

TAYLOR ♂
♀ **MADE**

CHAPTER 10

Wave Function



Taylor made it all the way to the dorm before the euphoria curdled in his veins. It wasn't until he stepped out of the elevator, lungs burning, fumbling for his keys, that he realized he hadn't taken a full breath since Maya kissed him.

The feelings lingered like the echo of the Big Bang—lips still tingling, chocolate-and-lipstick sweet; her soft hand on his cheek; the tiny sound she made when he kissed her back; the floral smell of her hair. For thirty seconds, the lies and careful calculations that kept Taylor the Girl intact went quiet, and he was simply someone being kissed by a beautiful woman.

His feet carried him forward on autopilot, muscle memory navigating while his brain short-circuited between pure joy—*first kiss!*—and crushing guilt—*built on complete deception!* The door to 412 materialized like he'd teleported there, and he froze, key hovering near the lock, trying to reassemble himself into something coherent before facing whatever chaos awaited inside.

And as he palmed open the door open, Abigail did not disappoint.

“Spill!” she said, catapulting from her lookout by the window. **“You have thirty seconds to tell me everything, or I will start guessing, and my guesses are all lesbian disaster scenarios.”**

Taylor froze, half-in and half-out of the doorway, his brain still caught between standing on the bridge and the soft press of Maya's body. He tried to speak, but his tongue was rubber and his jaw was locked.

Abigail, grinning like she'd discovered cold fusion, seized his wrists and yanked him all the way inside, slamming the door with her hip. She examined his face, then broke into a triumphant cackle. "Holy fuck! Is that glitter on your mouth?"

His mind reeled, reconstructing the date as if he were debugging an experiment. "I..." too raspy, too strained. He coughed, tried again. "We had coffee, she was really nice, and I think she likes me."

"Oh, no, no, no, Indiana. You're not getting off that easy. Did you talk? Did you flirt? Did she touch you? Did you—" she zoomed in on his mouth again, "—kiss?!"

Taylor flinched and nodded. Abigail made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a dolphin squeal.

"Oh my god! This is a sapphic coming-of-age movie and you're the main character. Did you kiss her or did she kiss you?" She hopped from foot to foot, hands fluttering like she was playing air castanets. "Wait, don't answer, tell it in order! Start with the coffee. What did she wear? Was she hot?"

Taylor stammered out a sequence. "Blue dress, but not, like, fancy? Just, you know. And she did that thing where she tucked her hair behind her ear. A lot. My sister said it was important. Is that a thing?"

Abigail snorted. "That's a thing. Keep going."

He relayed the greeting, the tea, the brownie the size of a paving stone. How Maya asked about his weird talent, and he'd told her about the digits of pi. Abigail let out a snort of pure joy at that one. Then Maya talking about movies, the slow pivot to walking around Harvard Square, the sailboats, the bridge, the sunset, the way everything felt weightless and real until the moment it didn't.

Abigail bit her knuckle. "Oh my god, this is so gay. Did you feel the spark? Like, did your knees go wobbly? Was it like... like in the movies?"

Taylor wasn't sure if his knees went wobbly. He'd been too busy trying to keep his lungs working. "It was...intense," he said finally.

"I need the exact logistics of the kiss," Abigail demanded. "Who leaned in first? How hard? Was there tongue?"

"Abigail!"

She grinned, unrepentant. "I'm living vicariously. I need a full play-by-play. Pretty please with sugar on top."

Taylor shut his eyes and relived the bridge moment. The memory replayed perfectly, every frame high-def. Maya's lips, a gentle question at first; the breath that puffed into the hollow of his cheek when he kissed her back, and the little surprised mmh that made him shudder and want to bolt all at once. How his own hand went to her lower back, then chickened out and fell away. The heat of her mouth, the way the

city noise cut out, the weird clarity of noticing an airplane moving across the pink sky just as their lips met.

But all he said to Abigail was: “She asked if she could tell me something, then said she’d never asked out a girl before me. And then she kissed me. It was quick, not, like, movie-length, but then... I, um, kissed her back.” Heat rushed to his cheeks.

Abigail whooped. **“You went back in for seconds?!”**

“Not like a... I mean, it was just...” He waved his hand, the memory fracturing under scrutiny. “It was nice.”

