

TAYLOR ♂
♀ **MADE**

CHAPTER 12

Superposition



Microexpressions. Taylor had read about them. He had never seen them. Emotions flickered in and out of existence on Maya's face like unstable particles: confusion, surprise, and—horribly—fear. She pulled away; the warmth of her embrace vanished, and cold air rushed into the space between them.

"I don't like lies." Her hands balled up into fists at her sides. **"Are you seeing someone else?"**

The assumption was so normal, so far from the impossible truth, Taylor had to look away. **"No."**

"Oh, okay. Good." The relief in her voice was the worst thing he'd heard all night. She trusted him, ready to forgive whatever small betrayal she'd imagined. **"Then what is it? You look scared."**

"I really am."

"Of what?"

Park Street station was empty except for a woman in a Celtics hoodie shouting into a phone and a man in a bright safety vest mopping the floor in big, angry swipes.

"Lots of things. But, right now, I'm scared I'm about to compound one lie with another."

"I don't understand."



“That’s because I’m not making any sense. My name is Taylor. That part’s true. I’m from Indiana, and I study physics at MIT.” Each fact felt like a tractor beam pulling him back to Earth. “But I’m not... female.”

“Wait...” She shook her head. **“What are you saying?”**

The lights on the T platform flickered, casting their faces in the same sickly hue as old hospital rooms. “I’m saying I’m biologically male. I have a medical condition called gynecomastia that made me grow... breasts... during puberty.”

Maya’s gaze darted to his chest, then back up. Her mouth formed a question and then snapped shut. **“Are you fucking with me?”**

“No. I wish I were. Usually, for other people, they go away. Mine just got bigger. When I won my scholarship, there was a mix-up with my gender, and my mom suggested I just... go with it. For one semester. Until I could figure out how to transition back. We don’t have a lot of money, and it was the only way to pay for college.”

A train pulled into the station with a screech of metal on metal. Taylor half-expected her to bolt for the doors, but she just stood there, staring like he’d announced he was an Andorian.

“So you’re...” her voice came out strained **“...a boy?”**

Boy. Such a small word, but it carried the weight of everything he’d

escaped in Bloomington—the locker rooms, the groping hands, the years of bullying that left him feeling broken beyond repair. “I guess. Yes. I mean, technically.”

“Technically?”

Celtics hoodie stormed past, still yelling into her phone about a guy named Derek. Meanwhile, Maya’s pretty blue eyes—just yesterday filled with warmth and curiosity—had turned flat. Analytical. Cataloging the features that had fooled her.

Good. She understands, she hates me, and I can stop pretending I ever deserved something real.

“So are those...” she nodded at his chest **“...like, fake?”**

He couldn’t even look up. “They’re real. I mean, biologically. It’s a medical thing. I didn’t... I never wanted them.”

A silence. The train doors chimed open, then shut, and the train groaned away, leaving only the two of them and the echoes of everything unsaid.

“So when I kissed you,” Maya began, her voice brittle, **“who was I kissing?”**

Taylor tried to find the words, but they jammed in his throat, cold and slick and impossible. “Me,” he said at last. “But... I lied. You thought you had a date with a girl. And I let you believe that.”

The sudden silence of the platform was too much. He had to get away, to scurry back to the dark corners where things like him belonged.

“Look,” he said, backing toward the stairs, “I’m really, really sorry. I know this is fucked up and weird. I’ll never bother you again. I promise. Just... forget you ever met me, okay?”

He turned to bolt, but Maya caught his sleeve. **“No.”**

Taylor froze, afraid to look back and see the disgust on her face. **“No?”**

“You don’t get to do that. Just drop a bomb like that and disappear. That’s not how this works.”

“But I—”

“What? Say you lied, so now you get to decide what happens next?” She crossed her arms. **“I’m a grown woman, Taylor. I can decide for myself whether I want to forget I met you.”**

His stomach felt like it was turning inside out. In all his simulations, she’d either yelled or stormed off, leaving him to dissolve into the night like he deserved. He wasn’t prepared for any scenario where Maya stood her ground. Or, God help him, wanted answers.

“We’re going to talk about this,” she continued, **“but not here, it smells like pee.”**

“You still want to talk?”

“I think we have to.” She glanced toward the stairs. **“There’s a diner on Tremont. Open all night. We’re going there.”**

“But I tricked you into kissing me. I made you think—”

“Stop.” Maya held up a hand. **“Stop telling me what I thought or**



felt. I have a brain, I can figure it out myself.” She studied his face, and her expression softened just a little. “But I can’t do that if you run away. Now come on. I need coffee, you need tea, and we both need gravy fries.”

She turned and walked toward the stairs, not glancing back. Taylor watched her go. He still had time to run. The train to Cambridge was in the opposite direction—toward forgetting, toward a return to who he’d been before all this. It was the safe solution, the path of least resistance, where the math added up, but nothing ever changed.

Instead, he followed the girl up into the night.

