

**TAYLOR** ♂  
♀ **MADE**

## **CHAPTER 14**

Coherence



The MIT boathouse sat at the edge of the Charles, a low-slung rectangle of peeled white paint and river funk. A fleet of canoes and rowing shells hung overhead like sleeping bats. Outside, late sun cut the water into moving bands of orange and copper. The rowers skimmed past in pairs, their oars slapping and feathering in unison, the wake trailing behind like calligraphy.

Taylor climbed down the battered wooden steps, cardigan folded over his arm. The plan had been to return the thing and bolt, but that excuse had died three bridge stops back. After everything that happened with Abigail, Maya and Alicia, he owed Will something more substantial than a mumbled thanks and a hasty retreat.

Inside, the place reeked of lake weed and sweat, the floor slick with muddy footprints. Half a dozen rowers clumped at the far end, stashing gear and trading the kind of banter he would never fully decode. Will worked alone, towel in hand, wiping down the hull of a single scull. The boat looked fragile under him.

Will's sweatshirt sleeves were shoved up past his elbows, and even with his back turned, the guy looked mythological—shoulders built for Greek statuary, hands that could probably snap a baseball bat in half. But the way he moved was gentle, like a librarian handling rare books.

In the golden light, it looked almost choreographed. Taylor suddenly felt like he was interrupting something sacred.

He hovered for a second, clutching the cardigan, then cleared his throat. “Hey.”

Will glanced over his shoulder, then set the towel down. **“Oh, hey. How are you?”**

“I, uh, brought your cardigan back. Thanks for lending it to me.”

Will didn’t bother with “Oh, you could’ve kept it” or “No big deal.” He simply took the cardigan, serious as a priest, and folded it with geometric precision. **“You doing better?”**

He started to say “Yes,” but the word got stuck. Honestly, he reminded himself. Best to just launch and hope not to crash.

“I am, mostly.” He didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he forced them into his pockets. “Sorry again for the meltdown. That wasn’t... optimal.”

Will shrugged. **“Happens to people.”** He looked Taylor up and down, but not in the way that made him tense. It felt more like a medic checking for wounds. **“Are you okay? I’ve seen a lot of freakouts, but not like that.”**

Taylor tried to build a lie, but his brain wouldn’t cooperate. Maybe he was just too tired. “I think I will be. But I thought you’d want an explanation.”

**“I figured you’d just avoid me for the next four years,”** Will replied, lips quirking. **“But I appreciate it.”** He grabbed a bench and sat, knees wide, then patted the spot beside him.

Taylor hesitated, then dropped down. The river moved outside, and the voices in the boathouse faded. He could smell the lake, the starch of Will’s sleeve, the cheap detergent from the rowers’ laundry.

Taylor stared at his sneakers, then spoke. “So, the thing is...” He stopped, rewound, tried again. “Okay, this is going to sound insane. And I get it if you want to just nod politely and never speak to me again.”

Will said nothing. Just waited.

“I’m not—” his voice cracked. He swallowed. “The scholarship. There was a clerical error. And I didn’t—my family needed the money, and I just—I have this condition, gynecomastia, which means I have—” He gestured at his chest. “And the form said female and I just didn’t correct it because we’re broke and MIT was the dream and I thought it would only be for one semester but now I’m living in a female dorm and everyone thinks I’m a girl and I’m not, I mean I don’t think I am, but I’m not exactly a boy either, and Abigail knows and... and basically I’ve been lying to everyone for two months and—”

**“Taylor.”** Will’s voice cut through the spiral. **“Breathe.”**

Taylor stopped. His lungs burned. He hadn’t been breathing.

“Start over,” Will said. “Slower. What’s the condition called?”

“Gynecomastia.” He forced himself to inhale. “It made me grow breasts during puberty. Real ones. They were supposed to go away but



they didn't."

**"Okay. And the scholarship?"**

"Someone at the registration desk saw my name and assumed I was female. Taylor. Gender-neutral. Also I was wearing my sister's dress because none of my fancy clothes fit. That was my mom's idea." The words were coming easier now, parceled out instead of avalanching. "After I won, Mom suggested I just... go with it. Use the scholarship, get through one semester, then come out as trans and switch back to male. We couldn't afford MIT otherwise."

Will nodded slowly. **"So you've been living as a girl since September."**

"Female dorm. Female pronouns. The whole thing." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Abigail didn't know. Well, she didn't. She does now." He risked a glance at Will. "And now you. Congratulations, you're part of a very exclusive club of people who know I'm a walking fraud."

The silence stretched. Outside, an oar splashed. Someone laughed. He risked a glance at Will. The guy's expression hadn't changed, which was somehow worse than shock.

Finally, Will spoke. **"I kind of figured something was going on."** His head snapped up. "What?"

“Not that specifically. But something.” Will leaned back, bracing his hands on the bench. “You always talk like you’re translating in real time. Like every sentence goes through three filters before it comes out. Most people don’t do that unless they’re hiding something.”

His cheeks burned. All that careful vocal work, the constant monitoring of pitch and word choice, and Will had clocked it anyway. Not the content, but the effort.

“Great,” he muttered. “So I’m not even good at lying.”

“I didn’t say that.” Will’s voice was steady, unhurried. “I said I noticed you were careful.”

Taylor processed this. His brain wanted to spiral into all the implications—who else had noticed? Was he that obvious? Had everyone been humoring him this whole time?—but Will was still talking.

“For what it’s worth, I get it. Not your specific situation, but the body thing.” He gestured at himself. “People see this”—the broad shoulders, the height, the mass—“and they make assumptions. I must be aggressive. Stupid. Threatening. I’ve had people cross the street when they see me coming. I’ve had professors assume I’m only here on athletic scholarship, not that I actually earned my spot.”

Will was so quietly competent, so measured in everything he did, that it was easy to forget the world might read him differently.

“So I learned to make myself smaller,” he continued. “Speak softer. Move slower. Smile more. Take up less space, even though I physically can’t.” He shrugged. “It’s not the same as what you’re dealing with. But I understand what it’s like when your body is transmitting a message you didn’t write.”

*A message you didn’t write.* The phrase clicked into place like a proof he’d been missing.

“So what do I call you?” Will asked. “Pronouns, I mean.”

Taylor tried not to fumble. “Still figuring that out. Sometimes she, sometimes he. Depends on the day. Or the crowd.”

“Cool,” he said. “Whatever you need. You’ll let me know if it shifts?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Will nodded, like this was a perfectly reasonable answer to a simple request. “Great. I’ll follow your lead.”

“That’s it?” Taylor stared at him. “I just told you I’ve been lying to everyone for two months and you’re just... fine with it?”

“I didn’t say I was fine with it, I said I’d follow your lead.” Will’s mouth twitched. “Look, you’re clearly going through something. And you trusted me enough to tell me the truth, which you didn’t have to do. That matters more than whatever gender box you check on forms.”

What do you say to something like that? His throat felt tight, but not in the panic attack way. More like something was loosening.

“The research thing,” he managed. “Is that still...?”

“Still on.” Will stood, brushing off his shorts. “I’m more interested in your brain than your chromosomes. Besides, you’re the only person

who's ever made me understand quantum tunneling. I'm not giving that up."

He let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

"Oh, and one more thing." Will grabbed his gym bag. "There's a Halloween party that some of the rowers are throwing. You should come. Bring your roommate and your girlfriend."

"She's not my—" he started, then stopped. "Wait, how do you even know about Maya?"

"Abigail told me." Will smiled. "She cornered me in the dining hall. Gave me a full debrief on your romantic situation."

"She did *what*?"

"There were diagrams."

Taylor dropped his face into his hands. Of course Abigail had made diagrams. She probably had a whole presentation ready, complete with a PowerPoint and audience participation.

"She's very... thorough," Will added.

"She's very *dead* when I get back to the dorm."

"She seemed proud of you. Said you were, quote, 'finally getting some.'" Will's expression remained neutral, but his eyes were definitely laughing.

He groaned. "I'm going to kill her. I'm going to kill her and hide the body and no one will ever find it because I'll use science."

"So, party?" Will prompted, mercifully moving on.

"Yeah," Taylor muttered through his hands. "Yeah, okay. We'll be there. If Abigail survives that long."

