

**TAYLOR** ♂  
♀ **MADE**

## **CHAPTER 11**

Collapse



“Taylor?”

The universe, which for a moment had felt expansive and full of light, collapsed into a single point of failure.

*Alicia Reed. Here. Now. Seeing this. Seeing me.*

Time dilated. The distant, off-key notes of the trumpet player faded to nothing. The crunch of acorns under Abigail’s boots stopped. All sound, all motion, all light bent toward the gravitational singularity of Alicia’s dark eyes, fixed on him.

The exposed skin of his stomach prickled and burned under her gaze. The mesh top felt like flashing neon. His chest—God, his chest in this stupid bra-thing—rose and fell in sharp, shallow gasps that made him look like he was hyperventilating.

Oh, which he was. Crap.

Alicia took a hesitant step forward. “Hi. Are you okay? What’s, uh, going on?”

His brain, which had run thousands of social simulations in the past month, went blank. Blue screen of death. All systems offline.

He gripped the little bridge’s railing, wishing he could melt into the wood, become vapor, to have never existed. He could visualize with brutal clarity how the next few hours would unfold: Alicia would text

all her popular friends. Those friends would turn to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. By midnight, his secret would be a meme: *The freakshow who faked his way into MIT as a girl*. In eight hours, Mom would receive a call from the college. In nine, he'd be headed back to Indiana.

Pink hair flashed in the corner of his vision—Abigail stepping in like a human blast shield. “Excuse me, can we help you?” Her voice had that dangerous sweetness she deployed when someone cut in line at the dining hall. “Because my friend doesn't look like she wants to talk.”

Alicia's eyes darted between them. “She? I—” She shook her head, then looked directly at him. “Is someone making you do this? Is this some kind of... like, a hazing thing?”

His mouth opened but nothing came out. Not even air. His brain was too busy searching for the escape route, the words that would make this all go away. But every scenario ended in disaster. The past and present, like matter and antimatter, destroyed each other on contact.

Abigail stepped closer to his side. “I don't know who you are, but you need to back off. Now.”

“I... no, I think there's been a misunderstanding.” Alicia's hands were raised, palms out—that universal gesture of ‘I come in peace.’ “We went to high school together. We're friends. He helped me—” She caught herself, glanced at Abigail, then back at him. “Taylor helped me with calculus. We ate lunch together sometimes. I've been concerned, actually... I mean, I wondered how college was going...”

The words hit like shrapnel. Friends. They *had* been friends, hadn't they? Real friends, maybe the only one he'd ever had before MIT. Why hadn't he ever realized it before? Alicia sat with him when no one else would. She'd asked about his day. She'd cared enough to wonder how he was doing.

And now she was seeing him like this—half-naked in women's clothing, wearing makeup, being defended by a girl who thought *he* was a girl, in a city a thousand miles from home.

Abigail held the line, body squared. “Right, ‘friends.’” She air-quoted. “Look, lady, she's told me all about the wonderful ‘friends’ she had in high school and how incredibly supportive they all were. So thanks for the concern, but she's doing just fine without reminders of that shitshow.”

The color drained from Alicia's face. When she spoke again her voice was small. “I... I was never... I thought we were...” She looked at him, searching for some sign, some acknowledgment of what they'd been. “I was really worried about you after graduation when you just... disappeared. I texted you a few times over the summer. You didn't reply.”

*Tell her!* his brain screamed. *Tell her you remember. Tell her she was your friend. Tell her she was the only person who treated you like a person instead of a sideshow.*

But his entire nervous system had gone offline. He was a pinned bug, writhing uselessly while the only person from his past who'd ever



been genuinely kind to him backed away with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Alicia said, her voice breaking slightly. “I didn’t mean to... I just saw you and I thought maybe...” She shook her head, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “I’m messing this all up. I’m sorry.”

She turned and walked away, hands stuffed into her pockets, head down. The silence that followed felt like a vacuum—not peaceful quiet, but the terrible and deadly absence of sound when there is no air.