The diner was a time capsule, a greasy, fluorescent-lit box with cracked vinyl booths, all-day breakfast specials, and three kinds of pie under a domed glass like relics of a dead civilization. At the counter, a couple argued quietly, their voices low and weary. A grad student in a Red Sox jacket sat alone, bent over a laptop, nursing a cup of black coffee.

Maya waved at the waitress, a pretty middle-aged woman in a

Wonder Woman apron, and picked the booth farthest from the windows. Taylor followed, stomach churning and heart jackhammering. He was afraid to sit, afraid to do anything unless Maya gave the signal. She settled into the booth and gestured to the spot across from her. **“Come on, sit down.”**

He did, elbows tucked against his body. The table hit just under his breasts, the Formica edge pressing into his ribs. Now that Maya knew what he was, that old defensive curve of his shoulders had returned.

Wonder Woman Apron approached with two menus and a tired smile. “What can I get you sweethearts?”

“Coffee, black,” Maya said. **“And Taylor here will have tea. Earl Grey, if you have it.”**

Taylor looked up, surprised. She’d remembered.

“Hot or iced, honey?” the waitress asked.

“Hot.” Still the girl voice, he realized. Even now, even here, he couldn’t let it go.

“And gravy fries, please,” Maya added. **“With, like, super extra gravy.”**

“You got it.” The waitress scribbled on her pad and walked away, her sneakers squeaking against the linoleum.

“Okay,” Maya said. **“So you’re biologically male.”**

He nodded.

“And you have a medical condition that gave you breasts.”

Another nod.

“And you’ve been presenting as female to keep your scholarship.”

“Yes.”

She was quiet for a moment, processing. **“Okay,”** she said, **“And your mom was in on it from the beginning.”**

Taylor reached for a napkin, twisted it into a tight spiral, then unwound it again. “She said it was just a temporary thing. One semester, max. I’m supposed to switch back at winter break, but—” He stopped, knuckles white around the napkin.

“But what?”

“But I...” He stared down at the napkin he’d shredded into a pile of white confetti. “I didn’t expect anyone to be kind. The last month has been like walking into the Mirror Universe, except nobody has bad goatees, and I kept expecting someone to notice I was an imposter, but nobody ever did. For the first time, people treated me like I mattered. Like I could actually be...just myself, I guess. Even if it wasn’t really me.”

Maya tapped her nails, a hollow staccato against the table. Her eyes were clear now—no longer the soft, filmic blue from the river, but something sharper, almost surgical. He wondered if this was how it felt to be dissected in a biology lab, all the layers peeled away, the ugly organs exposed.

“Okay,” she said finally, **“why don’t you start at the beginning.”**

“Which beginning?” His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat.

“Sorry, I—”

“Your real voice,” Maya said quietly. “Please.”

He swallowed hard. Then, for the first time since arriving at MIT, he let himself speak as himself. “The beginning,” he said. “I guess that would be puberty. When I was thirteen, I started... developing. Like a girl.”

Maya’s eyes widened slightly at the change in his voice. “It’s not that different. Your voice. I mean, it’s deeper, but not by much.” She tilted her head, studying him. “How long have you been practicing the other one?”

“Since May. My mom downloaded this app...” He trailed off, realizing how absurd it sounded. “God, this is so fucked up.”

The waitress returned with their drinks, setting down a steaming mug of coffee for Maya and a cup of tea with the string hanging over the rim for Taylor. “Fries’ll be up in a minute.”

Maya wrapped her hands around her coffee mug. “And the doctors?”

“Said it would go away. It didn’t. It got worse.” He stared down at the table, tracing a coffee ring with his finger. “Like, a lot worse. My doctor said he’d never seen anything like it in thirty years of practice. So, hey, at least I get to be a medical marvel.”

Maya poured sugar into her coffee. “So, yesterday, the outfit... You weren’t, like... There was no padding or anything, was there? You just... that was really all you?” At Taylor’s slow nod, something like relief spread across her face, though it was fleeting. She pressed her lips together and looked away. “That must have sucked. Puberty, I mean. For you.”

“Yes. Like at first it was just embarrassing, but by the time I started high school, it was... it was a nightmare. I didn’t take off my shirt, not even at home. I wore hoodies. Sometimes two, even in summer. They hurt. People saw, and then they never let me forget it.”

“Kids at school?”

Taylor dunked the tea bag, watching the water turn amber. The scent of bergamot wafted up with the steam, triggering memories of his old Sunday mornings—tea and crossword puzzles at the kitchen table with Mom while Wendy and Dad practiced penalty kicks in the backyard. How was it that boring moments later became the most precious things you had?

“They called me names. ‘Bitch tits’ was the main one. They weren’t very creative.” He tried for a smile, but it came out warped. “Sometimes they’d just moo when I walked by. But the worst part wasn’t even the words. It was the... physical stuff.”

“They hurt you?”