"Good." Will adjusted the strap on his bag, then paused. Something shifted in his expression—a crack in that statue-like composure. "So, uh. Speaking of Abigail."

He looked up, hands falling away from his face. "What about her?"

"She seeing anyone?"

Of all the things he'd expected to come out of this conversation, that wasn't even on the list. Will—steady, unflappable, looks-like-he-could-bench-press-a-Volkswagen Will—was asking about Abigail. With actual nervousness in his voice.

"I... don't think so?" His brain scrambled to catch up. "She flirts with basically everyone, but I don't think she's, like, *with* anyone."

Will nodded, processing this like it was data. "She's interesting. The way she talks—it's like she's not afraid of taking up space, you know?"

He almost laughed. Abigail, afraid of taking up space? The girl who'd reorganized their entire room on day one and declared herself his "emotional support chaos goblin"?

"That's one way to put it," he said. "She's a lot. But, like, good a lot. Mostly."

"I like a lot. Quiet gets boring."

He tried to imagine it—Will's measured steadiness paired with Abigail's caffeinated chaos. It shouldn't work. It was like pairing a

metronome with a jazz improvisation. And yet...

"I could mention you asked," he offered. "Or you could just, you know, talk to her."

"Yeah." Will seemed to remember himself, the brief vulnerability shuttering back behind that calm exterior. "Yeah, maybe I will."

He set the cardigan precisely on a shelf, then extended a hand. Taylor took it. The handshake was brief but solid.

"See you Wednesday for labs?" Will asked.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "See you."

Will slung his bag over his shoulder and headed for the exit. At the door, he turned back. "And Taylor? For what it's worth? I think you're handling this better than you think you are."

Taylor stayed in the boathouse until the river outside turned dark, the last rowers hauling their boats onto the dock, shoulders loose with exhaustion. The boathouse felt less like a gym and more like a cocoon, the air heavy with polish and sweat. The last week had been so full of edges—hard truths, raw admissions—that the soft hush of the place felt like a gift. He sat on the bench Will had vacated, trying to catalog what had just happened. He'd confessed. Again. To another person. And Will hadn't freaked out or called the cops or looked at him like he'd grown a second head.

Four people now. Abigail. Maya. Alicia. Will.

Four people who knew his secret, walking around campus with the power to unravel everything. Four variables he couldn't control.

Statistically speaking, he was pushing his luck. Every confession was another coin flip, another roll of the dice, another quantum measurement that could collapse the whole wave function into disaster. So far he'd landed on the improbable side every time—acceptance instead of rejection, understanding instead of disgust. But probability didn't work like that. The universe didn't owe him a streak.

Eventually, the math would catch up.

Outside, the Charles had gone black, the last light bleeding out of the sky. Taylor stood, legs stiff, and headed for the stairs.

Four down. How many more confessions before his luck ran out? He didn't want to calculate those odds.

But as he climbed up into the evening air, his phone buzzed. **Abigail: so what are we being for halloween???** *I need to know NOW so I can start planning*

He smiled despite himself. Three weeks to figure out a costume. Three weeks to decide who he wanted to be, even if just for one night.

Maybe that was the thing. He'd spent so long hiding what he was that he'd never stopped to ask what he wanted to become.

He pocketed his phone and started walking toward the T station. Time to find out.



Taylor had been staring at Mom's contact in his phone for twenty minutes, thumb hovering over the call button like it might bite. Abigail had gone to grab dinner, leaving him alone with his cowardice and the growing certainty that if he didn't make this call soon, he'd talk himself out of it entirely.

Family Weekend. October 24-25. Two weeks away.

The flyer had appeared on their door three days ago, cheerfully announcing that MIT welcomed families to campus for tours, lectures, and "meaningful connection with your student's academic journey." Abigail had immediately texted her parents that she had midterms and couldn't possibly host them. Taylor had shoved the flyer in a drawer and tried to forget about it.

Except he couldn't forget about it. Because Mom would love Family Weekend. She'd love seeing his dorm room, meeting Abigail, walking through the Infinite Corridor, sitting in on a physics lecture. She'd been working double shifts for years to make this possible, and he'd been too busy having an identity crisis to invite her to see the results.

Also, he was still kind of mad at her. Or had been. The anger had faded to something more complicated—a mix of frustration and understanding and guilt that sat in his chest like a bruise that wouldn't

quite heal.

The door opened. Abigail walked in carrying two burritos, took one look at him, and set them on her desk. "You're doing the thing again."

"What thing?"

"The thing where you stare at your phone like it personally wronged you." She flopped onto her bed. "Just call her."

"I'm working up to it."

"You've been working up to it since Tuesday. It's Friday." She unwrapped her burrito. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"She could say yes."

Abigail blinked. "That's... the goal, though?"

"Is it?" He set the phone down, then picked it up again. "She's going to see everything. The dorm, the way people treat me, the way I..." He gestured at himself.

"The way you what? Breathe?"

"If she comes, she'll see that I'm not just pretending for the scholarship anymore. That I actually like parts of this."

"And that's bad because...?"

"Because I don't know what it means yet." His voice had more bite than he'd meant. Recalibrating. "And I don't want her looking at me with that hopeful expression, like she's waiting for me to announce I've figured myself out."

Abigail chewed thoughtfully. "Your mom's not stupid, Tay. She knows you're going through stuff. She's not expecting you to have all the answers."

"You don't know my mom."

"True. But I know you." She pointed her burrito at him. "And I know that you're going to regret it if you don't invite her. So stop overthinking and just dial."

Taylor looked at his phone. Abigail was right, which was annoying because she was usually right about emotional things, which meant he couldn't hide behind logic. He took a breath and hit call before his brain could manufacture more objections.

The phone rang once. Twice. His heart hammered against his ribs. Maybe she was at work. Maybe she wouldn't answer. Maybe—

"Honey!" Mom's voice was bright, immediate. "I was just thinking about you. How are you?"

"Hey, Mom." His throat was tight. "I'm good. Um. How's work?"

"Oh, you know. Same old chaos. Mary is convinced someone's stealing her lunch again." She laughed, that familiar sound that made his chest ache. "But enough about that. What's going on? You sound nervous."

Of course she could tell. Mom had a Taylor-detection system more sensitive than a seismograph. He picked at a loose thread on his top. "I'm not nervous. I just... wanted to ask you something."

"Okay." He could hear her moving, probably stepping away from whatever she'd been doing to give him her full attention. "What is it?"

“MIT has this thing. Family Weekend. October 24th and 25th.” The words came out in a rush. “Parents can come visit, see the campus, meet professors, that kind of stuff. And I thought... if you wanted to... you could come up. If you’re not too busy.”

Silence on the other end. Not the bad kind, but the kind where someone was trying very hard not to cry.

“Mom?”

“I’m here.” Her voice was thick. “Sorry, I just... yes. Yes, honey, I’d love to come.”

Relief and panic hit simultaneously. “Yeah?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been dying to see your dorm room. And meet Abigail—you talk about her constantly, I feel like I already know her. And I want to see where you eat and study and just... exist.” Definitely crying now. “I can’t believe you’re inviting me. I thought after our last conversation you might not want me there.”

The guilt twisted. “Mom, I was never going to not invite you.”

“You were pretty mad.”

“I was. I still am, kind of.” He picked at the thread harder, watching it unravel. “But you’re still my mom. And you’ve been working your ass off to make this possible. The least I can do is show you what you paid for.”

She made a half-laugh, half-sob sound. “Don’t make it transactional. I want to come because I miss you. Because I want to see that you’re okay. That you’re happy.”

“I am okay,” he said. “Mostly.”

“That’s more than I hoped for.” She was moving again, probably grabbing a pen. “Okay, let me figure out logistics. I’ll drive up Friday morning. Should I get a hotel? What’s nearby?”

His stomach clenched. Hotel meant money they didn’t have. “Mom, you don’t have to—”

“Don’t even start. I’m getting a hotel. End of discussion.” Her voice had that edge that meant arguing was pointless. “I’ll find something cheap but not sketchy. There’s got to be something between ‘murder motel’ and ‘luxury suite.’”