“Jesus,” Abigail said finally, her voice cutting through the void. “What a bitch. Who the hell was that?”

He sank onto the bench behind him, the cardigan pooling around him. His hands shook—no, his whole body shook, fine tremors starting in his core and radiating outward like seismic waves.

“Indiana?” Abigail’s voice changed, the aggressive edge dissolving into concern. “Hey, talk to me. Who was she?”

The tears started then—not the angry, frustrated tears from the alley, but something that felt like it was being torn out of him at the atomic level. “She was...” his voice cracking back into his natural register before he caught it. “She was my friend.”

“Your friend?” Abigail sat beside him. “That psycho was your friend? She was calling you ‘he.’ She was—”

“She was right. She was right about everything.”

Abigail went still. “What do you mean she was right?” Her voice was careful, like talking to someone standing on a ledge.

“I’m not who you think I am.”

A couple walked past, laughter bright and careless. In the distance, the trumpet player had moved on to massacring “Yesterday.”

Abigail grabbed his arm, not gently. “Okay. We’re going home. You’re scaring the shit out of me, and I need you somewhere safe so I can figure out what just happened.”

*Safe.* The word bounced around his skull like a rubber ball. Was anywhere safe? Had anywhere ever been safe? Or was safety just another temporary state that could collapse when the wrong person saw you at the wrong time wearing the wrong clothes?

Abigail started walking, tugging him along, and he followed mechanically. Left foot, right foot, the concrete. The T ride was a blur. Escalators rose and fell. Fluorescent lights flickered. He wanted to sit down on the dirty tile and stay there. Abigail would not let him.

He came to himself in the dorm hallway, Abigail shoving open 412 and steering him to his bed. The room was in its usual state of comfortable chaos—Abigail’s clothes strewn across her bed, Taylor’s textbooks stacked into towers. Except now it felt like an elaborate stage, a backdrop for a performance that had reached its final act.

“Here, sit.” Abigail guided him to his bed, unlaced his boots, and slid them off. “Now, let’s get you comfortable.” She draped a fuzzy blanket over him. “Aw, you look way cute. Like E.T.—except, uh, not ugly.”

When that didn’t get any response, she disappeared into their tiny kitchenette. The microwave hummed, and soon the rich smell of hot chocolate filled the room. She returned with a steaming mug, pressing it gently into his hands.

“Careful, it’s hot,” she said, tucking the blanket more securely around his shoulders. “But it’s the good kind from Trader Joe’s, with the little marshmallows.”

He took the mug and let the warmth seep into his palms. She was right, it was hot, but he didn’t care. The pain grounded him.

Abigail knelt on the carpet, her brow all crinkled. “Tay, I need you to be honest. Should I call someone? Your mom? Campus Health? Because I wasn’t kidding, you’re actually scaring me.” She tried to keep her tone light, but he caught the tremor in her voice.

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

He nodded, watching the fake chocolate dissolving the fake marshmallows, then took a cautious sip. It burned. “Alicia was nice to me. In high school. She was one of the only people who was ever nice to me.”

“Then why was she being such a—”

“She wasn’t being anything. She was just... shocked.” He took a



shuddering breath. “She didn’t expect to see me looking like this.”

“Looking like what? Hot? Badass? Happy?”

He clutched the mug. This was the moment everything fell apart. He was about to lose his best friend, his fake life, everything he never thought he needed but now felt as vital as air.

“I’m not...” he began, still using the damn girl voice, even now, even here. “I’m not really a girl. I’m a boy.”

The silence that followed was absolute. Abigail blinked, her expression cycling through confusion, disbelief, and something like fear.

“No,” she said firmly. “You’re not.”

“Abby—”

“No.” She stood up, pacing to the window. “You’re not a boy. You’re just... confused. Or scared. Or having some kind of crisis because that bitch from high school freaked you out.”

“I’m not confused.” The words came out steady, like confessing had broken something loose. “I’ve been pretending this whole time. The voice, the clothes, everything. I’m male. I was born male. I am male.”

Abigail whirled around, her face flushed. “Stop it.”