“You just had your first kiss!” She tackled him in a hug. **“Taylor Hughes, you absolute sapphic goddess.”**

The words stabbed right under the ribs. He was still running the numbers on what the hell he’d just done, what he’d just taken, and there was Abigail, grinning like she’d just personally delivered him to Queer Valhalla.

Taylor thought of the way Maya said, **“I’ve never done this before,”** her breathless smile after the kiss, as if she’d just done the scariest and most exciting thing of her life. He ran the tape forward and backward, searching for some inflection or hesitation that would prove she was onto him, that the whole thing had been a test, but instead found only sincerity. She’d trusted him! She’d looked at him and seen someone worth kissing. And for a few seconds on the bridge, he’d wanted to be that person so badly, he’d convinced himself it wasn’t a lie.

But fundamentally, Taylor was a fraud. If the universe was a closed system, there was no free joy; what he’d taken tonight belonged to someone else. The laws of conservation demanded it. He wondered if tomorrow Maya would wake up feeling hollow, like she’d had a date with a black hole—known only by the light it steals.

He needed to tell Abigail. He needed to say something, anything to break the cycle of performance. But the words backed up in his throat, jammed behind all the practiced mannerisms and the weeks of effort. Instead, he let Abigail squeeze him, watched her delighted little dance, tried to enjoy the vicarious happiness radiating off her.

“It’s official,” she said, spinning away and collapsing dramatically on her bed. **“You have to marry her now.”**

“I don’t think that’s how dating works.”

“You don’t know how dating works. That’s the point!” She propped herself up on her elbows. **“So, do you want to see her again?”**

Taylor nodded, and that was the problem. He wanted to see Maya again. He wanted the coffee, the laughter, the look on her face after the second kiss. He wanted to keep pretending, just for another day. Maybe two. Maybe the whole semester. And that made him the worst person in the entire city.

Abigail sighed blissfully. **“God, you’re so lucky. I wish my first date had gone half that well.”**

Taylor bit the inside of his cheek. The guilt roared in his head. “Tell me?” he said, desperate to change the subject. “You never talk about

any of your disasters.”

“Oh, honey.” Abigail stretched her arms above her head, exposing a band of skin where her shirt had ridden up. “My first date was a disaster’s disaster. The girl made me watch six episodes of *The Bachelor*, then tried to convince me to join her in a pyramid scheme. I snuck out when she went to pee.”

“That sounds—”

“Horrorifying? It was. But at least she wasn’t a dude projecting her mommy issues onto me, which was my second date.” She rolled her eyes. “The point is, you had a magical, totally-not-catastrophic first date, and I’m so proud of you I could puke.”

Taylor smiled, but his stomach lurched. What would Abigail think if she knew? Would she call him a monster? A thief? He tried to imagine telling her, tried to shape the words. But every scenario ended with her smile vanishing, her voice hard and flat, her faith in him shattered, their friendship over in the kind of explosion that could be seen from orbit.

He swallowed the confession, replaced it with a tight-lipped grin. “I think she wants to see me again. She said she’d text.”

Abigail laughed, “Girl, you are unstoppable!” then rolled onto her stomach, legs kicking in the air. “We need to celebrate. Should we order Dominos? Oh my god, you should call her, like, right now. Show her you’re not playing games.”

“Isn’t that clingy?”

“Clingy is in. Clingy is the new ‘cool and mysterious.’” She reached for her phone, tapping at the screen. “Here, I’ll draft something. I’m, like, your texting Cyrano. You can edit.”

Taylor let her compose the text—something funny and casual, with just enough vulnerability to keep the conversation rolling. He didn’t want to send it, but he also couldn’t stand the thought of disappointing Abigail. She looked so proud, so satisfied, like this had all been her doing. Which, of course, it was.

He watched her, pink hair mussed yet stylish, eyeliner smudged but also perfect, just a living neon sign of confidence. He wanted so badly to be like her—unapologetic, wild, honest. But he wasn’t. He was just Taylor, a person constructed from a borrowed gender, a fake voice, and a secret no one could know.

Still, he pressed send.

“See? Easy,” Abigail said. “Now let’s celebrate.”

They ordered pizza and watched old episodes of *Great British Baking Show*, Abigail recapping each of the contestants as if she’d personally mentored them. She had lots of opinions on royal icing. Taylor tried to lose himself in the bedlam of signature challenges and showstoppers, but his brain kept looping through the date, the kiss, the shame of how easily he’d let Maya believe a lie.

