadn't hung out in that room since my drugging days, as shortlived as they were. I looked for lights on as I climbed the stairs. My mind jumbled with thought and I creased my brows as I moved on, seeing a flickering candlelight escaping through the crack at the bottom of my door, "Hello?" I repeated as I closed the gap between me and the door.

Shuffling was heard beyond it as I opened the door slowly, peering in at the same pace once it was fully opened. Right in front of me sat Zac, perched on my computer desk chair. The candlelight came from a handful of tiny candles, all of which were set upon a cake. A cake that, once again, looked homemade. The only other light I could spy in the room was the steady red dot glaring at me from directly across from where Zac stood, crossways from myself. My confused frown melted into a smile as I entered the room completely, shutting the door and breathing a sigh of relief as I walked to him, circling my arms around his waist, "Thank you, baby," I grinned into the crook of his neck.

"How was your trip?" He asked carefully, his eyes, which looked amber with the candlelight burning in them, dissecting my own stare, trying to find out an answer without words.

I shrugged, "Its weird. Ez is all about seeing me. Natalie and I even smiled at eachother at the end," I breathed in a deep sigh, "But Penny doesn't remember me. She didn't say anything to me"

His arms came around me a second time, this time to comfort me, "Its okay baby," He whispered over and over again as my shoulders shook with dry sobs until I calmed down enough to look at the cake.

"Those are getting pretty low," I muttered, frowning a little at the candles, now stubs.

He smiled now, "So blow them out, and make it a good one," He clapped me over the back a couple times, his hand lingering to grasp my shoulder, "You're a quarter century old now, geezer," He laughed.

"You better watch it, youngin'," I teased back, playfully shoving him as I leaned over the cake. *I wish . . . fuck, I wish a lot of things*, I thought with a small frown, but shook the thought and made one, breathing deep to attempt blowing them all out at once. I almost succeeded, missing only three in the upper righthand corner of the thin, square cake.

"So whad'ja wish for?" Zac asked. He'd never missed a beat on that question, but now he was doing our parents' part with me in removing the still warm, soft stubs of wax.

I smirked as I pulled away the last of the candles, placing them on a spare paper plate. Just for kicks, I ran my middle and index fingers carefully over the edge of the cake, coating them in icing, "Wouldn't you like to know?" I asked smartly, raising my brows in challenge, before sticking my middle finger in my mouth, "But you're not gonna," I muttered, icing making my mouth stick, "Mmm, what flavor is this?"

"Um," He thought a moment, coming back over to me, "Cherry Vanilla," He said as he took the hand with icing on it and stuck my index finger to his mouth, taking more time than necessary to lick it off. It drove me *insane*. His tongue sliding over the pad of my fingertip, those lips . . . *those lips* . . . pulling, sucking against my skin. *Fucking tease* . . . , I thought, but couldn't help smiling, "Yeah, its good shit ain't it? We uh, finished the rest of it off after we finished with what needed to be put on the cake," His eyes veered over to the corner, to the corner with the little red dot shining through the almost dank black.

I didn't need light, not even that which was shining through the windows from the street, to know that

Skylar stood there. He was still, like an actual tripod, when I'd walked in. But I'd known he was there. Zac would have told me immediately if he'd have gone somewhere, and probably have saved my "surprise cake" until he'd have come back.

"Why is he standing over there like a statue anyway?" I asked in a stage whisper to Zac, who'd just freed my finger from his mouth.

"Probably because he's hard," Zac snorted at the end, trying not to laugh. I'd broken the sexy moment though, I knew that. But for how long? I wondered silently, as the torture Zac had already put me through had left its mark, quite visibly in fact.

A wicked smile came over my face as I looked to Zac once more before sauntering over to where Skylar stood. As I neared, I saw a shy smile over his face, and was sure he was blushing, "So baby," I cooed into his ear while I put my hand over the hand holding the camera, "Trying to catch me doing something naughty on tape? Think I wouldn't notice if you stood still enough?" My grin widened, threatening laughter as I felt him shudder as my lips met his neck.

Carefully I peeled the camera from his hands, looking at the screen. It was set to record in night-vision, and the power cord was actually connected to it. *Smart guys...*, I thought with a smirk, knowing that the setting drained the battery terribly. They must have been planning something. Something long lasting. The thought made me chuckle inwardly, "Well, this is apparently part of you two's plan, so let's just put this," I shook the camera lightly, smiling before I set it on the nearby dresser, "Right here," I looked back to him with a wide smile, "And you," I took his hand again, "Are coming and socializing," I led him over to where Zac stood again.

"I'm considered 'socializing'?" Zac snorted out a laugh. With a silly grin, I nodded, "Whatever you say captain"

It was my turn to laugh, "Captain? I don't think so! You two planned out this shindig, not me!"

"Mmm," Zac teased me with his mischievous stare, coming nearer to us, "That we did my dear," His fingers walked down my chest, to the hem of my t-shirt.