“Yeah.” The word came out flat. “A lot.” He squeezed his eyes shut, but Malcolm’s face swam up anyway—that cruel smile, those grabbing hands. “This guy Malcolm and his friends, they’d... they’d corner me in the locker room. Hold me down. They’d grope them, called them the



best part of gym. Sometimes they'd stick stuff in my locker—bras, pads, tampons. Or they'd try to pull down my pants, see if I had... the right parts." He dug the heel of his hand into his eye. "Once, they took a picture of my chest and sent it around the school."

Maya's coffee mug hit the table. **"Jesus."**

"My mom wanted to press charges, but I begged her not to. I just wanted to graduate and disappear." He took a shaky sip of tea, the warmth doing nothing for the cold knot in his chest. "I tried to flatten them with, like... tape and shit. That didn't work. Then I tried to starve myself so the fat would go away, but it didn't. So I learned to hide. Baggy clothes, hunched shoulders, eat lunch alone. Survive until graduation."

Taylor stared at the table, the words getting stuck behind his teeth. He tried to imagine what he looked like right now: a fake girl, face bare and blotchy, hands shaking, voice all wrong. Not enough of a boy to be a boy, not enough of a girl to be a girl. A biological mistake, a medical outlier, a fluke.

"I didn't mean to drag you into this," he said. "I never thought anyone would... notice me. That anyone would want to kiss me. That wasn't part of the plan."

“So what was the plan?” She leaned forward, elbows on the table. **“Get your degree and disappear just like in high school?”**

“Yes.” He allowed himself to meet her eyes. **“The scholarship is real, I won it. But there was a mix-up at the awards ceremony—I was wearing my sister’s dress because nothing else fit, and they thought I was a girl. So, I stole that, too. Like, there’s some girl out there who deserved that scholarship, who actually faced barriers I’ll never understand, and I just... took it. Because I have tits. And, yeah, Mom said to just go with it for one semester. Get the money, then ‘transition’ back to male.”**

The waitress appeared with a plate piled high with fries drowning in brown gravy, setting it between them with a clink. Neither of them reached for it.

“So you think you stole a scholarship meant for women.”

“I know I did,” he said.

“And you think you tricked me into kissing you.”

“I did trick you.”

She picked up a fry, dragged it through the gravy, took a bite, and chewed thoughtfully. **“You know what I think?”**

Taylor shook his head.

“I think you’re an idiot.”

He blinked. **“What?”**

“You heard me.” She pointed the fry at him like a weapon. **“You’re sitting here telling me you stole something from women, but you spent four years getting your ass kicked for having breasts. You think that’s not a barrier?”**

“That’s different—”

“How? Because you’re male?” Maya’s voice rose slightly, causing the grad student at the counter to glance over. She lowered it again. **“Taylor, you’ve lived with the consequences of having breasts since you were thirteen. You’ve been harassed, assaulted, objectified. You’ve hidden your body, hated yourself, probably contemplated some really dark shit just to make it stop. Am I wrong?”**

Taylor’s throat felt like sandpaper. **“No.”**

“Right. And, honestly, lots of girls I know dealt with that same awful crap, except you couldn’t even talk about it, because it was supposed to be your fault.” She took another fry. **“So maybe you earned that scholarship by surviving something most people couldn’t handle. Maybe the universe corrected a filing error instead of making a mistake.”**

He stared at the napkin-pile, trying to assemble the logic of what she was saying. The pieces wouldn’t fit. **“I don’t believe in that kind of thing. The universe doesn’t care about me.”**

“Well, I believe it does.” Maya sipped her coffee, contemplating him. **“Okay, so high school ends. You graduate, come to MIT, and for the last month you’ve just been... pretending? This whole time? That seems like a lot of work for someone who doesn’t want to be a girl.”**



“It was, at first. The voice, the makeup, the clothes—all of it felt like a performance. But then...” He hesitated, struggling to articulate the shift that had occurred so gradually he’d barely noticed. “People started treating me differently. Better. Like I mattered.”

“You don’t think you mattered before?”

He shrugged. “Not really, no.”

“So at MIT, as a girl, people treated you better.”

“Everyone.” Taylor’s voice was still raw from switching registers. “My roommate, professors, other students. Suddenly I had friends. People saved seats for me at dinner. Someone asked me on a date.” He gestured helplessly at Maya. “You asked me on a date.”

“And you think that was just because they saw you as female?”

“Wasn’t it?” He stared at the steaming fries. “I mean, you literally said you’d never asked out a girl before. You were attracted to who you thought I was, not... this.”

She was quiet for a long moment, chewing thoughtfully. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

She licked gravy off her thumb. “Why’d you text me?”

He blinked, caught off guard. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if this was all just pretending, if you were just playing a role to keep your scholarship, why’d you text me back? You could have thrown away my number and never thought about me again.” Maya leaned back against the vinyl booth. “But you didn’t. You texted me. You went on a date with me.”

“I did, at first. But then...” He didn’t want to explain how Abigail had pushed him, because the truth was simpler: “Because I’m selfish.”