The universe wasn’t a fair or kind or good place. He’d known that for years. But why did his life have to be this? Why did he have to be the



one to pile hurt on top of happy, to be both the thief and the witness? He wanted to tell Maya the truth. He wanted to feel the relief of the secret dispersing, the molecular bonds of guilt and make-believe finally popping, leaving behind... what? An empty space, probably, but maybe also some new kind of matter. Something that, finally, didn't depend on how well he faked everything.

Abigail fell asleep halfway through the fourth episode, arms curled around her pillow, a half-eaten pizza slice on her chest. Taylor watched her breathe, slow and steady, then sat up, wiped the makeup from his face, and stared at his reflection in the tiny mirror above his desk.

The lips were still a little red, even after the tissue. The eyes were blurry and tired. The face looking back at him was neither boy nor girl, just a mess: red blotches where he'd scrubbed too hard, a forelock hanging damp. Still, there was something left over in the lips. In the shadow of a smile.

He checked his phone, half fearing, half hoping for a message. Nothing. Then, right as he plugged his charger in, three dots wobbled into existence on the screen. Then a text:

i had so much fun. i haven't stopped thinking about your lips all night

The words glowed back at him, bright as a warning buoy in the dark.

He stared at the text, his skin prickling, a cold sweat blooming even as his face flushed. If he replied instantly—if he let himself be swept into the current of whatever this was—he'd be pulled even further out from shore. But the thought of leaving Maya hanging twisted him up even worse.

He thumb-hovered above a dozen possible replies, all of them idiotic. Each felt like selecting the wrong answer in a multiple-choice quiz. He typed and deleted half a dozen responses before settling on: *Tonight was really, really perfect. Thank you.*

Then he put the phone away, brushed his teeth until his gums stung, and climbed into bed, hoping for a dreamless sleep. He deserved nothing less.

Taylor woke up early on Sunday. The sun cut through cracks in the blinds, casting prison bars across the ceiling. Abigail was also awake—highly unusual—curled on her side, knees to chest, the sheets wrapped around her like a biosafety containment barrier.

Uh oh, he thought.

She was scrolling her phone in silence, thumb flicking up, up, up, over the same handful of screens. Her hair was a flattened pink helmet, the remains of yesterday's eyeliner pooled under her eyes. She didn't look up when he emerged from his bed.

"You okay?" he asked.

She shook her head. "That bitch even took a picture of my bedroom."

"Who's a bitch?"

"The realtor." She shoved her phone screen at Taylor as if this were proof of a war crime. "Look at this bullshit. They'll think some stupid, boring girl lived here."

Taylor squinted—the photo showed a perfectly staged bedroom stripped of any trace of the chaos and color of Abigail. Her bed was made military tight, her bulletin board emptied. The caption said, 'Cozy, with lots of light.'

"That sucks," he said, uselessly.

Abigail dropped her head to the pillow and stared at the ceiling. "It's like it's already not my house. Like everything that made it mine is stripped out. It's just a fucking set piece and I'm supposed to never think about it again."

Taylor sat on the edge of his bed, fingers tangling in the blanket. He wanted to say something, anything that would make it better, make her less small.

"Want to get breakfast?" No response. "Watch more Brits make scones? Or, I don't know, go throw eggs at a frat house?" Nothing.

Finally, he went with the nuclear option. “Abby,” he said, quiet and careful, “can you pick my outfit for this thing with Will?”

For a moment, there was more silence. Then, slowly, her head turned on the pillow, hair matted against her cheek. “You want me to dress you?” Her voice was dull, a burned-out light bulb.

Taylor nodded. “We have established that I have no taste, and you do.”

She considered him, eyes squinty and suspicious. Then, like a switch being thrown, a faint spark lit her expression. “Really?”

Taylor hesitated, but she looked so sad. And if he could fix that, he should. “Really. And... no veto. I am clay, shape me.”

Abigail levered herself up, blankets sliding off her like storm debris. For a second, she didn’t say anything, just blinked at him with an expression Taylor couldn’t parse. Then she grinned, and her phone landed face-down on the mattress. “You’re a brave woman, Indiana. Thank you.”