“The Hampton Inn isn’t too far. Or there’s a Holiday Inn Express.” He’d looked them up earlier, just in case, even though he’d been trying not to think about this conversation.

“Perfect. I’ll book something tonight.” He could hear her typing. “And I’ll leave early Friday so I can be there by late morning. We’ll have the whole weekend. Oh, honey, I’m so excited.”

Her joy was infectious, but also terrifying. Two full days of Mom seeing his life, meeting his people, watching him navigate campus. Two days where he couldn’t hide behind curated texts and phone calls. She’d see him in person, see how he dressed, how he moved, how other people talked to him.

She’d see the truth.

“You still there?” Mom asked.



“Yeah, sorry.” He cleared his throat. “I was just thinking about the schedule. There are some talks and tours, but mostly it’s just hanging out. I thought I could show you around campus, maybe we could get dinner somewhere.”

“That sounds wonderful.” A pause. “Will I get to meet your friends? You’ve mentioned a few people.”

His heart rate kicked up. “Yeah. I want to introduce you to some people.”

“Some people,” she repeated, and he could hear the smile in her voice. “That’s delightfully vague.”

“I just meant—”

“Honey, it’s fine. I don’t need a full itinerary. I’m just happy you want me there. And that you have friends to introduce me to. After high school, I wasn’t sure...”

She didn’t finish, but she didn’t have to. After high school, she wasn’t sure he’d survive, much less thrive. Neither had he.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, careful to keep the pitch where it needed to be. “Me neither.”

They sat with that for a moment, the phone line crackling faintly. Taylor watched Abigail pretend not to listen while clearly listening to

every word. She gave him an encouraging thumbs up.

“You sound different,” Mom said finally. “Not your voice, although that sounds perfect, but... the way you’re talking. More sure of yourself.”

He was still using the girl voice, he realized. Even though Abigail knew now. Even though he was in his own room with no one to fool. The thing was, Abigail had only ever known this voice. This was the Taylor she’d befriended, defended, dressed up, and pushed toward Maya. Switching registers now felt like pulling a rug out from under her, even if she’d already seen what was underneath.

“I don’t know about sure,” he admitted. “But maybe less terrified of getting it wrong.”

“Good.” She sounded pleased. “You should never have to worry about that with me. I love you exactly as you are, hon. I hope you know that.”

His throat felt tight again. “I know.”

“Even when I screw up royally and make decisions without asking you first.” She said it lightly, but he could hear the genuine regret underneath. “I’m still sorry about that. I should have talked to you before telling MIT anything.”

“Yeah, you should have.” He picked up the flyer from his desk, studying the cheerful fonts and stock photos of smiling families. “But I get why you did it. You were trying to protect me.”

“I was trying to protect your future. There’s a difference.”

He thought about that. His future. Two months ago, his future had been a straight line: survive one semester as a fake girl, switch back to male, graduate, get a job, live a quiet life where nobody ever looked at him twice. Now his future felt more like a probability cloud—infinite possible paths, none of them certain.

“I can’t wait to see the person you’re becoming,” Mom said, and something in her voice made his eyes sting. “I know things have been complicated. But honey, you sound... lighter. Like you’re not carrying quite so much weight.”

He looked around the dorm room—Abigail’s riot of pink and glitter, his carefully organized desk, the makeup bag he sometimes used and sometimes didn’t. His mixing board, set to whatever frequency felt right that day.

“Maybe,” he said. “I’m working on it.”

“Aren’t we all.” She was definitely smiling now. “Okay, I should let you go. I’m sure you have homework or experiments or whatever brilliant physics students do on Friday nights.”

“Yeah, sure. Homework.” Actually, he and Abigail were planning to watch a movie and eat too much candy, but Mom didn’t need to know that.

“I love you, honey. So much.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

He hung up and set the phone on his desk. His hands were shaking

slightly, adrenaline draining away and leaving him hollow and tired.

Abigail set down her burrito. "How'd it go?"

"She's coming." He pressed his palms to his eyes. "She's so excited. She's getting a hotel and driving up and she wants to meet everyone and see everything and I have no idea how I'm going to—"

"You're spiraling," Abigail interrupted.

He lowered his hands. "I invited my mom to come see my life as a fake girl while I'm still figuring out if I'm actually a fake girl or a confused boy or something else. If that's not spiral-worthy, I don't know what is."

"Okay, valid." She grabbed his burrito and handed it to him. "But also consider this: your mom loves you. She's not coming here to judge you or force you into any boxes. She just wants to see that you're okay."

"What if she takes one look at me and knows I'm not okay?"

"Then she'll probably hug you and tell you it's fine and offer to murder anyone who's mean to you." Abigail grinned. "Moms are good like that. Well, some of them, at least."

Taylor unwrapped the burrito, suddenly starving. "I'm introducing her to you first. You're good with moms."

"I'm really not. My mom thinks I'm going through a phase."

"Yeah, but you're confident. You can fake it." He took a bite, barely tasting it. "Also maybe I'll introduce her to Maya."

She nearly choked on her food. "You're going to introduce your brand new girlfriend to your mom during Family Weekend? That's insane. I love it."

"She's not my—"

"Please." Abigail pointed at him. "You get this look when you text her. It's disgusting. I hate it. Do it forever." She crumpled her wrapper into a ball and tossed it toward the trash. It bounced off the rim. "So, speaking of social obligations you're anxious about..."

"We weren't speaking about that."

"We are now. Halloween party. Will's rower friends. You promised we'd go."

"I didn't promise. I said we'd probably go."

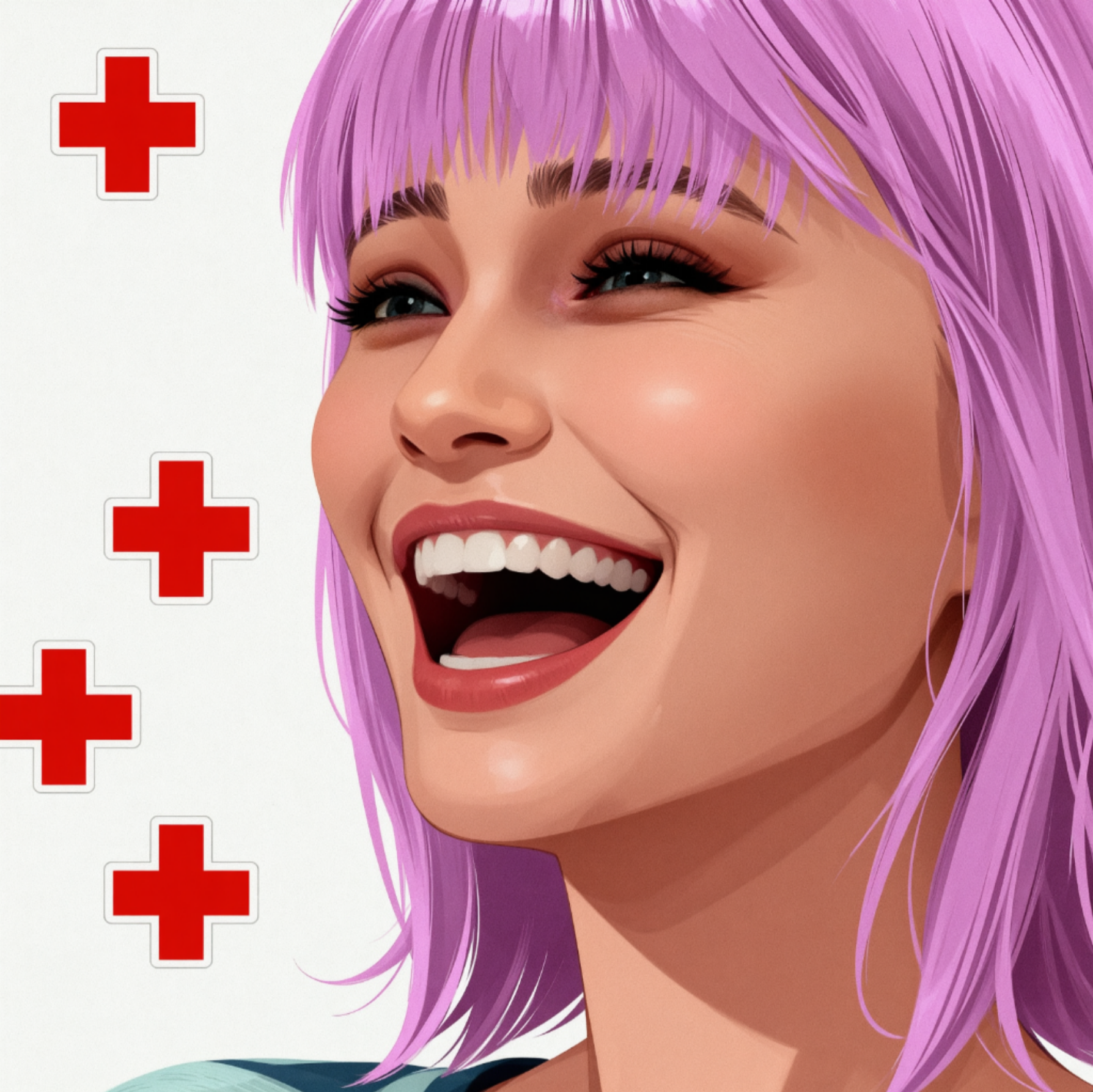
"Same thing." She spun in her desk chair, pink hair flying. "Which means we need costumes. Which means you need to tell me what we're being. You've been holding out on me for days and it's cruel."

