

TAYLOR ♂
♀ **MADE**

CHAPTER 4

New Frame of Reference



The flight to Boston was long and uncomfortable, wedged into a middle seat between two chatty old ladies. Taylor pretended to sleep, hoping they'd take the hint and leave him alone. Instead, he was forced to listen as they talked about him.

"Aw, look," said the one by the window. "Headed to college, no doubt. Bet she's excited."

"Remember when we were that young?" said the other.

"My gosh, she'll drive the boys wild with that figure."

"I don't know, Marlene. Short hair. Barely any makeup. She looks more like one of those girls who likes girls."

"Nonsense. Just because she doesn't look like a Barbie doll doesn't mean she's a lesbian."

Three hours into the flight, Taylor shifted uncomfortably. The underwire dug into his ribs, and the straps had created a dull ache across his shoulders. How did women do this every day? He tried adjusting without drawing attention, which only made it worse. Every slight movement seemed to make the straps dig deeper, the cups sit more awkwardly. Was this what Mom meant by "perks" of womanhood? If so, he wasn't impressed.

"Honey, would you like my pretzels?" said the woman by the



window, extending a package of airline snacks. “You should eat something before we land.”

Taylor froze. This was it—the first real test of his new and (hopefully) improved girl voice outside of practice with Mom. He cleared his throat quietly.

“No, thank you,” he said, the words coming out in what he hoped was a convincingly feminine pitch. “I’m not very hungry.”

“Suit yourself,” the woman said, seemingly satisfied with his response. “But college is stressful, even for a smart girl like you. MIT? You’ll need your strength!”

Taylor’s cheeks heated up. How was he going to get used to people calling him a girl? He supposed he should be grateful. Maybe fooling the smart, observant students of MIT wouldn’t be as difficult as he thought.

* * *

The airplane landed at Logan in the late afternoon. As an Uber took him north to Cambridge, he gazed out the window and watched the city whiz past. The buildings were so much more dignified than anything in

Bloomington. In Boston, architecture was art.

As they crossed the Harvard Bridge, the late afternoon sun bathed MIT's Great Dome in golden light. Taylor's heart hammered against his ribs—partly from anxiety, partly from genuine awe. These hallowed buildings had housed the minds that split the atom, created the internet, and mapped the human genome. And now, him. The sprawling complex of red brick buildings nestled on the hillside overlooking the Charles River was breathtaking. Here, he'd spend four years honing his intellect in classes taught by world-class scholars and engineers. And afterward? Who knows? Perhaps he'd work for NASA or start his own tech startup.

Lugging his suitcase behind him, Taylor made his way to his dormitory. When he checked in, the staff member barely glanced at him before handing over his keys. Taking a deep breath, he entered the elevator and headed up to the fourth floor.

The dormitory smelled of fresh paint, industrial cleaner, and the unmistakable scent of too many people living in close quarters. The hallway was a chaos of open doors, blaring music, and shouts as students greeted old friends and sized up new ones. But as Taylor rounded a corner, this particular corridor was eerily quiet, as if waiting just for him.

His room number was 412. The door was propped open and as he approached he could hear somebody unpacking. Taylor's heart suddenly started pounding. It had to be his roommate. What if she saw right away that he was a guy? Women had a sixth sense when it comes to that stuff, didn't they? They could smell a liar or a cheat a mile away, and Taylor was both!

Taylor set his suitcase down outside room 412, cleared his throat, and whispered to himself: "Hi, I'm Taylor. Nice to meet you." Too deep. He tried again, consciously lifting his pitch. "Hi! I'm Taylor!" Too Mickey Mouse. One more time: "Hey there, I'm Taylor." Better. His voice was getting better, more consistent, but finding the sweet spot between fake-sounding and masculine was harder than Navier-Stokes equations.

After taking a final calming breath, he stepped into the doorway. Girl voice activate. "Hey!" he called out, trying to sound friendly. "I'm—"

A petite girl with bright gray eyes and pink hair looked up from her suitcase, which looked as if it'd been dragged across half the world before exploding in the middle of the room. "Oh, my god! You're Taylor? Taylor Hughes?"

"Um. Yes?" Taylor replied.

The pink-haired girl grinned. "I love your accent! You from California or something?"

"Uh..." Taylor's voice cracked.

She giggled. "I'm kidding. I know you're from Indiana. I got here a couple days early and begged the R.A. to give me the lowdown on



everyone on our floor.” She held out a hand. “I’m Abigail.”

Taylor shook the offered hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Wow, you have a strong handshake! Most girls are like dead fish when I shake their hands, you know?” She paused, her gaze trailing down Taylor’s body. “So, valedictorian of your high school, huh? That’s awesome. Congratulations.”