Twenty minutes later, Abigail emerged from her closet smiling like a deranged fairy godmother, arms full of fabric. “Okay, so hear me out—”

“That’s never a good start,” Taylor said, eyeing the items of clothing she was laying out on his bed like surgical instruments.

“You said no veto.” She held up what appeared to be a shirt, though ‘shirt’ was generous. It was black mesh with strategically placed leaf patterns that would, *theoretically*, cover the important bits. “This goes over this—” she produced a black bra-thing that looked only somewhat more substantial than usual, “—and then these.”

‘These’ were red cargo pants that sat so low on the hips they looked designed to mock the idea of a waistband. His brain performed several calculations: exposed skin surface area (*catastrophic*), probability of Will noticing something anatomically inconsistent (*rising*), chances of combustion from embarrassment (*approaching certainty*).

“It’s fashion, Tay.” Abigail was already sorting through her jewelry box. “Will’s going to forget how to form words.”

“Because he’ll be busy calling campus security?” He picked up the mesh top, holding it to the light. His entire midriff would be exposed, that soft pale expanse he’d spent four years hiding under hoodies. “Abby, I can’t—”

All the manic energy drained away, replaced by that hollow look from earlier. “Okay,” she said. “Sorry, I’ll find something else.”

The words weren’t manipulative, just tired. She looked like someone had unplugged her, all that Abigail-ness flickering on emergency power. Taylor thought about her childhood bedroom, sanitized for strangers. About the divorce texts she kept deleting. About how she’d saved Maya’s number from the trash because she believed he



deserved good things.

“Fine,” he heard himself say. “But if I die of exposure—like, *literal* exposure—you’re explaining it to my mom.”

That thousand-watt smile clicked back on. “You won’t die. You’ll transcend. You’ll become the goddess you were always meant to be.”

“I’m supposedly already a *sapphic* goddess, how can I transcend *again* while on a coffee date with a guy?”

“My mythopoeic framework is fluid, thank you very much. Goddesses contain multitudes.”

Twenty minutes later, Taylor stood in front of their mirror experiencing an out-of-body experience. The mesh top clung to his torso and the bra-thing underneath provided structure but not much coverage—if anything, it emphasized everything the mesh revealed. Meanwhile, the cargo pants started somewhere around his hip bones, leaving an expanse of fleshy white stomach that seemed to glow under their dorm lights. Basically, he looked like someone had taken scissors to a perfectly reasonable outfit and removed all the reasonable parts.

“I look like I’m auditioning for a pop-punk band.”

“No, you look like you could break someone’s heart just by *pouting*.” She circled him, pulling the pants slightly lower (how was that

possible?), arranging the mesh top just so. “I mean, you could destroy someone with a glance.”

The only thing I’m destroying is what’s left of my dignity, he thought. But she was practically vibrating with creative satisfaction, dancing around him while applying finishing touches.

“Abby, Will’s just my TA,” he said desperately. “This is a professional meeting about research.”

“Sure, Jan. That’s why he asked you for one-on-one coffee at eight PM on a Sunday.”

“I guess.” Taylor’s stomach churned. The mesh might as well have been transparent, but Abigail was humming as she worked. She was having fun, and if this made her happy, he could survive a few hours of looking like a Hot Topic model. Besides, the coffee shop would be dark, probably. He could sit strategically, arms crossed over his middle. It would be fine.

Everything would be fine.

“There,” Abigail said, stepping back. “Perfect. You’re going to give that poor boy an aneurism.”

Taylor looked at his reflection one more time. He looked like someone dangerous and soft simultaneously, exposed but somehow armored by the audacity of it all. His brain supplied unhelpfully: *Schrödinger’s Slut*.

“If this goes badly—”

“It won’t.” Abigail squeezed his hand. “Trust me. Sometimes the best armor is no armor at all.”

The coffee shop was in Boston proper, the kind of place where every inch of wall was plastered with flyers for poetry slams and vegan potlucks, and where you could pay three extra dollars for the privilege of almond milk.

When Taylor walked inside, the effect of Abigail’s handiwork was instant. Heads turned. A cluster of frat boys in matching polos paused their game of *Magic: The Gathering* to openly gawk. The guy behind the counter—nose ring, sleeve tattoo—arched an eyebrow, then glanced away so fast it looked painful. An old woman in a cardigan at the window table lowered her scone mid-bite and stared, lips pursed. He felt less like a goddess and more like a science experiment that had escaped the lab.