Taylor leaned back in his chair, allowing himself a small smile. This, at least, he could handle. "I told you I'd pick something good."

"You told me you had a *plan*. That's not the same as telling me what the plan is." She stopped spinning and fixed him with her most pleading expression. "Come on, Tay. I'm dying here. I need to know if I should be ordering supplies or raiding thrift stores or learning to sew. Do I need to learn to sew? Because I will. For the aesthetic, I will."

"You don't need to learn to sew."

"So it's something we can buy? Or put together? Give me something. A hint. A letter. A vibe."



He considered drawing it out longer—she was so easy to torment—but she'd also just talked him through calling his mom and would probably be talking him through much worse in the coming weeks. She deserved a win.

"Fine," he said. "You're going as a sexy nurse."

Abigail's face went through about six expressions in two seconds, landing on pure, unfiltered delight. "Oh my god!"

"I know it's basic—"

"It's so basic. It's the most basic, overdone, slutty Halloween costume in existence and I am *obsessed*." She jumped up from her chair. "Taylor. Taylor. This is genius. It's so obvious it's subversive. It's so cliché it becomes commentary. I'm going to be the sexiest, most ironic nurse this campus has ever seen. I need the tiny hat. And the stethoscope. And white platform heels. Do you think I can find white platform heels?"

"Probably?"

"I'm going to find white platform heels." She was already on her phone, Googling. "This is perfect. You're a genius. What are you going as?"

"Not telling yet."

*"Taylor."* She threw a pillow at him. "You can't give me mine and not tell me yours. That's evil."

"It's called suspense." He caught the pillow and tossed it back. "You'll see it when I have everything. I'll need your help with the makeup."

"At least tell me if it's masculine or feminine or what. Give me a genre."

He thought about the image he'd saved, the costume he'd been planning in his head for days. "Kinda feminine, kinda not."

Abigail studied him for a long moment, her excitement softening into something more serious. "It's going to be good, isn't it? Like, actually you?"

"That's the goal. I don't want it to look cheap. I hate that."

"Good." She nodded firmly. "Okay. I'll stop pestering. But only because I trust you. And because I'm going to be too busy planning my sexy nurse lewks to care." She turned back to her phone. "Ooh, they have fishnet thigh-highs with little bows..."

Taylor watched her fall down the costume rabbit hole, grateful for the distraction. Outside, October darkness pressed against the windows. He tried not to smile and failed. Two weeks. Two weeks to figure out how to be a version of himself that Mom could understand, that Maya could still want, that he could live with.

Or maybe—and this was the scary part—two weeks to accept that there was no "correct" version, just him, messy and uncertain and somehow still standing.

His phone buzzed. **Maya:** *miss your face. coffee tomorrow?*

He typed back: *Yes. Absolutely.*

Abigail leaned over to read his screen. "Gross. You're so gone for her."

"Shut up."

"Never." She stole a piece of his burrito and popped it in her mouth. "Family Weekend is going to be amazing. Your mom's going to love it, you're going to survive, and maybe you'll stop being so terrified of people actually knowing you."

Taylor looked at her—pink hair messy, eyeliner slightly smudged, expression full of annoying optimism and genuine affection. His best friend, currently scrolling through sexy nurse costumes with the intensity of a PhD candidate researching their dissertation.

"Maybe," he said.

She glanced up. "And the Halloween party is going to be even better. Will's going to lose his mind when he sees me."

Taylor remembered Will's question at the boathouse, that crack in his composure. "Yeah, I think he might."

Abigail's eyebrows shot up. "Wait, what does that mean? What do you know? Indiana, what do you know?"

"Nothing."

*"Liar. Tell me everything immediately."*



But he just smiled and turned back to his own phone, letting her stew. Some secrets were fun to keep.  
At least for a little while.

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Taylor spotted the sedan before Mom had even pulled into the parking spot—the same dented Toyota that had hauled him around Indiana for his entire life until two months ago. She emerged from the driver’s side with the careful movements of someone who’d been sitting too long, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, dressed in jeans and a cardigan that had seen better decades. But her face—God, her face lit up when she saw him, like he’d just solved world hunger instead of merely existing on a sidewalk.

“**Honey!**” She was already moving, arms open, and he met her halfway across the parking lot.

The hug squeezed air from lungs and made ribs hurt. Mom smelled like the lavender detergent she’d used since he was a kid, mixed with the faint plasticky scent of the car’s interior. He held on, face pressed into her shoulder.

**“Let me look at you.”** She pulled back, hands on his shoulders, eyes scanning his face like she was checking for damage. **“You look good. Healthy. Are you eating enough?”**

**“Mom, I’m fine.”**

**“You’re wearing makeup.”** She reached up, thumb brushing his cheek. **“It suits you.”**

His face heated. He’d agonized over whether to wear any this morning, finally settling on just mascara and lip gloss—enough to be himself but not enough to feel like he was performing. **“Abigail taught me. I mean, I know you showed me first, but I still hadn’t gotten the hang of it yet.”**

**“I can’t wait to meet her.”** Mom stepped back, surveying the campus. **“This place is incredible. It looks like something out of a movie.”**

**“It kind of is. The hotel okay?”**

**“It’s great. Clean sheets, bad art, exactly what I paid for.”** She fell into step beside him. **“I’m just happy to see where you’ve been living.”**

The walk to the dorm felt longer than usual, every step weighted with her presence. Students passed them, some nodding at Taylor in recognition. A girl from his study group waved. The guy from the third floor called out **“Hey Taylor!”** without breaking stride. Each interaction felt like proof that he existed here, that people knew him.

Mom noticed. Of course she noticed. She didn’t say anything, but her expression shifted—pride mixed with wonder.

They climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, Mom slightly winded at the top. Taylor was hyper-aware of every detail she absorbed: the bulletin board covered in event flyers, the lounge with mismatched furniture, the faint smell of microwaved popcorn.

**“This is it.”** He stopped outside 412, hand on the doorknob. **“Fair warning, Abigail’s been cleaning all morning. She never cleans. If she seems weird, that’s why.”**

Mom smiled. **“Noted.”**

He opened the door.

Abigail stood in the center of the room, pink hair freshly washed and styled, wearing dark jeans and a black sweater with tiny embroidered stars. She’d toned down her usual chaos but couldn’t hide herself entirely—her scuffed combat boots were still enormous, and her expression was pure nervousness poorly concealed. The room behind her was immaculate, every surface cleared, both beds made with hospital corners.

**“Hi.”** Abigail’s voice came out high. She cleared her throat. **“Hi, Mrs. Hughes. I’m Abigail. It’s really nice to finally meet you.”**

Mom didn’t hesitate. She crossed the room in three steps and pulled Abigail into a hug.

Abigail went rigid, arms hanging at her sides for a beat before slowly, carefully, returning the embrace. Over Mom’s shoulder, her eyes went wide and shiny.