“I’m telling you the truth—”



“Stop it!” Her voice quivered. “You’re making me feel crazy. You’re making me feel...” She pressed her palms against her eyes. “God, you’re making me feel so bad.”

He set the mug down, bewildered. “But why?”

Abigail laughed, but it was sharp, brittle. “Tay, if *you’re* a boy, what the hell does that make me?”

“What? You’re... you. You’re Abigail.”

“But that’s what everyone online says about us!” The words exploded out of her. “That’s what they all say. That we’re not real. Just confused boys playing dress-up. That we’re perverts or predators or mentally ill or—” She broke off, sobbing.

The room tilted. He felt like he’d been shoved off a cliff and was still plummeting, the ground nowhere in sight.

“Even my mom.” Her voice was small now, broken. “Even my own fucking mom says it. That I’m just her confused son going through a phase. That I’ll grow out of it. That I’m not really...” She wrapped her arms around herself. “That I’m not really a girl.”

His mind raced back through every interaction, every conversation, recasting them in this new light. Abigail teaching him makeup with patience. Her insistence that he could feel beautiful. The way she saved

Maya's number because she believed he deserved love.

She hadn't just been a supportive, fun roommate. She'd been a trans girl helping another trans girl navigate the world.

"I was so damn happy they paired me with you," Abigail continued, her voice stronger now. "Someone who gets it. And you do! Only now you're telling me you're a boy? Sorry, I don't buy it."

"Abby—"

"You're just scared." She grasped his hands. "But I've seen how you light up when you think you look good. How ecstatic you were after Maya kissed you. The way you've blossomed since we got here—that's not pretending. That's you finally being yourself."

"That's just... Just me finally being seen as worth something. There's a difference."

"Is there?" Her eyes searched his face. "Because from where I'm sitting, you're a girl so traumatized by transphobia that seeing someone from back home sends you spiraling. I get it, that shit sucks. But fuck them, okay? Fuck them sideways. Just look at you! I'd give anything to look half as good."

Something cracked inside him. How could he explain that his performance wasn't about identity but survival? That he'd tumbled into this lie and found, to his horror and wonder, that people finally treated him like a human being?

"I have gynecomastia," he said quietly. "A medical condition. That's why I have..." He gestured vaguely at his chest. "These. I'm not trans, Abby. I'm just a guy with a hormonal disorder who's been pretending to be a girl to get a scholarship."

For a second, she looked stricken, as if he'd slapped her. Her lips parted, then pressed together, and she stared at him, hard, searching for some sign, some punchline that would bring the world back into orbit. "No," was all she managed. "Don't do this. Please don't take this from us."

He stayed perfectly still, pulse throbbing in his neck, hands clammy in hers. "The National Scholastic Award. They thought I was a girl. Mom said to just go with it for one semester, then I could 'transition' back and—"

She shook her head, small jerking motions. "No, you're not just a cis guy. I'd know. I'd have—" She let go of his hands suddenly and folded her own between her knees. "I get that you weren't girly, but you can't tell me this—" Her arm swept the length of his body. "—isn't real. That this isn't *you*. Like, who puts herself through all that if she's not trans? Faking being a girl for months, doing makeup, going on dates—" Her words tangled, her hands twisting in her lap. "You can't just say it's all fake. You can't do that to yourself."

His skin felt two sizes too tight. He wanted to crawl out of it, to run and keep running forever. "I only went along with it because I had to. I needed the scholarship. I thought I could pass for a semester, just long enough to make it work, and then I'd go back to being nobody."

“Stop.” Abigail stood up, backing away from him. “Just stop talking.”

“I’m sorry.”

She moved to her side of the room, gripping the edge of her desk like she needed it to stay upright. “So this whole time, you’ve been what? Playing dress-up? Using me as your personal stylist for some elaborate con?”

“It wasn’t like that—”

“Then what was it like?” Her voice rose. “Because it kinda looks like you’ve been mocking everything I am. Everything I fought to become.”