“For what? For wanting someone to like you?” she reached across the table and touched his hand, just her fingertips against his knuckles.

Taylor stared down at their hands. Her fingers were warm, her nails painted a chipped blue. The touch sent the same electric current through him that it had yesterday on the bridge, before everything changed.

“Can I tell you something?” he asked. “Even if it will sound dumb?”

“Oh, especially if it sounds dumb. That’s my brand.”

His throat felt thick, but the words came out anyway. “Yesterday, when we were walking around Harvard Square, talking about movies and antimatter...” he paused, searching for the right words. “My brain went quiet for the first time in my life.”

Maya tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, usually my mind is like... like a server farm. Constant processing. But with you, walking by the river, I wasn’t thinking. I was just... living.” He picked up a fry but didn’t eat it, just held it between his fingers. “It was like standing in the sun after only knowing what it felt like to be inside.”

Maya’s fingers tightened slightly on his hand. “What do you mean?”

Taylor gazed out the diner window at the empty street, searching for the right words. “You know how you can see sunshine from your window? You know it exists, that it’s warm, and that others enjoy it. You can read about photosynthesis and vitamin D and photons, but that doesn’t actually tell you anything. You’re just an observer.” Maya nodded slowly. “For years, that’s been my whole life. Watching other people have connections, relationships, moments of joy. Understanding them intellectually but never... never actually feeling them. But yesterday, walking with you, kissing you—I wasn’t observing anymore. I was in the sun.”

“And that scares you.”

“Kinda,” he replied. “I tricked myself into thinking feelings don’t matter, that they were just... chemical reactions, evolutionary leftovers. But yesterday was proof they do matter. That I’ve been living my whole life in the shadows and didn’t even know it until someone finally opened the door. But I hate that I stole that special moment from you. I hate that I made you part of my fake life, even if it was the best, most real night I’ve ever had.”

Maya stirred her coffee, eyes on the swirl. “You should have told me. Yesterday, even. Before the date.” Her voice was close to gentle, but



it carried the tired gravity of someone who has been disappointed too many times. **“It wasn’t fair.”**

He nodded, unable to meet her gaze. Beyond the window, a delivery truck rumbled past, headlights bright against the window. **“I know.”**

Maya was quiet for a long time. She finished her coffee, ate more fries. Taylor waited, hardly breathing. Somewhere there, the waitress was singing along softly with the radio, but he couldn’t make out the song. It was just bass and static, background radiation.

“You didn’t steal it,” Maya said at last. **“This kiss, I mean. I gave it to you.”**

“Yeah, but—”

“So, I still haven’t kissed a girl. Okay. But that moment isn’t gone, right? That’ll still happen for me, someday. It’s not, like, lost in the void.”

Taylor stared at her, uncertain where to direct his eyes or his hands. Something loosened inside him—relief or disappointment, he couldn’t say. Maya was looking at him and, astoundingly, her gaze wasn’t full of contempt. She ate another fry.

“You’re not off the hook,” she said. **“I’m still mad. You didn’t tell**

me, and that sucked. But I'm just saying—memories aren't one-use. I can make more. Was that really your first kiss?"

"My first anything. First date, first holding hands, first kiss, first time anyone ever wanted to see me again. That was... really nice." The last words stuck in his throat.

Maya did not look away. "Same. Well, not the first kiss, but the first time it felt like it meant something. So you didn't steal it. Okay? Maybe it's fucking weird, and maybe I'm still kinda upset, but I don't regret it." She grabbed a bundle of fries and offered him one. "Eat."

He did. The salt and gravy coated his tongue, a sensory flood, and for a moment the ache of shame receded. Maya watched him, elbows on the Formica, her eyes unwavering. "Why are you still looking at me?"

"I guess because I want to."

Outside, the streets outside were empty, but the glow of the diner windows made the world feel like a bubble, insulated from the past and the future. Taylor tried to imagine what he looked like from her side: a person in fragments, voice all wrong, hoodie stretched too tight across his chest, eyes red and leaking. He'd expected Maya to treat him as a fraud. Instead, she seemed to be weighing him, atom by atom, waiting for him to tip the balance one way or the other.

"The truth is," she said. "Even if you'd told me on the bridge the second before I jammed my tongue in your mouth, I wouldn't have cared. Because I wanted to kiss you, not 'a girl.' Like, I go to Emerson. It's chock full of gays. I could kiss a dozen girls before lunchtime, if I wanted."

"But... you said you'd never been brave enough to do that before."

"I wasn't. Now I know I am." She gave him a look—steady, unblinking, a little sad. "Can I tell you what I was thinking when you kissed me back?"

Taylor nodded, afraid of what was coming.

"I was thinking," Maya said, "that I wanted to do it again. Immediately. Like, not even a second later." She gave a half-laugh, almost a cough. "And then, I was thinking, holy shit, this is the best first kiss of my life, and also, you taste like chocolate, and also, I hope she doesn't notice how nervous I am, and also, maybe if I kiss her again, I'll stop shaking."