“Thank you,” Mom said, voice muffled against her shoulder, “for taking care of my kid.”

That did it. Abigail’s face crumpled, one hand pressing against her mouth. When Mom finally released her, she wiped her eyes with her sleeve, laughing shakily.

“Sorry, I’m—I don’t usually—” She gestured vaguely at her face. “Your kid’s pretty great. It’s been, like, zero hardship.”

“Taylor tells me you’ve been teaching him about makeup.” Mom settled on the edge of his bed, looking around the room with curiosity. “And from what I can see, you’ve been doing a good job.”

“Oh, well.” Abigail shot Taylor a quick glance, clearly trying to figure out what Mom knew, what she didn’t know, what was safe to say. “Taylor’s a fast learner. And, uh, a really good roommate. Quiet. Clean. Makes me laugh.”

“All my jokes are terrible,” he interjected. “You’re just easily entertained.”

“Rude but accurate.” Abigail had recovered somewhat, her usual brightness returning. “Mrs. Hughes, you raised a genuine weirdo—in the best way. But Taylor’s fear of loud noises is concerning for someone who lives in a dorm.”

Mom laughed. “I know. I used to have to shout a warning before I ran the vacuum.”

“See? Vindication.” Abigail pointed at him. “You can’t keep pretending you’re normal. Your mom knows.”

“I never claimed to be normal.”

“You act like it, though. All stoic and logical.” She turned back to Mom, confidence restored. “Do you want the tour? Taylor’s probably going to show you all the boring academic buildings, but I can show you the good stuff. Like where to get the best coffee and which vending machines are likely to give you free snacks if you kick them right.”

“I would love that,” Mom said, her smile so warm and genuine that they could’ve powered a small city with it.

They left the dorm together, Abigail leading the way with the kind of manic energy that suggested she’d consumed her body weight in caffeine. She pointed out landmarks with increasingly absurd commentary: “That’s the library, where Taylor basically lives. I’m pretty sure they’re going to name a study carrel after her. And that’s the Student Center, where I had a full meltdown during orientation because I couldn’t figure out how to work the ID card scanner.”

Mom laughed at the right moments, asked questions, soaked it all in. But Taylor noticed her watching him more than the buildings—noticing how he navigated campus without hesitation, how other students nodded or smiled in passing, the ease in his shoulders that hadn’t been there in Bloomington.

They stopped outside the physics building, and Mom tilted her head back to take in its height. “This is where the magic happens?”

“More like where I have existential crises about particle physics,” he replied.

“She’s being modest,” Abigail said. “Taylor’s one of those people professors actually like. It’s disgusting.”

“I’m not—”

“You are. Will told me your Classical Mechanics professor wants to put your name in for the undergraduate colloquium.”

Taylor blinked. “He told you that?”

“He tells me *lots* of things.” Abigail’s grin was wicked. “We’ve been texting.”

Mom raised an eyebrow. “Will?”

“A friend,” he said quickly. “He’s in my lab section.”

“A friend who’s built like a Greek statue and has a nice smile,” Abigail added. “Not for Taylor, though. Definitely not for Taylor.”

“I hate you,” he muttered.

“You love me.” Abigail checked her phone. “Okay, it’s almost noon. If we’re having lunch with the others, we should head to the dining hall.”

The dining hall was busy with the usual Friday chaos—students rushing between classes, families visiting for the weekend, and the constant clatter of trays and overlapping conversations. Taylor scanned

the room and spotted their usual table by the windows. Ben, Chloe, and Sam were already there, mid-argument about something likely involving Sam's conspiracy theories.

"Those are the others?" Mom asked.

"Yeah. They're..." He searched for the right word. "Passionate."

"I'll take that as a warning."

They loaded trays with the dining hall's version of food and headed over. Ben saw them first, his face breaking into a grin. "Taylor! And Taylor's mom! This is wild."

"Everyone, this is my mom," Taylor said, suddenly feeling like he was presenting a science project. "Mom, this is Ben, Chloe, and Sam."

"It's lovely to meet you all." Mom slid into the seat Taylor pulled out for her, completely unfazed by the chaos. "Taylor's told me about you."

"Nothing good, I hope," Sam said, already launching into what was clearly going to be a bit. "Because we've been working hard to corrupt your innocent child."

"Taylor was never innocent," Chloe countered. "Too much physics knowledge. It's ruined them."

*Them.* The word hung in the air for half a second before the conversation moved on, but Taylor caught it. Chloe used "them" sometimes, he'd noticed, alternating with "her" in a way that suggested she'd picked up on something he hadn't quite articulated. It should've made him panic. It didn't.

Mom didn't react, just nodded along as Ben launched into a story about their last study session, which had apparently devolved into a heated debate about whether a hot dog was a sandwich. Taylor half-listened, mostly watching Mom watch him—the way she smiled when he made a joke, the way her eyes softened when Abigail casually bumped shoulders with him, the way she seemed to be cataloging every detail of this life he'd built.

After lunch, they walked Mom back to her car so she could grab her things and check into the hotel. The afternoon sun cut low across campus, painting everything gold.

"Your friends are wonderful," Mom said as they crossed the quad. "They really care about you."

"Yeah." He tried to shove his hands in his pockets, forgetting this pair was from the women's section. "I got lucky."

"It's not luck, honey. You made this." She stopped walking, turning to face him fully. "I know things have been complicated. I know I made them more complicated. But seeing you here, like this..." Her voice wavered. "You're not just hanging on anymore. You're living."

He wanted to joke, to intellectualize, to deflect. But Mom's eyes were bright with tears she wouldn't let fall, and Abigail was pretending to check her phone nearby, giving them privacy. The moment felt too big for deflection.

"I'm trying," he said finally.

“I know.” She cupped his face like she used to when he was small. “I’m so proud of you. Whatever you decide, whoever you are, I’m proud.”

Taylor nodded, his voice caught in his throat. Mom squeezed his shoulder once more, then headed for her car. He watched her drive away, that familiar Toyota heading toward the hotel, and felt the weight of the weekend ahead settle over him.

Abigail appeared at his elbow. “Your mom’s really cool.”

“Yeah,” he managed. “She is.”

“She hugged me.” Abigail’s voice was small, almost wondering. “My mom hasn’t hugged me in years. Not since I told her.”

Taylor looked at her—pink hair catching the light, eyes still a bit red, combat boots firmly planted on the concrete. His best friend. His accidentally-assigned, perfectly-matched, chaos-goblin who’d taught him eyeliner, pushed him toward Maya, and made him believe he could be more than a collection of lies.

“She meant it,” he said. “The thank you. For taking care of me.”

“You’ve taken care of me too, you know.” Abigail bumped his shoulder. “We’re like... emotionally codependent roommates enabling each other’s identity crises.”

“That’s the worst pitch for a sitcom I’ve ever heard.”

“It would get at least two seasons on Netflix.”

They walked back toward the dorm, the day fading into evening, the air crisp with the promise of autumn settling in. Tomorrow Mom would return for more campus tours, more introductions, more moments of her watching him navigate this new life.

But for now, he had this: the golden light, the familiar path, Abigail’s ridiculous commentary about their hypothetical sitcom, and the knowledge that when Mom had looked at him today, she hadn’t seen a fraud or a mistake. She’d seen her kid. Different, maybe. Changed, definitely. But still hers.

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The rest of Family Weekend passed in a blur of introductions and campus events: A professor cornered them after lecture to call Taylor’s essay “genuinely innovative,” Ben explaining recursive algorithms for forty minutes while Mom nodded like she’d learned anything other than patience, Chloe stopping by to say “Taylor’s a great listener” like she was giving a reference. Mom bought an “MIT MOM” sweatshirt from the campus store. Taylor pretended this was embarrassing instead of exactly what he’d hoped she’d do.

Then it was Sunday afternoon and they stood by the Toyota in the parking lot, Mom’s overnight bag already loaded. October wind cut across campus, sharp enough to make Taylor’s eyes water. At least, that’s what he’d blame if anyone asked.

“I don’t want to leave,” Mom admitted, fiddling with her keys. “I

keep thinking of reasons to stay another night.”

“You have work.”