The hot chocolate turned to acid in his stomach. “I never mocked you. Never. I... I didn’t even know you were trans.”

“You didn’t know? Are you—” She pressed her palm to her forehead. “Are you honestly telling me you’re this fucking oblivious?”

He shook his head. The last few weeks played back at 100x speed. Abigail’s obsession with first times; becoming a new person; stories about those who couldn’t accept her; the gentle teasing about his boobs; the endless, patient tutorials on makeup and clothes, as if she were teaching him survival skills, not just fashion. How had he missed all of it?

*Because, yes, you’re an oblivious, selfish asshole,* came the reply.

He fumbled, desperate. “You never said! And you never gave me any reason to think—I thought you were just, I don’t know, super confident and cool.”

“If you’re a boy, why are you still talking with that voice?”

He opened his mouth, but the words evaporated. He couldn’t make them come out in the old voice. He searched for it, tried to reach back and grab it by the tail, but it was gone, or maybe just cowering somewhere inside him. He felt a sudden fear that if he spoke as himself—really himself—Abigail would hate him, or worse, pity him. That the fragile, ridiculous thing they’d built together would come apart like wet paper.

“I don’t... I don’t want you to hear my real voice.”

“Why? What does it matter?”

“Because... Because if you do, you won’t ever see me the same. And I don’t want to lose you, even though I know I already have.”

She frowned, but her eyes were shining, bright and watery. “You haven’t lost me. Not yet. But this is the part of the dialogue tree where if you pick the ‘I’m sorry’ option, you get the Bad Ending. Just... be honest.”

“Okay. At first, I hated that I had to do this, I swear. I’ve always hated my...my breasts. I wasn’t just bullied, I was attacked. Like, physically assaulted. They’d hold me down, they’d grab them, they would squeeze and twist, and I’d have bruises, and if I tried to fight back...” He shook his head. “And the school didn’t do shit.”

“People are awful,” she said quietly.

“I used to think so. Like, maybe that was just one of the



fundamental constants of the universe. But then I got here, and everyone—*you*—started treating me like I belonged.” The words tumbled out in a rush, a dam finally breaking. “Like I was worth something. And you—you acted like I was this amazing, beautiful girl, and for the first time in years, I didn’t hate being alive. And I *really* didn’t want that feeling to go away, but now it will. Alicia saw me, and she’s going to tell everyone back home. Also you hate me, probably. So, I’ll have to go back to being nobody again, which was what I was expecting... only now that I know what *this* feels like...” He wiped his eyes and looked away. “That really sucks.”

Abigail pressed her fist to her mouth, blinking hard.

“I’m sorry. I wish I was who you thought I was—”

“**Fuck this,**” she said.

He thought she was about to storm out. Instead, with a suddenness that shocked him, she rushed forward and cupped his face in both hands, fingers warm against his jaw. He flinched, but she held him in place, refusing to let him retreat into the shadows of the room or himself.

“**Listen to me,**” she said. “**You are an amazing, beautiful girl. I don’t care what anyone else says, or what you think you’re supposed to be, or**



what kind of bullshit you fed yourself to get here. You're not a fraud, Tay. You're not an imposter. You're a badass, brilliant, gorgeous girl who deserves to exist. Period." She gave his face a tiny, defiant shake, like she was daring him to contradict her. "Tell me how that feels to hear that. Right now."

Taylor didn't know what to do with her hands on his cheeks, or with the heat spreading from his jaw to the base of his skull. For a moment he let himself believe it—let himself be the girl Abigail saw, someone worthy of affection, of loyalty, of love. For three heartbeats it was an almost holy thing. His chest ached with it, so much he was sure she'd feel his heart hammering against her palms.

But then the old scripts ran in, the ones about trickery and masks and the hundred-thousand-dollar lie. He opened his mouth to answer, but his throat closed off. He couldn't breathe, couldn't swallow, couldn't even look away from her searching, desperate eyes.

"Tell me."

He started to cry, silent and ugly, tears tracking down as Abigail's thumb swept them away almost automatically. She didn't break her gaze, didn't let go, just kept waiting him out. Maybe she thought the pressure would force him to finally admit some grand, liberating secret.