Taylor felt the air squeeze out of his lungs. "But I'm not—"

"A girl?" She shrugged, then studied her coffee. "Okay. Although why did you say 'technically' before?"

He shifted, suddenly even more uncomfortable under her blue gaze. "I don't know. I mean, yes, I'm male. But when you ask me like that..." He trailed off. "I've never really thought about what I am, just what I'm not."

She leaned forward, tucked a loose hair behind her ear. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not normal. I'm not what guys are supposed to look like. I'm not..." He gestured vaguely at his chest. "I'm not what anyone expects."

“But what do you think when you look in the mirror? Not what other people think. What do you see?”

“I try not to look.”

“What I’m asking is, do you hate your body?” Her voice was soft. “Or do you hate how the world treats your body?”

The question surprised him. He’d always thought it was the body itself, this fleshy, humiliating, soft mistake, but now he wondered: had he ever really hated it? Or had he hated the way it marked him as wrong, different, laughable?

“I think,” he said, working it out as he spoke, “I hate what it lets people do to me. Or what it makes them think they can do. But... sometimes, I think, if it didn’t matter to anyone else—if it wasn’t a big deal—I could just be... fine with it.”

Maya nodded, then drained the last of her coffee. “You know, there’s a whole community of people who feel exactly like that.”

“Trans people?”

She shook her head. “I mean, yeah, some, but not all. There’s a lot of space between ‘cis’ and ‘trans.’ There’s nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, all kinds of people who just refuse to play by the rules.”

“Yeah, but those people are braver than me.”

“They’re brave, but they’re also just people,” she said. “People who realized they didn’t have to be anyone but themselves. I’m not saying that’s you, but you’re allowed to be uncertain. You don’t have to sign a contract tonight. Did you hate wearing the girl clothes and makeup and stuff?”

Taylor shook his head, almost before she finished the question. “No. I mean, sometimes I liked it. At first it was weird, but then it felt... kinda good.”

“Cool. Because you looked amazing.”

The compliment landed so softly it might have slid off the table and vanished. His ears burned. “I didn’t do any of it myself. My roommate—Abigail—she taught me everything. I’d still look like a swamp creature if not for her.”

Maya allowed herself a small smile. “You wouldn’t. But I like that you give credit.” She tapped a cold fry against her lips, then frowned. “So how does she fit into all this? Does she know?”

The question made his insides twist. The memory of Abigail’s voice, trembling between hope and betrayal, made it hard to breathe. “She does now. Tonight.”

“Wow. You’re on a roll. Confessing to everyone. Is it contagious?”

“I hope not,” he replied. “I’m not sure how much honesty I could take.”

“Okay, well, if you’re confessing things, I have another question. If you could keep wearing the makeup and hot clothes, would you?”

“I...” Taylor fumbled for the words. “If nobody else thought I was weird?”

“To hell with everyone else.”



“Then, yeah, I think so. I... I really liked the way they made me feel sometimes. And I really liked the way you looked at me.”

“Oh, good. Because I liked the way I looked at you, too.”

“But not all the time,” he added quickly. “Like, if it was up to me, some days I’d want to look like I did when we went out, and some days I’d want to be invisible, and some days I’d want to look like a guy. Does that make sense?”

Maya smiled, full-on brightness this time. “Perfect sense. Think I feel sexy when I’m wearing my Target t-shirt, unwashed jeans, my hair in a scrunchy? Also, who cares if people think it’s weird. You’re allowed to just exist, you know. You don’t need to submit your application to the Gender Committee for review.”

Taylor tried to smile back. “It’s not that simple.”

“Well, no. If it was, the world wouldn’t be such a shitshow.”

They sat in silence. Taylor’s chest felt tight, but not with panic—with something that felt dangerously close to hope.

“I should probably get back,” he said finally, though every part of him wanted to stay in this fluorescent-lit bubble where Maya looked at him like he wasn’t broken.

Maya glanced at her phone. “Shit, it’s past one. The T stopped

running.” She looked up at him. “My dorm’s only a few blocks from here. You could crash if you want. Better than walking all the way back to MIT at this hour.”

Taylor’s heart hammered against his ribs. Being alone with Maya, in her room, after everything that had happened tonight—it felt like standing at the edge of a cliff.

“I could Uber.”

“Sure... or,” she paused, “you could come up. I have a spare bed. I can lend you pajamas or whatever.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

Because I want to kiss you again. Because I want to believe this is real. Because I’m scared of what I want, and I’m scared you’ll let me, he thought. “I already hurt you, and I don’t want to make it any worse.”

“You need to stop telling me how I’m supposed to feel.” Maya reached across the table and wrapped her hand around his wrist. Her grip was firm. “If I wanted you out of my life, I’d have said so. Very loudly. You fucked up, and your whole story is insane, but you’re not a monster. You’re just a mess. Join the club. But, in my experience, bad people don’t tearfully apologize on subway platforms at midnight. And they definitely don’t buy Earl Grey in diners, which by the way is the most adorable old lady tea ever.”