“Work is overrated.” But she was already moving toward him, pulling him into one last crushing hug. “Thank you for this weekend. For letting me see your life.”

“Thanks for coming.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it.” She pulled back, hands on his shoulders, that same searching look she’d had when she arrived. “You’re doing okay, honey. Better than okay. I can see it.”

He nodded, not trusting his voice.

“And Abigail.” Mom turned to where Abigail hovered nearby, trying to give them privacy while clearly not wanting to miss anything. “Get over here.”

Abigail shuffled forward, and Mom pulled her into another hug—the fourth of the weekend. Taylor had been counting.

“You’re coming for Thanksgiving,” Mom said when she released her. It wasn’t a question.

Abigail blinked. “I—what?”

“Thanksgiving. You’re coming to Indiana. Taylor mentioned you weren’t going home, and I’m not having that.” Mom’s voice had that familiar edge of non-negotiable determination. “You’ll stay with us. Wendy will be there. I make terrible turkey but excellent pie.”

“Mrs. Hughes, I can’t just—”

“You’re family now.” Mom squeezed her arm. “That’s how it works.”

Abigail’s face cycled through shock and joy before landing on that same shiny-eyed overwhelm from Friday. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes.”

A pause. Then, quietly: “Yes. Thank you.”

“Good.” Mom nodded, satisfied. “Taylor will give you the details. And I expect both of you to eat properly between now and then. I can tell you’ve been living on dining hall pizza.”

“It’s actually pretty good pizza,” he offered.

“It’s trash and you know it.” She kissed his forehead. “I love you. Both of you. Take care of each other.”

“We will,” Abigail said, and her voice was steady even if her eyes weren’t.

They watched the Toyota pull out of the lot, Mom’s hand waving through the driver’s window until she turned the corner and disappeared. The parking lot felt suddenly too quiet, too empty.

“Your mom just adopted me,” Abigail said finally.

“She does that.”

“Thanksgiving. In Indiana. With your family.” She turned to him, expression caught between terrified and thrilled. “Tay, I’m going to meet your sister. What if she hates me? What if I say something weird? What if I—”

“She’s going to love you. You’re exactly her type of insane.”



“That’s not comforting.”

“It’s accurate.” He started walking back toward the dorm. “Come on. I need to process this weekend through the medium of terrible snacks and reality TV.”

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Maya’s dorm room felt different now—less like foreign territory and more like a second home. Taylor climbed the three flights of stairs without the breathless panic of his first visit, pushed open the door she’d left unlocked for him, and found her cross-legged on her bed with her laptop, editing footage for some documentary project. She looked up when he entered, and her smile faded immediately.

“Okay, what’s wrong?” She closed the laptop and set it aside. “You have your ‘I’ve made a terrible decision’ face on.”

He kicked off his shoes and climbed onto the bed beside her, settling against the wall. “Not terrible. Just... big.”

“Big how?” She shifted to face him fully, tucking her legs under herself. The afternoon light through her window caught in her hair, turning it gold. “Good big or bad big?”

“Both, maybe.” He picked at a loose thread on her comforter, watching it unravel. “I’m going to tell MIT. About everything. The scholarship, the gender stuff, all of it.”

Maya went very still. The kind of still that meant she was thinking hard, running scenarios. **“When?”**

“I don’t know yet. Soon. I need to schedule a meeting.” The words came easier than he’d expected. He’d been rehearsing this conversation in his head since Mom left yesterday, trying out different approaches, different explanations. But sitting here with Maya, it felt less like a prepared speech and more like just... talking. “I can’t keep doing this. The lying, the constant mental gymnastics, the feeling like I’m going to get caught any second. It’s exhausting.”

**“I know.”** She reached for his hand, threading their fingers together. **“But Taylor, what if they take it away? The scholarship. You can’t afford MIT without it.”**

There it was. The question he’d been avoiding, the probability he didn’t want to calculate. He’d run the numbers a dozen times, each simulation ending the same way: without the scholarship, MIT was impossible. His family couldn’t cover the gap. Not with Mom working double shifts just to keep up with Wendy’s tuition, not with the medical bills still trickling in from years of doctor visits about his condition.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “That’s the most likely outcome. They’ll say I obtained the scholarship through false pretenses, which is technically true. They’ll revoke it. And I’ll have to leave.”

**“Then why—”**

“Because I can’t keep building my life on a foundation of lies.” He looked up at her, needing her to understand. “Every conversation I have, every paper I write, every friendship I make—it’s all conditional. Contingent on this fake version of myself. And I keep thinking, what’s the point of achieving anything if it’s not really me achieving it? If it’s this... this character I invented?”

Maya squeezed his hand. **“It is you, though. You’re not fake. You’re just... complicated.”**

“Maybe. But the circumstances are fake. The scholarship was meant for women facing barriers in STEM. Not a boy in his sister’s dress who got lucky with a paperwork error.” He pulled his hand away, needing to gesture. “And yeah, I’ve faced barriers. The gynecomastia, the bullying, all of it. But I’m not what they thought they were funding. I’m not what MIT thought they were admitting. Every day I’m here feels like stealing something that wasn’t meant for me.”

**“That’s not true—”**

“It is true. Legally, objectively true.” He was on a roll now, all the arguments he’d been having with himself spilling out. “And I know the smart thing would be to keep my mouth shut, graduate, move on. No one would ever know. But I’d know. I’d spend the rest of my life knowing that everything I achieved started with a lie. That my degree, my career, all of it—it’s built on fraud.”

Maya was quiet for a long moment, watching him. Her expression had shifted from worried to something else.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re kind of amazing, you know that?”

He blinked. “I’m about to throw away a full ride to MIT because I can’t handle living with guilt. That’s not amazing, that’s stupid.”

“It’s brave.” She shifted closer, her knee pressing against his thigh. “Do you know how many people would just keep lying? Take the money, get the degree, never look back? Most people. Because it’s easier. Because it makes sense. But you’re willing to give up everything just to be honest. That’s...” She shook her head, searching for words. “That’s the opposite of stupid.”

“It doesn’t feel brave. It feels terrifying.”

“Those are the same thing, usually.” She leaned in, kissing him softly. “And for the record? If they take it away, you’ll figure it out. Community college for a year, transfer somewhere else. Or loans. Or some combination. There are other paths.”

“None of them are MIT.”

“No,” she agreed. “But all of them will be yours. Really yours.” She cupped his face in both hands, forcing him to meet her eyes. “And you’ll still be brilliant. You’ll still be you. The scholarship doesn’t make you who you are.”

He wanted to believe her. Wanted to think that losing MIT wouldn’t mean losing everything he’d worked for. But the fear was louder than hope. “What if I can’t do it? What if I schedule the meeting and then panic and can’t actually say the words?”

“Then I’ll be there. Well, outside. Waiting.” She kissed him again, longer this time. “You won’t be alone in this. You know that, right?”

“I know.” His voice came out rough. “But what about us? If I tell them I’m not actually a girl, if I’m... I don’t even know what I am yet. Non-binary, maybe? Or some days a guy and some days not? Does that change anything for you?”

Maya pulled back slightly, her expression shifting to something fierce and tender all at once. “Do you really think my attraction to you is that fragile? That it’s dependent on checking the right box?”

“I don’t know how attraction works for you.”

“It works by me liking you. You specifically. Not your gender, not your body, not whatever category you fit into. You.” She poked him gently in the chest.

“Even if I’m not a girl?”

“Even if you’re not a girl. Even if you decide you’re neither or both or something I’ve never heard of.” She shrugged. “I’m not dating a gender. I’m dating Taylor. And Taylor’s pretty great, regardless of the pronoun situation.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Because it is simple. You’re the one making it complicated.” She grinned. “Which is very on-brand for you, by the way. Can’t just accept

that someone likes you. Have to analyze it from every angle first.”

“That’s how I process information.”

“I know. It’s adorable.” She grabbed her phone from the nightstand. “Okay, logistics. When are you scheduling this meeting?”

“Next week, maybe? Before I lose my nerve.”

Later, when the sun had set, they ordered bad Chinese food and ate it on her bed while watching a documentary about deep-sea creatures. Maya made commentary about the cinematography. Taylor pointed out inaccuracies in the narration about bioluminescence. They argued about whether the giant squid footage was real or CGI. It was normal, easy, the kind of evening that felt like a glimpse of what life could be if he survived this.