But all it did was strip him raw. He gave a shaky, embarrassing snuffle.

“It feels like more lying,” he whispered.

“I know,” she said fiercely. “For me too, sometimes. But do you want it to be true? Do you want to be her? Because if you do, then it’s not a lie. It never was.”

He couldn’t answer. Not out loud. Not even in his head. The possibility ignited a panic that rattled down his spine and through his bones: Did he want it to be true? Did he want this body, this existence, this role?

He imagined a world where he could just say yes, admit it out loud, let the truth be something as simple as a name on a form or a pronoun in a sentence: She. Her. Taylor the Girl. But the voice inside him, the one built from years of humiliation and awkward doctor visits and locker room panic, shrieked that wanting didn’t make it real. How often had he wished for his father to come home, or for someone to notice him, or for all of it to just stop hurting? He’d spent his whole life wanting things that weren’t possible, it never helped. That’s why logic and science were safer. If you could quantify and measure something, it couldn’t hurt you—not the way feelings and memories could.

The silence deepened. Abigail’s hands were hot now, but she didn’t let go. “You don’t have to decide tonight,” she said. “But I need you to promise you’ll think about it. Think about what you want, not what makes sense, not what’s safe or logical. Just... what you’d pick, if you could. Because you *can*.”

He wanted so badly to say yes, but the edges of himself felt splintered, like parts detaching and spinning away. He couldn’t imagine a world where wanting was enough. And yet, the warmth of her hands, the thud of his own heart, the fragile hope in her face—he wanted to believe it. He wanted to want it.

But the only words he could find were, “I’m scared.”

Abigail nodded, a jerk of the chin. “Yeah. Me too. Listen, I’m going to take a walk. A long walk. I might stay over in Chloe’s room tonight. But I promise I’ll be back tomorrow. I just... I need to think.”

“I guess so do I.”

Abigail’s phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen, then looked back at him with a kind of manic urgency, as if she was afraid the window for saving him was closing. “No, the last thing *you* should do is think. For once... stop overanalyzing every molecule. Forget logic. Forget the spreadsheets, the pros and cons. Just ignore your brain and let yourself *want* something.” She was almost yelling, her face streaked and wild and perfect in its sincerity. “Let it be messy. Let it be wrong. Let it change tomorrow. But if you keep pretending your feelings don’t matter, you’ll miss the whole goddamn point.”

“The point of what?”

“Of being alive, Tay. The point of being fucking alive.”

He sat there, numb, as the door closed behind her. The silence in the room was complete, like a pressure wave that filled his ears and

pressed down on his chest.

Did he want it? Did he want to be Girl-Taylor? Or was he only here because the universe had manufactured a body so confusing, so off-script, that it made more sense to be someone else entirely?

The radiator kicked on with a metallic groan, filling the silence with its steady hiss. He stared at the constellation of glow-in-the-dark stars Abigail stuck to their ceiling weeks ago—back when everything was simpler, when he was just a fake girl playing dress-up for a scholarship instead of... whatever this was now. The stars were dim, their stored light fading, and he wondered if that's what he was too: something that had absorbed energy from elsewhere and was now dimming back to its natural state. Maybe the whole month at MIT had been borrowed light, and now reality was reasserting itself, pulling him back toward the darkness he'd always known.

Sometimes, he liked to pretend he believed in the multiverse. Not in the real physics sense, but in the dumb, lazy, Mirror Universe way—like somewhere, right now, a million other Taylors were making better choices. Somewhere out there, a version of him existed who never got stretch marks on his chest, who didn't have to bind himself in Ace bandages just to survive gym class. Maybe in one of those universes, Dad hadn't dropped dead in the garage, and he didn't spend every March 3rd rerunning the footage of his mom doing chest compressions over a cooling body. Maybe there was a Taylor whose most traumatic secret was something cute, like a crush on his math teacher, not a hormone malfunction so severe the doctor literally used the word "unprecedented."