"So," I got out before I gasped at his kissing my neck, fingers tickling the skin just above my pant line, "What, oh," I moaned softly as I felt Skylar's lips at the other side of my neck, "Exactly did you two plan?"

"Oh, but," Skylar whispered, stopping to nip at my skin, "If we tell you, it would," He let out a groan as Zac's free hand snaked around my back to grab his waist, "Ruin the surprise"

I felt lost as they both attacked me at once, hands running under clothes, over clothes, on skin, gripping, nipping, licking. It wasn't the first time, oh no way in hell was it the first time. But it gave me the sensation that the first time did. How confused, wary, tentative we all were in that position. How curious our touches and kisses were that night. God it was brilliant, amazing. Their lips met after they made a point to trail nearer and nearer each other through my neck and collar.

My interest, and arousal, peaked as I watched them kiss, their mouths moving together softly, but still so hotly. My eyes, and bulge in my pants, grew as they opened their mouths, tongues meeting. It was torture, but lovely torture, to see them like this, and they knew it. Soon I felt cheeky though, "What happened to this being about me?" I asked, a laugh lingering on my words. Slowly they pulled away from each other, a bashful smile gracing both their faces, looking to me in apology.

Those looks were shortlived though, as Zac attacked me with a kiss on the lips, a moan escaping my mouth as he teased my bottom lip with his tongue. Readily I accepted his offer, opening my mouth sooner than I'd intended, but to gasp as Skylar crept behind me, hands gripping my waist and lips on the back of my neck. I felt the heat from both their hands as they both worked to lift the shirt from my body.

I felt when they undressed me so slowly, that I was being pampered. A royal with servants who used so much care, that I was precious and couldn't bruise. Skylar's hands raced up and down my back, tickling the skin lightly as Zac finished pulling my shirt off. He returned to my lips, his hands almost mirroring Skylar's on my front now. I gasped into his mouth as I maneuvered each hand to grasp one of each of their hips, well best I could with Skylar.

Zac was first to take any other initiative outside of kisses and touch, closing the gap between us roughly, his left hand on my waist, the other reaching to pull Skylar close. I gripped, tore, tugged at his shirt as best I could with one hand, until he finally got the hint and pulled back a bit to remove it, his pants and boxers soon after before he grinned, pausing to stand there in his full glory and nearly hard as a rock for me to see.

It took me by surprise, the fervor of his kiss as he pulled me to him by my pant line, fingers nimbly working at the button, then zipper of my jeans. Skylar disappeared from my senses as my jeans and boxer-briefs were smoothed away by Zac's hands. Zac grinned as he stood again, but he wasn't looking at me. This confused me, but I barely had time to move my head a few inches before the shock of heat from both their bodies hit me, crushing themselves against me, attacking me with their lips, hands roaming each other and whatever of me they could reach.

Cold overtook me with a chill from the front as Zac backed away off of me. I threw him a confused look, which was broken midway by a kiss at the crook of my neck from Skylar. Why was he moving away, not a look my way? "What the hell are you doing?" My voice obviously emoting my bewilderment. He was cutting the cake! What the hell? I wanted to go over to him and tear him from the stupid thing. I'd tried actually, but while he was thin, Skylar held a good grip with an arm about my waist before I'd made an entire step forward.

Small, bite-sized pieces he cut, being careful not to make it crumble with the knife. Just before he made the last cut to finish his work, Skylar started nudging me forward. This wasn't helping my confusion *at all*. But I played their game and was rewarded when we reached Zac with a corner piece of the sweet dessert, his thumb lingering on my lips after he'd put the bite in my mouth. It wasn't until then that I realized their intentions, and it made me want to grin from ear-to-ear. Zac's grin matched my own as I reached down to the plate and picked up the piece to the left of the one he'd taken out. I twisted myself a bit in Skylar's arms, repeating Zac's movements to him, giggling a little as my fingers left some of the icing just below his lip.

Time and time again we went over those motions, taking turns as to who fed who in no particular order. Sticky kisses were left over our faces and shoulders and necks between bites. Over and over until the small cake was devoured, our lips and fingers mussed with the icing. I took Zac's hand carefully in my own, putting his thumb into my mouth, wrapping my lips around the digit, sucking, licking the contents from it until the taste waned in my mouth. Then onto the index finger, going in procession until each was cleaned of the sweet confection. Skylar decided he would do the same to me, and Zac did so to him at the same time. The feel of his lips around my fingers, his tongue sweeping over the skin made me unbelievably hard, wanting his mouth to be elsewhere by the time he'd finished with my middle finger.

His hand was at my bare chest, leading me to sit, then lay on the bed, his body following atop mine once I was situated to laying correctly. He'd become more fierce, less shy about his actions just before we left for the tour. Only because Zac and I teased him into it, not doing a damn thing unless he started it. But the catch was that we would tease him without actually doing anything, and we'd do things to each other in his presence, just to egg him on. Needless to say, it was only a few days' time before he initiated something. His naked form lumbered over me like a thin shadow, topped off with a shock of shaggy, raven black hair.