When he finally left around ten, Maya walked him to the stairs. “Text me when you’re back safe.”

“I will.”

She kissed him one more time, her hands fisted in his sweater. “You’ve got this. You know that, right?”

He didn’t. Not really. But he nodded anyway, because sometimes belief came after action, not before. “Yeah. I’ve got this.”

The walk back to campus was cold, October bleeding into November, the trees along the Charles already skeletal. The MIT dome appeared ahead, its silhouette familiar against the city glow. Home, at least for now. At least until someone decided it wasn’t anymore.

Taylor pulled out his phone and opened his email, finding the scholarship office address. His thumb hovered over the compose button.

Then, before he could overthink it, he started typing: *To whom it may concern, I need to schedule a meeting regarding my scholarship status. There are some inaccuracies in my file that need to be corrected. Please let me know your earliest availability.*

He read it twice, changed “inaccuracies” to “discrepancies,” then changed it back. Finally, he just hit send and shoved the phone in his pocket.

Done. No taking it back now.

The quantum measurement had been made. The wave function was collapsing. And whatever version of reality he landed in—with or without MIT, with or without the scholarship—at least it would be real. At least it would be his.

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The apartment building was one of those converted brownstones near Central Square, the kind with crooked stairs and radiators that clanked like dying robots. Bass thrummed through the walls, loud enough that Taylor felt it in his sternum before they’d even reached the third floor. Abigail took the steps two at a time despite her white platform heels, her tiny nurse’s cap pinned at a jaunty angle, fishnet



thigh-highs gleaming under her coat. Maya followed more carefully in her black Audrey Hepburn dress and pearls, one hand on the railing. Taylor brought up the rear, heart hammering, the spotted pattern of his Trill makeup itching a little.

**“You ready?”** Maya glanced back at him, her hair pulled into an elegant updo that must have taken an hour.

**“No.”** But he kept climbing anyway.

Abigail knocked—three sharp raps—then immediately opened the door without waiting for an answer. Music and heat and the smell of cheap beer and pizza rolled out into the hallway. She stepped inside, shrugged off her coat in one fluid motion, and struck a pose.

The effect was instantaneous. Conversations stuttered. Someone whistled. Abigail’s costume was gloriously, unapologetically trashy: white vinyl dress that ended mid-thigh, red cross positioned strategically over her chest, stethoscope draped around her neck like a fashion accessory. She’d paired it with the platform heels, those fishnet thigh-highs with little bows, and enough confidence to power a small city.

Will materialized from the kitchen, red Solo cup halfway to his mouth, and froze. His expression cycled through surprise, appreciation,

and something that looked suspiciously like panic before settling on carefully controlled interest. He was dressed as a lumberjack—flannel shirt, jeans, fake beard that couldn't quite hide his jawline.

“Hey,” he managed.

“Hey yourself.” Abigail’s grin was wicked. She crossed the room toward him, heels clicking on the hardwood. “Nice beard. Very Paul Bunyan.”

“Thanks. You’re, uh…” Will gestured vaguely at all of her. “That’s a great costume.”

“I’m aware.” She plucked the cup from his hand, took a sip, made a face. “This beer is terrible.”

“Yeah, sorry. Rowers have no taste.”

“Good thing I do.” She handed the cup back, fingers brushing his. “You got anything better hidden around here?”

Will nodded, still staring like his brain had short-circuited. “Kitchen. I’ll show you.”

They disappeared into the crowd, Abigail’s laugh carrying over the music. Maya leaned close to Taylor’s ear. “I give them twenty minutes before they’re making out.”

“That’s generous.” He took a breath and stepped fully into the apartment. “Okay. Here goes nothing.”

He’d spent three weeks planning this costume. Three weeks researching, ordering supplies, practicing the makeup. He hated how fake some Trek costumes looked, so he’d made sure the fit was perfect, the lines clean, every detail matched to the screenshot. Black-and-silver uniform, science blue on the shoulders, pips at the collar, communicator badge clipped just so. The outfit was clearly feminine in cut, but that was the point. Jadzia Dax had been both—the symbiont carrying lifetimes of male and female hosts, existing in a body that didn’t limit who she was or who she’d been. But the real star was the Trill makeup: a cascade of brown spots, painstakingly stippled along his temples, down his neck, under the collar.

Someone grabbed his arm. “Taylor! Holy shit, is that Jadzia Dax?”

Ben appeared, dressed as what appeared to be a calculator—he’d taped numbers to a silver shirt. “That’s amazing! The spots are perfect. How long did that take?”

“Two hours.” His face felt hot under the makeup. “Abigail helped.”

Maya smiled. “Tell them.”

He blushed. “They, uh, go all the way down.”

Ben howled. “That’s dedication. Respect.”

Chloe, in a full-body shark onesie that somehow looked both threatening and cozy, wandered over. “That’s the science officer from *Deep Space Nine*, right? The one with the nonbinary thing in her belly?” She looked at Taylor, waiting for him to confirm.

Taylor nodded. “She was always my favorite character.”

Chloe shrugged. “She’s cool. I mean, the writers kind of copped out on the queer stuff but at least she got to be weird.” She nodded at Maya.



“Love the Breakfast at Tiffany’s.”

Maya twirled, the hem of her dress flaring. **“Thanks.”**

Ben gestured at the room. “You realize you’re the only three people here not doing some version of slutty animal or meme?”

Taylor glanced around; Ben was, in fact, wrong—there were at least two slutty Pikachus.

“Your Jadzia is so good.” Ben said. “Like, genuinely impressive. And you even got the hair right.”

**“Thanks, it’s a fake ponytail. Obviously.”** He shifted his weight, hyperaware of every eye on him. This was it. The moment where people either understood or didn’t. Where his carefully chosen costume either communicated what he’d meant it to or fell flat.

Sam appeared with a drink that glowed faintly green. “Okay, I have to know. Why Jadzia Dax? I mean, it’s rad, don’t get me wrong. But you could’ve gone with any Trek character.”

Taylor took the offered drink—definitely not beer, possibly radioactive—and considered how to explain. He’d practiced this too, running through variations in his head until the words felt right.

**“She’s a Trill,”** he said finally. **“The symbiont—the part that makes her who she is—it’s lived in both male and female hosts. Hundreds of**

years of memories and experiences that don't fit into one gender. She's been Curzon and Torias and now Jadzia. She remembers being a man, being a father, having male relationships. But she's also herself, feminine, attracted to whoever she's attracted to regardless of what her past hosts would have chosen. She doesn't have to pick one thing and stick with it. She's just... all of it. All at once."

Sam nodded slowly. "That's fucking brilliant."

Will emerged from the kitchen with Abigail, both of them carrying better drinks. He spotted Taylor and stopped short. "Dax. Nice." Then, after a beat: "Really nice, actually. That makeup must have taken forever."

"Abigail's very patient."

"I'm very talented," she corrected, handing him a cup. "And Taylor's very brave."

The pressure behind his sternum dropped by about forty percent. This was what he'd wanted—not just people tolerating his weirdness, but actually getting it. Seeing the thought he'd put into this choice and recognizing it for what it was: a declaration that he didn't have to be one thing. That maybe he'd never been meant to be.

The party swallowed them after that. Someone cranked the music louder—early 2000s pop that demanded movement. Maya pulled him toward the makeshift dance floor in the living room, and suddenly they were surrounded by bodies, everyone slightly drunk and very happy, costumes ranging from elaborate to last-minute. A guy in a foam dinosaur head. A girl dressed as the concept of existential dread. Three people who'd apparently coordinated to be Rock, Paper, and Scissors.

Maya's hands found his hips, pulling him closer. She smelled like her vanilla perfume. They moved together, not quite dancing so much as swaying, letting the bass dictate their rhythm. This was the first time they'd been like this in public—openly together, obviously a couple. His arms around her waist, her forehead resting against his.

"You having fun?" she asked, lips close to his ear.

"Actually, yeah." He was surprised to realize it was true. "I really am."