Will was already there. And when he spotted Taylor, there was a sharp inhale, his eyes went wide, and the coffee froze halfway to his lips.

Taylor’s stomach, suddenly cold, felt impossibly exposed. He adjusted the bra-thing under the mesh top, wishing desperately that the floor would open up and drop him somewhere less visible. Mars would be ideal.

Will put the cup down and, after a second, summoned a grin.



“Wow,” he said, his voice a shade higher than usual. “I feel severely underdressed.”

Taylor tried to smile back, but his face was numb. He sat across from Will, tucking his hands between his knees.

Will was wearing a simple white shirt and a big brown cardigan. It was somehow both athletic and nerdy, and it made Taylor feel like a kid in a Halloween costume. He regretted the mesh top. He regretted everything.

“You look...” Will trailed off, searching for the right word. “Awesome. I mean, if it’s okay to say that. I like the leaves.”

Taylor shrugged, avoiding eye contact. “It’s my roommate’s.”

“Your roommate has taste. I wish I could pull off something like that, but I think I’d get arrested.”

The frat boys at the corner table snickered. One of them locked his eyes on Taylor and grinned with a slowness that made him nauseous. The nearest leaned over, stage-whispering something about “smuggling two water balloons,” and the entire table burst into laughter.

Please let this be over soon, he begged the universe. He would’ve done anything to become invisible again, to shrink to a single point, to unsee the guy’s smirk as his eyes lingered on his cleavage.



Will's eyes snapped in the direction of the frat boys, then back to Taylor. **"Ignore them,"** he said, voice low. **"They're not even worth it."**

The memory hit without warning: his backyard, eighth grade, the sun hot on his bare shoulders for the last time. The neighbor kid, Jason, had pointed, cupping his hands under his own flat chest. Then came the sound—a high 'moooooo' that echoed across the lawn.

Taylor's skin prickled. Every nerve ending was on fire, the mesh top suddenly abrasive, the band of the bra squeezing tighter with each breath. He felt the old, familiar panic beginning to bloom—an expanding sphere of dread that crowded out all thought.

Will kept talking, filling the silence with safe subjects. He discussed the best strategy for the next problem set in Professor Flores' class, the weirdest prank he'd seen on campus, a story about a rowing teammate who got stuck in a revolving door at a hotel. Taylor tried to focus, but the edges of his vision blurred, and the coffee shop noise—so pleasant when he'd been with Maya—was now a hostile signal, too loud, too sharp. He gripped the table, his hand shaking.

Will stopped mid-sentence. **"Hey,"** he said, gently. **"Are you okay?"** Taylor nodded, but his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. **"Do you want to get out of here? We can walk if you want. Or, um,**

go somewhere quieter?”

Taylor shook his head no, then yes, then realized he was trembling all over. “I... I’m really sorry.”

He bolted.

One second he was sitting there, and the next he was on his feet, the chair scraping against the floor with a sound that tore through the coffee shop.

“I have to go,” he managed, the words a mangled mess in his throat.

He was out the door before Will could even stand up, the bell above the entrance chiming a mocking little farewell. The cold night air slapped his exposed stomach, a shocking reminder of his own nakedness. He ran blindly, boots hammering against the pavement, each jarring impact a fresh wave of nausea. He could feel *them*, his chest, bouncing with every stride, a sickening, pendulous motion that made him want to vomit. They were heavy, alive, two alien things strapped to his body, announcing his freakishness to the world with every step.

He didn't know where he was going, only that he had to get away from the lights, the people. He ducked into a narrow alley between a bookstore and a Mexican place, the smell of garbage and stale beer thick in the air. He stumbled to a stop, bracing his hands against a grimy brick wall, and finally let himself fall apart.

Ragged, desperate sobs tore from his lungs. He couldn't breathe. The air wouldn't go in deep enough, each gasp shallow and useless. He clawed at the mesh top, his fingers catching in the netting, trying to rip it off, to tear away the flimsy fabric that had failed so spectacularly to be armor.

Taylor was a fake—and if he wasn't a fake then he was a freak. A boy with monstrous tits playing dress-up, and everyone could see it.