With a grin, he leaned down to me, kissing me roughly while grinding his hips into mine, making the kiss break for me to cry out from the sensation. The twist of his lips turned wicked as he basically shimmied down my legs, kissing the entire way, pulling his legs to be between my shins now. My eyebrows knit as my eyes closed as his hot breath, then mouth, hit the head of my dick. I gasped the first time he went down, pulling hard on his way up.

I tried to keep myself composed as best I could, my eyes still glued shut from concentration, breath hitching when he'd do something unexpected. I felt the bed shift again, then Skylar rocking in time with who I could only imagine to be Zac. That boy was a terrible tease and I knew this well. It wasn't until Skylar let out a hard groan around my shaft that I dared opening my eyes.

There was Skylar to my south, pulling against the sensitive skin on my prick with his mouth, licking the head as he finally made his way to the top, fingers gripping the sheets. Zac was behind him, rocking with him, against him, rhythmically, eyes knit shut like my own had been, mouth slacked. Even in the dark I could see the splotches on his cheeks from the heat, sweat glittering over the piece of forehead I could see left uncovered from his own mess of light brown hair.

The sight all together was too much, Skylar going at my cock, Zac pounding into Skylar. I bucked my hips toward Skylar's mouth a few times before I regained my willpower, letting out a cry before forcing my eyes closed again. His pace quickened with the rhythm I could feel beyond me, grunts and cries and moans stifled by his full mouth.

Poor thing, only once had he been in that position before. Most of the time it was me stuck in the middle, and even for me was it overwhelming. He'd actually made the mistake of biting down last time, though I wasn't the victim. That would be Zac. It hurt him for over a week after that to get hard, or even put too much pressure on it.

I cried out, bucking my hips up to him again when I felt him shove two fingers into me. That was brave for him to do actually, as I could count on one hand since our relationship started again that he'd done

anything like that. He was the girl no matter what was going on, whether it was Zac or I or the both of us against him. It was a shock, but damn was it a good one and I fell into the rhythm he pumped me with.

His breath was hot, shallow, quick over me, over my slick cock as he got closer and closer to coming. Zac seemed only capable of rough grunts as he gyrated his hips like a piston in overdrive against Skylar, sweat coating his hair, matting it to his face.

Skylar made the effort to raise his eyes to me, and succeeded for only a moment. That was all I needed to be thrown over the edge, seeing his brilliant eyes masked and deepened by the darkness of the room, the sight of Zac beyond him, eyes half-lidded and temporarily blind I'm sure. I reached out, wanting contact with skin against my hands, my fingers. I found Skylar's neck, his upper back, raking my stubbed nails against the tender, sweating flesh as I cried out loudly, 'oh's escaping my mouth in lieu of breaths as I came, pouring the hot liquid into Skylar's waiting, breathless mouth.

I watched with exhausted interest as they finished off, letting myself breathe again, watching as they came down as well. Zac sank back, sitting on his feet and ankles I'm sure, once he was calm enough to even move. Skylar's face rested against my upper thigh, breathing deep against my sweat-soaked skin.

Finally, Skylar crept up my side, curling against me, a leg over my thighs. Zac followed lethargically, moving slow and fluid until he reached my other side, an arm hanging limp over my chest. I kissed Skylar, then Zac, smiling dreamily.

"Good birthday present?" Zac asked with a tired grin after we parted.

"Oh yeah, let's just hope that tape doesn't get out," I laughed.

Skylar's frame stiffened, then he bolted upwards and off the bed, muttering, "Oh shit," On his way over to the dresser. He fiddled around with the camera, finding a way to stop recording and finally shut the machine off. A silly grin came over his face, cheeks red by the time he reached us again, "Sorry," He whispered.

I sighed and turned toward him on my side as he got comfortable again, his arm reaching around my waist until it settled, fingers just barely gracing Zac's stomach. I smiled before letting my head rest against the pillow, fighting the urge to just watch them both fall asleep, which I could tell they were on the way to doing from how limply they rested against me, from their breathing, from their lack of talk.

"I love you . . .," I found myself whispering into the darkness, trying my best not to let my emotions choke my words and become known, "Both of you," I whispered softer a few minutes after, tears stinging my eyes, and though I got no response back, I knew they felt it too, but were asleep by then. I smiled, letting my tears fall. There was no reason to wipe them away, they were out of good reason, not bad. I wrapped a protective arm around Skylar, scooting myself more into Zac's curve, feeling his hand attempt curling against my skin, pulling me as close to him as possible. A smile came to my face, replaying the night's events, knowing I couldn't forget them because Zac and Skylar were brilliant in their idea of a video camera. Sleep closed my eyes and hazed my mind, and I let myself fall into



dreams, knowing I'd be ready to wake and live in the conscious world as long as they both were in it.