Across the room, Abigail had pulled Will onto the dance floor. She was absolutely shameless, hands on his shoulders, hips swaying in a way that made several people stop and stare. Will looked simultaneously terrified and delighted, his careful composure cracking into something more genuine. When she went up on her toes to say something in his ear, he laughed—head thrown back—and pulled her closer.

"You were right," Maya said, following his gaze. "Didn't even take twenty minutes."

They watched as Abigail kissed him. Not tentative, not careful, just a full-commitment kiss in the middle of the dance floor. Will's hands found her waist, and for a moment they were their own universe, oblivious to everything else.

“Good for her,” Taylor said.

“Good for both of them.” Maya turned his face back toward her. “But I’m more interested in this.” She kissed him, slow and deliberate, and he forgot about everyone else watching or not watching. Forgot about the scholarship meeting he’d scheduled for Monday. Forgot about the uncertainty of what came next. There was just Maya’s mouth on his, her hands in his hair, the spots on his face that declared him something undefined and unashamed.

When they broke apart, she was grinning. “Your makeup’s smudged.”

“Yours too.” Her red lipstick had transferred slightly. “Come on, let’s get some air.”

They found their way to the fire escape—a narrow metal platform overlooking the street. The air was sharp and cold. Below, Central Square glowed with neon signs and late-night traffic. Above, the sky was too light-polluted for stars, but the dome of MIT was visible in the distance, lit up against the dark.

Taylor leaned against the railing, letting the cold seep through his uniform. “I’ve been thinking.”

“A dangerous pastime.”

“I know.” He turned to face her. “The scholarship meeting is Monday. Two p.m.” He took a breath, watching the exhale turn to vapor. “And I’m terrified. Like, genuinely scared I’m going to lose everything. But also...” He gestured at the apartment behind them, where music still thumped and people still laughed. “It’s really *this* I don’t want to lose, not just MIT, but this whole life I’ve built. These people. You.”

“You won’t lose me.”

“You can’t know that. Not really. Everything could change.”

“So what?” Maya moved closer, her dress rustling. “Things change constantly. That’s not automatically bad. Two months ago, you didn’t know any of these people. Now you do. Two months ago, you were convinced you had to be either fully boy or fully girl, no in-between. Now you’re literally dressed as a character who proves that’s bullshit. And few weeks ago, you didn’t know *me*. Change isn’t the enemy, Tay. It’s just... what happens when you’re actually living instead of hiding.”

He wanted to argue with her logic, find the flaw in her reasoning. But standing there on the fire escape, dressed as Jadzia Dax, with Maya in her Audrey Hepburn costume and the sounds of his friends having fun inside, he couldn’t. She was right. For the first time in his life, he wasn’t just surviving. He was actually here—present, known, wanted.

Whole.

“Okay,” he said finally.

“Okay?”

“Okay, I’m going to trust that.” He pulled her close, burying his face in her hair. “I’ll go to that meeting, and I’m going to tell the truth, and whatever happens after that... I’ll figure it out. We’ll figure it out.”

**“Damn right we will.”** She squeezed him tighter. **“Now come on, we’re missing the party. And I want to see if Abigail and Will have progressed to the making-out-in-the-corner stage or skipped straight to the accidentally-falling-in-love stage.”**

They went back inside. The apartment was more crowded now, more chaotic, the air thick with heat and sound and the particular energy of college students determinedly having fun before midterms destroyed them. Ben was attempting to teach Sam some complicated dance move that neither of them could actually do. Chloe was in the kitchen mixing drinks that definitely violated several laws of chemistry. And in the corner, exactly as predicted, Will and Abigail were wrapped around each other, her tiny nurse’s cap askew, his fake beard barely hanging on.

Taylor and Maya joined the dancing. Not gracefully—neither of them had any actual skill—but with commitment. Someone changed the music to a song from their collective childhood, and suddenly everyone was shouting along to lyrics they barely remembered. His feet hurt in the boots. The Trill spots were definitely smudging. Maya’s updo had come partially undone, hair falling around her shoulders. None of it mattered.

This was what he’d been missing in Bloomington. Not just parties or friends, but the feeling of being himself—complicated, undefined, still-figuring-it-out himself—and having that be enough. Better than enough. Exactly right.

Around midnight, the party started winding down. People filtered out in groups, heading back to dorms or other parties or nowhere in particular. Taylor found Abigail in the kitchen, helping Will clean up even though she was clearly tipsy and kept giggling at nothing.

**“We should go,”** he said.

**“Nooo.”** She draped herself dramatically against the counter. **“I’m having so much fun. Will’s having so much fun. Can’t we just live here now?”**

Will laughed, steadying her with a hand on her elbow. **“You’re very drunk.”**

**“I’m very happy.”** She beamed at him, then at Taylor. **“Did you see his costume? Isn’t it perfect? I told him it was perfect.”**

**“You did mention that.”** Will’s expression was fond in a way Taylor hadn’t seen before. **“Several times.”**

**“Because it’s true!”** She turned back to Taylor, nearly losing her balance. **“We should go soon, shouldn’t we? Before I do something embarrassing.”**

**“Too late,”** Taylor said, but he was smiling.

Maya collected their coats. They said goodbye to Will, who pulled Taylor aside briefly. **“Hey. That meeting Monday?”**

**“Yeah?”**

**“Good luck. And... whatever happens, you’ve got people here. Remember that.”** He clapped Taylor’s shoulder, that brief solid contact,

then turned back to Abigail. "I'm calling you an Uber."

"You could walk me home," she suggested hopefully.

"I could." Will's smile was careful but genuine. "Would you like that?"

Her answering grin was radiant. "Very much."

"It's okay," Taylor said. "We've got her from here."

"Aw," Abigail said. "Spoilsport!"

Outside, the frigid air hit like a punch. Taylor, Maya, and Abigail stood on the sidewalk, breath fogging, costumes looking more absurd in the streetlight glow. Abigail's makeup was spectacularly smudged, one false eyelash hanging on for dear life. Maya's pearls were crooked. Taylor caught his reflection in a car window—the Trill spots had mostly survived, but his fake ponytail had gone chaotic and his lipstick was completely gone.

They looked like exactly what they were: college kids who'd had a perfect night.

"That was amazing," Abigail announced to no one in particular. "Best Halloween ever. Top five nights of my life. Will is amazing. Did you know he's amazing?"

"We gathered," Maya said, linking her arm through Abigail's to keep her steady.

"And you two." Abigail pointed at them with her free hand. "So cute. Disgustingly cute. I want to hate it but I can't because you're my people."

Taylor took Abigail's other arm. They started the walk back to campus, three abreast on the empty sidewalk, moving slowly because of Abigail's platform heels. Somewhere a siren wailed. A car passed blasting music. The city hummed around them, indifferent and alive.

"Hey Tay?" Abigail's voice softened into something dangerously close to sincere.

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad you're my roommate. Like, really really glad. Even when you're being stubborn and self-destructive and overthinking everything."

"Hey, I'm glad too."

"Good." She squeezed his wrist. "Because you're stuck with me now. Both of you. Maya's part of this too. We're a unit. A squad. A found family of disasters." She stumbled slightly, caught herself. "Wow, these heels are trying to murder me."

"You should've worn flats," Maya said.

"Flats aren't sexy."

"You could've been sexy in flats."

"Lies." But Abigail was smiling. "Will liked them. He definitely liked them."

They crossed the Harvard Bridge, the Charles River black and glossy below. The MIT campus spread out ahead, buildings lit up, the dome silhouetted against the sky. Taylor's feet ached. His face itched

where the makeup was drying. His ears rang faintly from the music. He'd probably regret staying out this late when he had to study tomorrow.

He regretted none of it now.

This was his life now. These people, this place, this version of himself that didn't fit neatly into any category but fit perfectly into this moment. On Monday he'd face the consequences of his honesty. He'd sit in an office and explain his fraud and wait to hear whether his future existed. The scholarship might end. MIT might end. Everything could still implode.

But right now, walking across the bridge with Abigail's arm hooked through his and Maya's hand warm in his own, the Trill spots itching—right now, the math didn't matter.

The Charles glittered below. The city hummed around them. Abigail was already planning next year's costumes.

And Taylor let himself believe there would be a next year.