He stood there for a while, hands braced on the wall, forehead pressed to the filthy brick. The mesh imprinted a diamond pattern on his arms. He welcomed the sting, the cold, the distant thump of a bassline from somewhere down the block. Anything to drown out the burning in his face and the pain in his lungs.

He'd survived all of Bloomington by refusing to cry in public, not when they called him “bitch tits” in gym class, not when his locker got stuffed with sanitary pads and “free the nipple” flyers, not even after Wendy found him in the bathroom trying to mash his chest flat with an Ace bandage so tight it left purple marks. He'd always told himself he was tougher than the worst shit they could throw at him. But like everything else in his life, that was just pretending, too.

A shadow fell over him. Taylor flinched away instinctively, but it was Will, concern etched into his face.

“Hey, hey—” he said, but he didn't touch Taylor, just crouched beside him, big hands splayed palm-up, as if ready to catch him if he fell. “You're okay. You're not in there anymore.”

Taylor's throat made a sound—a whimper, maybe, or a wheeze.



Will shrugged out of his big cardigan, which looked like it could double as a blanket, and wrapped it around Taylor's shoulders. The fabric swallowed him whole, the mesh and the bra-thing disappearing beneath its soft embrace.

"Better?" Will asked.

Taylor nodded, grateful for the shield. He tucked his chin into the collar and focused on the smell: detergent and sweat and something sharp, maybe eucalyptus. It grounded him, brought him back from the brink.

They stayed there for a minute, maybe two, neither speaking. Then Will said, **"We can go. Or not. Or if you want to go home, I'll walk you."**

Taylor wiped his face with the sleeve of the cardigan and croaked, **"Sorry. I'm just—"**

"You don't have to be sorry. That place is a zoo. And those assholes—" He jerked his chin back toward the shop. **"They're not worth your brain space. You're, like, literally the smartest person I've met this year. I mean that."**

Taylor tried to say thank you, but instead he just pulled the jacket tighter and stood. Will didn't move until he did.

They walked along the sidewalk in silence. The cardigan was so big

it nearly reached his knees, the hem flapping with each step. Will adjusted his pace so they walked side by side. He kept a respectful distance, hands jammed in his pockets. The conversation came slowly, at first just observations about the city, then about the bridge over the Charles, how the river looked different at night, black and glassy.

Taylor's heart rate started to slow, the tremors in his hands fading to a manageable vibration. The big cardigan hid everything—mesh, skin, the bra-thing, even the red cargo waistband. For the first time all night, Taylor felt almost safe. He didn't dare look up to see if Will was watching him.

Finally, thankfully, Will started talking physics. "You know that old thing about time dilation? People always say it's just a math trick, but my dad's friend works at Fermilab and he told me a muon at nearly light speed can cross a whole city before it decays. Like, it should just blink out of existence, but instead it travels a hundred miles because time slows down for it. Isn't that crazy?"

Taylor nodded. "Right. But... But it's not just time, though. Space gets weird, too. There's a frame where the whole city is compressed into a tiny segment, so the muon only has to cross a few feet instead of the real distance. It's, like, both at once. That's the freaky part."

Will's eyes lit up, and for the first time that night, Taylor felt like himself. Not the imposter, not the freak show, but the kid who could talk his way out of any science problem, the one who had something to offer.

They went back and forth for a while, trading theorems, stories about dumb high school teachers, their favorite paradoxes. At one point, Will drew diagrams in the dirt with a stick, and Taylor caught himself smiling, the panic of earlier fading into the background. They didn't talk about the coffee shop, or the panic, or the way Taylor had run from the table like the whole place was on fire. They talked about neutrinos, and about the time Will had tried to build a small particle accelerator in his parents' basement and incinerated a \$5,000 treadmill instead. Taylor learned that Will was the oldest of three, that he'd nearly flunked freshman chemistry, that he played video games

Taylor tried, consciously, to feel attraction. To see if there was a spark with Will the way there'd been with Maya. He cataloged Will's features—the strong jaw, the open expression, his muscles, the way he gestured when excited. He imagined kissing him, wondered if it would be better or worse than Maya's.

The answer was neither. The answer was nothing.

Taylor realized, with sudden clarity, that even in this "girl mode," he was still straight. Or, at least, straight-adjacent. Whatever label fit, it wasn't the one that would ever make Will's hands on his body feel right.