He gave a weak chuckle. “Captain Picard drinks Earl Grey.”

“Case in point. So, you coming?”

Taylor hesitated, his mind running through every possible simulation of how the night could end. He wanted to say yes, even as some primitive part of his brain screamed that accepting the invitation would mean entering a universe where nothing made sense anymore. A universe where Maya knew everything and still maybe wanted him.

“Okay.”

“Good.”

He left a ten on the table, because that’s what you did in diners, and went out into the city with Maya. This time, she looked back to see if he was following, and smiled when he caught up.

Maya’s dorm was a converted brownstone in the Back Bay, with brick walls and narrow, creaky staircases. She led him up three flights, their shadows dancing ahead of them in the dim stairwell lighting.

“It’s not much,” she said, fishing keys from her romper pocket. “But my roommate transferred last week, so it’s just me now.”

The small room felt lived-in rather than cramped. Movie posters covered every wall—some familiar, others foreign or arthouse. A string of warm white lights bordered the ceiling, and her desk was an organized mess of camera gear, a battered MacBook covered in film festival stickers, and three screenplays with her name on the covers.

“Bathroom’s down the hall.” Maya tossed her keys onto the dresser. **“And here—”** She pulled a pair of pajama pants and an oversized t-shirt from her drawer. **“These should fit.”**

Taylor took the soft clothes. They smelled like her. **“Thank you. For all of this. I know it’s strange.”**

“Life is strange.” Maya sat on the edge of her bed, pulling off her shoes. **“If it wasn’t, we’d all be boring.”**

He stood there holding the pajamas, suddenly paralyzed by the domestic intimacy of it all. This was Maya’s space, her sanctuary, and she’d invited him into it knowing exactly who—and what—he was. Nobody had ever done that before.

“You can change in here,” she said, noticing his hesitation. **“I’ll just go brush my teeth.”**

After she left, Taylor stood alone in the quiet room, surrounded by the artifacts of Maya’s life. On the nightstand sat a photo of her with an older man who shared her smile—her father, probably. Next to it was a dog-eared copy of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, the book she’d talked about wanting to adapt.

He changed quickly, peeling off his jeans and hoodie and pulling on Maya’s clothes. The pajama pants were soft flannel, and the t-shirt hung loose on his frame. For the first time in hours, he felt like he could breathe fully.

When Maya returned, her hair was loose again and she’d changed into a tank top and little purple shorts. **“Better?”** she asked him.

“Much.”

Maya’s eyes traveled over him slowly, taking in the way her clothes fit his frame. The t-shirt was loose but still showed the outline of his chest, and the pajama pants hung perfectly on his narrow hips.

“Damn,” she said softly, leaning back against her desk. **“You look good in my clothes.”**

Taylor felt heat rise in his cheeks. **“Maya...”**

“I’m being serious. You have this whole... I don’t know, soft androgyny thing going on. It’s really attractive.” She crossed her arms, studying him with the same careful attention she’d probably give to framing a shot. **“Can I ask you something else?”**

Taylor nodded, though his stomach was doing somersaults.

“When I tell you that you have an incredible body—” she said it matter-of-factly, like stating the weather, **“—how does that make you feel?”**

Heat rushed to his cheeks. **“Confused.”**

“Why confused?”

“Because incredible bodies don’t get stuffed into lockers. They don’t get photographed as jokes.” His voice was hoarse. **“They don’t spend four years learning to disappear.”**

“And if those people were wrong, like we were saying? If your body isn’t the problem? If they are?”

Taylor’s thoughts pinballed. He wanted to laugh, to cry, to punch a



wall and then crawl under Maya's bed and never come out. "Then..." He leaned against the bedpost, hands pressed between his knees. "Then I wasted a lot of years hating the wrong thing."

"Not wasted. You survived. That's not nothing."

"But what if I could've been happy?"

"You still can." Her voice was gentle, certain. "You've got your whole life ahead of you."

He looked down at his hands—pale, long-fingered, unmistakably his own. "I don't know how to be happy. I know how to get through the day, how to solve equations, how to disappear."

"Well, I'm not going to let you do that. Not tonight."

"You're not?"

"No." Maya gave a little smile, warm but not patronizing. "Because I like the way you look when you're not hiding." She pushed off the desk and crossed the room, then stopped with just enough distance that Taylor had to decide whether to close the gap. "You know what I see when I look at you?"

He shook his head.

"Someone who survived stuff that would've crushed most people. And instead of turning into an asshole, you turned into this brilliant,

funny, complicated, sweet person who has no idea how remarkable they are.” Her eyes flicked to his, then away, as if embarrassed by her own boldness. “And then, sometimes, I see you looking at me like you want to say something, but you’re not sure if you’re allowed to. You are. Please do.”

Taylor’s breath caught. He felt his heartbeat in his throat, smelled the vanilla of her shampoo. The space between them felt electric, charged with possibility and terror.