There were nights, usually after a bad day, when he'd lie in bed and make up stories about these other Taylors. Some were boring, some ridiculous. One was an Olympic weightlifter and had perfect pecs, one was a Broadway star, one was a deadbeat barista in Oregon. In all these stories, Dad was still alive. After he'd died, Taylor never once prayed for him to come back. He'd just wished, over and over, for a different timeline. For the option to reload from a previous save.

But there were no checkpoints, no do-overs, no sliders to lower the difficulty. Just the relentless forward movement of time, and the endless, unfixable you.

And this was the only universe he got.

He sat in the silence for what felt like hours but was probably only twenty minutes. He thought about Abigail's words: Let yourself want something. The problem was, he'd spent so long cataloging what he didn't want that the opposite felt like trying to solve for  $x$  when you'd forgotten what equation you were working with.

What did he want?

He wanted to stop lying. That felt like the only solid data point he had. Every conversation since flying into Boston had been built on calculated deception—the voice, the pronouns, the careful omission of his past. Even with Maya, *especially* with Maya, every moment of

connection had been under false pretenses.

His phone buzzed. A text from Mom, probably working another late shift: *How are classes going? Miss you.*

He stared at the message, thumb hovering over the keyboard. Three dots appeared and disappeared as he typed and deleted responses. *Fine. Good. I'm falling apart and don't know who I am.*

Finally, he set the phone aside without responding. He couldn't lie to her too, not tonight.

But maybe he could stop lying to someone else.

Taylor picked up his phone again and scrolled to Maya's contact. This was insane. It was past midnight. She was probably asleep. Or out with friends. Or doing normal college things that normal college people did on Sunday nights. She didn't need a call from someone having an existential crisis. But his finger moved before his brain could stop it. The phone rang once. Twice.

"Taylor?" Maya's voice was thick with sleep, but not annoyed. Concerned. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I..." His throat closed up momentarily. "I know it's late. I'm sorry."

**"What's wrong? You sound—are you crying?"**

He wiped his face with his sleeve. "Can you meet me? I know it's stupid, it's just... I need to talk to you."

**"Of course,"** she said without hesitation. **"Where?"**

**"Park Street T station? I can be there in twenty minutes."**

**"On my way."**

**"Thanks."**

The line went dead, and he stared at the phone screen until it went black, showing only his pale, hollow-eyed reflection. He peeled off the mesh top, went to his closet, and found his oversized MIT hoodie. The familiar weight of it settled over his shoulders like old armor. For the first time in weeks, he looked in the mirror and saw something closer to the person he used to be.

The person he maybe still was.

He grabbed his keys, paused at the door, and looked back at the room that had become home. Abigail's clothes were still scattered across her bed. The fairy lights still cast their warm glow. The makeup bag still sat on his desk.

Tomorrow, none of this might be his anymore. But tonight, he was going to find out what was left when all the lies were stripped away.

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Maya was waiting on the platform when the train pulled in, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of a cute romper, her blonde hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. She looked like she'd thrown on whatever clothes were closest to her bed, but somehow she still looked perfect. When she saw Taylor step off the train, her face crumpled with worry.

**"Oh, no, what's wrong?"** she said and opened her arms.



He walked straight into them. Maya smelled like vanilla and sleep and flowers. Her arms were strong, and for a moment he let himself believe that he deserved this kindness, that maybe some timelines didn't have to end in disaster.

**“What happened?”** she whispered against his hair.

He closed his eyes and held on, knowing that whatever he said next would change everything between them forever. **“I'm not who—I'm not what you think you kissed yesterday.”**

The silence stretched like a held breath, and he felt the exact moment when her body began to tense with questions. When she finally pulled back to look at him, her eyes were wide and searching, trying to read the truth in his face. **“What do you mean?”**

Taylor looked at her, memorizing the concern in her expression, the way the station lights caught in her hair, the blue in her eyes. All of it would be different after tonight. All of it would be gone.

**“I mean,”** he said, **“I've been lying to you since the moment we met.”**











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