They ended up at a bench overlooking the Common. Will sat, elbows on knees, hands clasped together.

"I'm sorry if I was weird back there," Will said, not looking up. "I just wanted you to feel safe."

“You did,” Taylor said, meaning it.

“I’m not really... good at the social stuff,” he replied. “It’s easier in the boat. There, everyone has a job and if you mess up, you just row harder. Out here, it’s... harder to know what people want.”

Taylor found himself relaxing, the borrowed cardigan heavy and warm. “I’m bad at it, too.”

They talked for another half hour. Will described the research opportunity, the data sets they’d be using, the kind of programming Taylor would need to learn. It was all very safe, very professional, but also deeply sincere. Will believed in Taylor, in his abilities, in the idea that they could work together as equals.

The moon was shining over the skyscrapers when Will said, “Not to sound cliché and patronizing, but do you want me to walk you home?”

“I think I’ll hang around out here for a while.”

“You’re okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Now I am.”

“Well, you can keep the cardigan.” he said. “For tonight, I mean.”

Taylor hesitated, then nodded. “Thank you.”

Will smiled, and for a second Taylor thought he might say something else, but he just nodded. “See you in class?”

“See you,” he echoed.

He watched Will walk away, the tall, broad frame shrinking with distance. Unlike with Maya, he had no desire to follow, but he wanted to see him again. It would be nice to have someone in his corner. To have a teammate. A friend.

He made it halfway down Tremont before realizing he had a tail.

Abigail was following him, badly. She kept darting behind lamp posts and then emerging as if by coincidence, alternately examining her phone and “studying” the graffiti on the underpass. Taylor pretended not to notice, even as her pink hair flashed in his peripheral vision like a warning buoy.

When he stopped at the footbridge to the river, she loitered beside him, hands jammed into the sleeves of her oversized sweater. “I wasn’t stalking you,” she announced preemptively. “I just happened to remember there’s a Burger King down this way, and also that I never finished my cardio this morning.”

Taylor let her stand beside him, silence stretched between them.

“So...” she said. “How’d it go?”

He watched a group of scullers slicing the Charles, each stroke synchronized. It seemed like nobody ever stopped rowing around here. What was the matter with them?

“Fine,” he said. “Good, even.”

She glanced up at him. “You don’t look good. And that is not your coat.”

Taylor traced the collar of Will's cardigan. "I bombed. Not the work part, but the... being a person part."

"What happened?"

"The outfit was too much," he replied. "People stared."

"Yeah, well, fuck them." She shrugged, unbothered. "But if it sucked, why didn't you change? You could've just said no."

He tried to explain, stumbling over the words. "You looked so... not sad, when you were dressing me. I know things have been hard for you. You're my friend. And I just wanted to see you happy."

Abigail's mouth opened, then closed. She flicked her gaze down, blinking too fast. "I didn't realize it bothered you that much."

"It didn't, at first. I thought it'd be, like, an experiment. But then I got there and it was like—" He gestured at his body. "I've spent my whole life trying to disappear. Lately, sometimes I forget why. But tonight, I remembered, and that really sucked."

She was quiet for a few breaths, then said, "You know you don't have to be what I want, right?"

Taylor nodded, unsure if it was true. He thought of the past month, the way every moment was shaped by Abigail's approval, the way he'd chased her delight like a cat after a laser pointer. Was he really any different than the version of himself who hid under hoodies and science back in Bloomington? Was this a new Taylor, or just the same one in a better disguise?

Abigail shifted, her shoulder brushing his. "I'm sorry," she said, voice unfiltered for once. "I should've noticed sooner. Sometimes I get tunnel vision and just... steamroll people."

"It's not your fault. I just need to figure out how to stand up for myself. Even if it makes things weird."

She elbowed him, gentle. "Character growth. Love to see it."

He smiled, and for the first time since Saturday, it wasn't a performance.

"You looked so brave," she said suddenly, as if the thought had been stewing for minutes. "In the outfit, I mean. Like you didn't give a fuck."

He snorted. "I gave, like, a hundred fucks."

"But you did it anyway," she said. "That's what makes it cool."

Taylor considered this. "Do you ever wish you could just be normal?"

Abigail grinned. "Nope. Normal is for people who peaked in middle school. Hey, want to walk through the Common? Maybe we'll encounter a serial killer and kick his ass."