“I want to say that I’ve never felt this way before,” he said. “That I didn’t know it was possible to feel this way. And I want to say that I’m scared because I don’t know what I am or who I’m supposed to be, but when I’m with you, it doesn’t feel like it matters as much.”

She took a half-step closer. “What else?”

“I want to say that I think about kissing you again every few minutes, but I don’t know if I have the right to want that anymore.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because you thought—”

Maya reached up and touched his face, stopping him. Her palm was warm against his cheek. “Listen to me. Yesterday on that bridge, I wasn’t kissing a gender. I wasn’t kissing an idea of a person. I was kissing you. The same you who just spent two hours in a diner telling me the truth even though you were terrified. I don’t care what you are. I care *who* you are. And I like who you are.”

Taylor blinked, unsure he’d heard her right. He felt like a screen full of static—no clear signal, just the white noise of all the possible ways this conversation could go wrong. “I... thought you were mad.”

She laughed, and it was a wonderful sound. “Oh, I’m still mad. You’ll be making this up to me for a while.”

“Maya—”

“Do you want to kiss me?”

Speaking was impossible. He nodded.

“Then kiss me.”

Maya’s presence pulled at him with the gravitational certainty of a planet—unignorable, beautiful, possibly lethal if you got too close. He fell into her.

Her eyes fluttered shut as he met her mouth, and this time, it was different. There was no lipstick, no artifice, just the soft, warm press of her lips against his. The tremor returned, the weightless feeling, but this time there were no spectators, no versions of himself observing. Just the warmth of her lips, the gentle scrape of her teeth, the taste of her minty breath. When she sighed against his mouth, something changed inside, like tumblers falling into place in a lock he didn’t know existed.

Maya pressed closer, her hands finding Taylor’s hips, anchoring him in the present. He kissed her again, searching for some proof that this moment wasn’t just charity or pity, that it was real. Maya responded in kind—hungry, almost greedy—her fingers digging into the



waistband of the borrowed pajamas, her body melting against his like they'd done this a hundred times before.

When they finally broke, both were out of breath. Maya rested her forehead against his, eyes still closed.

"Okay," she said, voice shaking with a low laugh. **"I take it back. Second kiss is always better."**

Taylor felt giddy, unmoored, like a helium balloon some kid had let slip on accident. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he let them settle on Maya's shoulders, fingers curling lightly in the soft flannel of her pajama top. The second kiss was longer, slower, exploring. Not just a question—an answer.

She said, **"You can do that as many times as you want, you know."**

He laughed. **"I don't want to stop."**

"Then don't."

Her hands slipped up his sides, tracing the shape of him, and Taylor realized his entire body was vibrating, not with nerves, but with the knowledge that she wanted him. Not the performance, not the borrowed voice, but the messy, uncertain person underneath. Both wave and particle, existing in superposition until observed—but Maya was observing him now, and somehow he wasn't collapsing into a

single, fixed state. He was still both, still everything, still possible.

When they finally pulled apart and collapsed onto Maya's bed, Taylor felt weightless, like the normal rules of gravity had been suspended. She propped herself on one elbow, hair a golden tangle down her back, gaze fixed on Taylor's face. She was so close he could count the faint freckles on her cheekbone, and the urge to kiss her again was like a pressure in his skull. He reached out, gently tracing her jaw with his thumb.

Maya smiled, and then, in one smooth motion, removed her pajama top and let it fall. She wore nothing underneath. Her skin glowed in the soft light of the lamp, her breasts round and soft, nipples pink and pebbled in the cool air.

His breath caught. He'd seen girls without their shirts before—on screens—but never like this, never with the feeling that it was meant for him. He wanted to mirror her, but his whole body went rigid with panic. The idea of taking off his shirt in front of Maya felt like standing at the edge of a cliff, faced with the command to jump.

Maya reached for his hand, guiding it to rest over her heart. **"You don't have to,"** she said softly.

Taylor wanted to say thank you, or I'm sorry, or something with words, but they all whirled inside his skull, impossible to catch. Maya was topless, and there was nothing performative or self-conscious about it. She just... was.

"I want to see you," she said, her voice so soft it barely made it across the space between them. **"But only if you want me to."**

Taylor's pulse thrummed in his neck. He wanted to say yes, but his body remembered every time someone had forced him to expose himself, every time the world had used his breasts as a punchline or a weapon. He remembered the smothering heat of locker room eyes, the snickers, the hands, the bruises blooming purple and yellow. He remembered every humiliating doctor's visit, the cold slap of a stethoscope, the way the nurse would lift his shirt and then look away, embarrassed for both of them.

But this was not that. Maya was nothing like them. She was sitting, warm and bare, solid and alive, blinking at him with hope and curiosity and—for the first time in his life—desire.

He set his hands at the hem of the t-shirt, feeling the cheap cotton and the heat of his own skin underneath. His pulse was a hard, arrhythmic beat in his ears. The shirt clung, static from the flannel, and for a second he thought he'd freeze up and never move again. But then Maya's hands, warm, gentle, covered his and helped him draw the shirt up, inch by inch.