Taylor blushed. So, she hadn’t clocked him yet! He tried to relax but found himself still standing awkwardly amid Abigail’s books, clothes, makeup, and shoes. How the hell did she expect to fit all of that in a tiny dorm room?

“I was salutatorian, but whatever.” She rolled her eyes. “That bitch Lauren Powell was a cheater, and everybody knew it but who cares when you have rich parents, right?”

Taylor smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, that sounds like, um, bullshit.”

Abigail chuckled. “No kidding. God, I love your voice, all husky. Do you always talk this way? Or do you have, like, COVID?”

“This is just my voice,” Taylor said. Husky? Shit, did she mean he sounded like a guy?

Suddenly, Abigail clapped her hands. “Taylor, what are you doing night?”

“Oh, I figured I’d unpack and—”

“Wrong. We’re going out! There’s this under-21 club in Allston called The Beatdown that plays ‘90s hip hop on Tuesday nights. It’ll be the bomb diggity dot com, dude!”

Taylor stared at the girl like she’d sprouted another head. “You want me to go clubbing?”

Abigail only winked.

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I...” Taylor was too tired to think of a good excuse. “I don’t have any clothes to wear. Hoodies and oversized T-shirts basically constitute my whole wardrobe.”

“It’s cool, you can borrow a few things of mine,” Abigail said. “Come on. When classes starts, we’ll be so buried in homework, there won’t be time to hang out. Now’s the time to party while it lasts!”

“I—”

“Please!” Abigail clasped her hands together. “I never did *anything* in high school but study and take SAT prep classes. I didn’t even have time for dating! But I’m going to be a whole new person here. A cool chick who knows how to have fun and get laid!”

A whole new person, huh? Sounds familiar.

Taylor glanced at Abigail’s eager face. Saying no would definitely make him stand out—the weird antisocial roommate. Mom’s voice echoed in his head: “Just try to blend in, honey. Don’t give anyone a reason to look too closely.” Maybe she had a point. Besides, wouldn’t a normal new-to-Boston girl jump at the chance to go out? Staying hidden in plain sight might actually mean saying yes to things he’d normally avoid like Ebola.

God, this is insane. One minute I’m about to start unpacking, the next I’m considering going clubbing. As a girl. With another girl who thinks I’m a girl. How is this my life?

“Fine, I’ll go—”

Abigail squealed with delight.

“—but I’m not wearing any of your clothes!”

“Thank you! Thank you! This’ll be awesome!” Abigail wrapped him in a hug and squeezed. When she pulled away, she was smirking.

Taylor couldn’t help but feel like a specimen under a microscope. “W-What?”

“Oh, nothing. But when you’re ready to show off the bodacious bod you’re hiding under those baggy clothes, let me know. I’m, like, the queen of makeovers. At least in theory. I’ve never done one in real life, except for my little brother once and I was grounded for a week. Now, c’mon, you’ll want a quick shower before the club.”

* * *

Taylor stood frozen in the communal bathroom doorway, as if stepping further inside would be crossing a line of no return. A girl in a towel brushed her teeth at one of the sinks. Another emerged from a



shower stall, wrapped in a robe. Neither gave him more than a passing glance. They saw exactly what they expected to see: another freshman girl with a deer-in-the-headlights expression, probably just overwhelmed by the whole college transition.

“You coming in or what?” Abigail called from where she’d already claimed a sink. **“The hot water runs out fast in these old buildings.”**

Taylor clutched his shower caddy tighter against his chest and practically ran to the nearest shower. Stepping inside the little alcove, he stripped off his clothes and set them aside, including his new bra.

God, it felt so good to be free of that thing. His shoulders ached from the constant pressure of the straps, and angry red marks scored his skin where the underwire had dug in all day. How did women wear these torture devices every day of their lives? Taylor made a mental note to text his sister and apologize for every time he’d rolled his eyes when she complained about bra pain.

He turned on the water, flinching as the first cold spray hit his chest. His breasts hung heavy and unrestrained. For four years he’d bound them, compressed them, hidden them under layers of baggy clothes. Now here he was, naked in a girls’ shower, the very body parts he’d been ashamed of serving as his most convincing disguise.

Taylor kept his eyes fixed firmly on the tile wall as he lathered up. What if someone noticed he was showering differently than a girl would? Was there even a difference? He'd never watched a girl shower—he wasn't a creep. Did they wash their... chests differently? More gently? He tried to imagine what his sister might do, then immediately regretted the mental image. No, better not to overthink it. Just shower like a human being.

Abigail stood a dozen feet away by the sinks, applying makeup and humming *Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls* to herself. "Tay!" she shouted suddenly. "At least let me do your makeup!"

The best way to go unnoticed is to blend in. That means acting like a typical Midwestern coed suddenly transplanted to the big city, ready to enjoy her college years to the fullest.

"Fine," he said. "But don't go overboard or anything."

She again squealed with excitement.