Taylor nodded, pulling the borrowed cardigan tighter. The wool was scratchy but warm. They crossed the street toward the dark expanse of the park, the gas lamps casting long, dancing shadows on the path.

"Seriously though," she said, nudging his arm. "That's a good look. The whole 'tortured poet who just got rescued by a gentle giant' thing."



They walked slowly, boots crunching over acorns, breath clouding in the air. Somewhere a trumpet player was butchering “Hey Jude,” the off-key notes stretching across the park.

Taylor stopped at the pond and pressed his hands into the pockets of the coat, wondering if Maya would text, or if she’d lost interest after the perfect day.

Abigail joined him. “Wanna hear something pathetic?”

“Always.”

“Every time my parents fought, I’d dress up my brother and me in ridiculous outfits and make him take pictures. Like, weird vintage shit from Goodwill, or stuff I made from garbage bags and tape. I’d tell him, ‘If we look awesome, nobody can hurt us.’ He was always so embarrassed, but he’d do it, every time.”

Taylor looked at her, the way her face went soft around the edges. Was everyone wearing a mask? Was everyone just barely holding it together with tape and borrowed coats?

“He’s lucky to have you.”

“Thanks. But sometimes I wonder if all the costuming was just hiding. Like, what if I never learned how to be a person unless I was playing a part?”

“Then we’re the same. Two frauds, LARPing our way through college.”

Abigail bumped him with her hip. “At least we look hot doing it.”

They looped the Common, talking about nothing—movies they wanted to see, which professor was secretly an alien, which dining hall had the best chicken tenders. With every step, Taylor felt lighter. He forgot about the mesh, about the cardigan, even about the panic attack.

When they reached the Swan Boats, Abigail stopped and did a theatrical curtsy. “Thanks for not hating me,” she said. “Even after I ruined your coffee date.”

“You didn’t ruin it,” Taylor said. “It was already a disaster.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Was Will weird?”

“No,” Taylor said. “He was nice. Really nice. He gave me this.” He tugged at the collar of the jacket, then let his hands fall. “I just... I kept waiting to feel something, and I didn’t.”

Abigail considered. “Maybe you’re just not ready.”

“Or maybe I only like girls.”

She grinned. “So you’re a lezzzbian?”

“Not exactly.”

She leaned in, conspiratorial. “Yeah, labels are for soup cans. But, hey, I think you’re great. Just don’t let me dress you again unless you want it.”

Taylor grinned back. “Deal.”

“Of course,” Abigail mused, her eyes tracing the outline of the cardigan. “You’d wear this killer outfit for Maya, though.” The statement wasn’t a question, just a hypothesis she was testing aloud.

The thought had crossed his mind, a fleeting, terrifying possibility. In the right circumstances, he wouldn’t have run. He would have felt bold. Wanted, even. He watched the dark water ripple under the bridge. “Maybe,” he said, the word barely a puff of condensation in the cold air.

Abigail gasped, clutching her chest theatrically. “Oh my god. Okay, before this magical moment of self-awareness fades, you have to do something for me.” She grabbed his arm. “Take off the cardigan. Just for a second. I need to sear the image of you looking like a goddamn rock star into my memory banks for posterity. This was my best work yet.”

Taylor let out a long sigh that was only half-fake. Slowly, he shrugged Will’s cardigan off his shoulders, letting the cold air hit his exposed skin. He stood there, arms crossed loosely over his stomach, feeling both ridiculous and, for the first time all night, a little bit powerful.

He held the pose, cold biting at his skin, mesh clinging to the dampness still left from the alley breakdown. Abigail stepped back, pursed her lips, then gave a slow, appreciative whistle. “Damn, Indiana. If we’re ever in a girl band, you’re on lead vocals.”

Taylor made a face, but didn’t cover up. The chilly air felt raw and real. No hiding. For a second, he could almost believe he was exactly



who he looked like: reckless, unbreakable, ready to take whatever came next.

“T-Taylor?”

He turned, recognizing the voice before his brain caught up to the face. Alicia Reed from Bloomington High stood five feet away.

Time dilated, and his entire existence narrowed to this moment—standing half-naked in girl clothes and makeup while the only person who was ever nice to him tried to process what in hell she was seeing.

He was observed. He was known.

He was completely, catastrophically fucked.









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