It was terrifying. The air on his skin. The way the fabric clung and then peeled free. The knowledge that her eyes were on him, seeing everything. But her hands never pushed, just followed the motion.

When the shirt was halfway up, Taylor paused, arms crossed at his chest, breathing hard. **"Shit."**



Maya kissed his collarbone, just above the neckline, her lips warm, soft. **“If you need to stop, we stop.”**

Taylor nodded. He focused on her touch, on the soft weight of her hair against his shoulder, on the way the world shrank to a single, bright point where her lips pressed to his skin.

With a ragged breath, he pulled the shirt the rest of the way up, over his head, letting it fall somewhere behind him.

He'd never been shirtless in front of anyone but doctors, and even then he kept his arms crossed and his posture hunched. Now, under the golden glow of Maya's desk lamp, he was exposed—truly naked—for the first time. His breasts were round, pale, freckled, large enough to overflow a D-cup. And there was no hiding, no slouching, no way to pull the focus elsewhere. Taylor was just a boy with a girl's chest, sitting on an almost-stranger's bed, wearing borrowed pajamas, trembling with hope that someone might see him and not turn away.

Maya did not turn away. She reached out, careful, and ran a hand over the curve of his right breast. Her palm was cool and her touch almost reverent, as though she was learning a new language by braille.

Taylor expected a question, a joke, an awkward laugh. Instead, she just looked up at his face. **“May I?”** she said, her hand pausing at the

edge of his skin.

He thought he'd be sick, or faint, or both. And yet the word escaped before his brain could approve it: "Yes."

She leaned in and kissed him again, this time trailing her lips down his throat, then across his collarbone, then lower. She pressed her cheek lightly against his chest, listening—he realized, with a jolt—to his heartbeat. Then she kissed just above his nipple, her lips lingering, and Taylor shuddered all the way to his toes. His whole body felt like a raw nerve, every touch a thousand times brighter and scarier and more wanted than anything he'd experienced or even imagined.

She moved back up and kissed him on the mouth again. "You're beautiful," she murmured, and Taylor was pretty sure he'd die from it. He wanted to say something witty, or at least functional, but all he could manage was an incoherent sound, maybe halfway between a whimper and a laugh.

She smiled. "That's good," she said. "I want to make you feel good."

He let her. He let her see all of him, let her touch the places he'd trained himself to ignore, to hate. He let himself want it. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

It was also, in this small, golden-lit room, the best.

Maya's fingers glided along his arms, across his shoulders, and down his sides. She kissed him again and gently pushed him onto the bed. Taylor surrendered to the moment, filled with a fierce, simple joy. He remembered every moment in high school where he'd wanted to disappear, every time he'd curled up and waited for the pain to be over. Now he never wanted this to end. He wanted Maya's touch, her kiss, her scent, her skin. He *wanted*, period, for maybe the first time in his life.

When they finally collapsed back onto the bed, Maya pulled the blanket over them and curled against him, her head tucked under his chin. He still felt exposed, still weird in his skin, but the shame never arrived. Somewhere in the quiet, Taylor realized he was happy. Not as a boy, not as a girl, but as a human being—confused, raw, cracked open but not broken.

Lying there, his brain began to switch back on.

He thought of all the multiverses he'd built in his head over the years, the infinite other Taylors who'd had it easier. Taylor Prime—the one who went through puberty like a normal boy, the one without breasts, the one who never got stuffed into lockers or photographed as a joke. That Taylor would've been confident, maybe even popular. He would've kissed a girl behind the bleachers, lived an easy, straight line of a life.

But that Taylor would never have ended up here.

He wouldn't have retreated into his own mind, honing his intellect into the only weapon he had. He wouldn't have poured everything into the paper that won the scholarship. He wouldn't have been desperate enough to agree to his mother's insane plan, or been assigned Abigail as a roommate. He wouldn't have been the "girl" from Target with the sad,

pretty eyes—the one Maya wanted to know so badly she'd scribbled her number on a receipt with a little heart underneath.

He wouldn't be this person, the one Maya had just called beautiful.

The entire causal chain that led to this moment—lying in the dark with a girl who'd seen his ugliest, most broken parts and hadn't run—began with the one variable he would've given anything to erase. The universe wasn't just a clock winding down toward entropy. It was chaos and cause and effect, where the worst thing that had ever happened to him had somehow become the prerequisite for the best.

Maya shifted slightly, her arm tightening across his chest, her breath warm against his collarbone. The city hummed beyond her window, distant and irrelevant.

All those other timelines, all those other Taylors he'd envied—they were the unlucky ones. They'd never get to experience this exact moment: the specific weight of Maya's arm across his chest, the particular way her breathing slowed toward sleep, the precise quality of light filtering through her blinds as Boston settled into the small hours.

For the first time in his life, Taylor Hughes didn't want to be anybody else.





