"Hey, are you almost done in there?" A voice from outside the stall made him jump. "Some of us have orientation activities in like twenty minutes."

"Sorry!" Taylor squeaked, his voice shooting up an octave naturally in his panic. "Just finishing up!"

He rinsed off in record time, heart pounding. As he reached for his towel, he realized with horror that he'd have to walk back to the stall door partly exposed to grab his clothes. He'd been so nervous, he'd forgotten to hang them on the hook inside the shower.

"Idiot," he muttered, wrapping the too-small towel around himself as best he could. It barely covered from his chest to his thighs. This was exactly the kind of rookie mistake that could blow his cover.

Taking a deep breath, Taylor pushed open the shower curtain, prepared to make a mad dash for his pile of clothes. Instead, he nearly collided with Abigail, who stood there holding his bundle of garments.

"Thought you might need these," she said with a wink.

"Thanks," Taylor managed, clutching the towel tighter.

"No problem, roomie. Hurry up though—the club awaits!" She spun on her heel and sashayed back to the sinks, leaving Taylor clutching his clothes with trembling hands.

Crisis averted. This time. But how many close calls could he survive before someone caught on? The end of the semester suddenly seemed like an eternity away.

* * *

Abigail and Taylor apparently had different definitions of "overboard." His hair was teased and sprayed into submission and foundation, lipstick, and mascara was applied to his face while Abigail sang along to Beyoncé.

As she approached him with the mascara wand, Taylor flinched back.

“Relax, I won’t poke your eye out,” she laughed.

But it wasn’t fear making him tense, it was the memory of teasing comments in high school locker rooms, of jocks pantomiming putting on makeup while calling him names. Now here he was, willingly participating in this ritual that had once been weaponized against him.

“Your eyebrows need a little clean-up,” Abigail said, pulling out a tweezer. “Here, I’ll do it.”

“Ow, ouch, shit, stop, no, no—”

“Don’t be a baby. You need to look sexy if you want to attract a man.”

“I don’t want to attract a man.”

“Ah ha! I knew it!” Abigail shouted, making Taylor jump. “I’m bi, personally. But I like my girls a little more...girly. You know what I mean? Like, when I’m in the mood for a dude, I go for the muscly, masculine type. But when I want a woman, I want a babe who’s pretty, feminine, and knows how to dress.”

“Uh, okay.”

What was he supposed to say to that? And why the hell was she sharing this with him? Maybe girls just liked to talk about this stuff, like how guys like to talk about video games?

Suddenly, Abigail pulled out the eyeliner and Taylor had to restrain himself from knocking it out of her hand. “That’s enough makeup.”

“But you have such pretty eyes!”

“Well, then they don’t need any more help, do they?”

Abigail pouted but mercifully put the eyeliner back into her bag. “Fine, then take a look!”

She spun him toward the mirror, and Taylor’s breath caught. The person staring back wasn’t him, but she wasn’t exactly a stranger either. She had his eyes, his cheekbones, but softened somehow. Less angular, more... pretty. The cognitive dissonance made him slightly dizzy.

It was Girl-Taylor again. Like, *really* Girl-Taylor.

The last time he’d seen his face this made-up was at the National Scholastic Awards. Back then, it had been a means to an end; a temporary disguise for a single day, a costume he could shed once the prize was secured. But now, staring at himself, Taylor felt a strange disconnect, as if he were watching an actress in a movie who happened to look remarkably like him.

“Earth to Taylor!” Abigail waved her hand in front of his face. “What do you think? You’re gorgeous! I mean, you were already pretty, but now you’re, like, hot pretty.”

Taylor cleared his throat. “It’s... Yeah, it’s different.”

“Different good or different bad?” Abigail tilted her head, studying her handiwork with a critical eye.

“Just different.” He turned away from the mirror.

“Alright, now put on whatever you want to wear. I’m going to change into something sexier.”

Abigail went to her closet and pulled out a black dress. Taylor



quickly turned away as she yanked off her top, unclasped her bra, and slid the dress over her head.

I'm not a perv, I'm not a perv...

When he risked a glance back, she was zipping up her dress, her pink hair stark against the black fabric. Taylor rifled through his duffel bag and pulled out a black T-shirt and a pair of dark jeans. He quickly changed, keeping his back to Abigail.

“Wow,” she said. “Not even panties, huh? Boyshorts. You’re an interesting one.”

“What do you mean by that?” Had she noticed something off about him? Had his careful planning already fallen apart on day one?

Abigail shrugged. “I dunno. You just give off this...vibe. Like, you have a super femme body but you dress like a tomboy. It’s kind of hot.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“It’s a compliment. You’re like this walking contradiction. Pretty face, killer rack, but zero interest in showing it off.” She paused, eyeing his outfit critically. “Although I bet if you wore a nice bra instead of whatever industrial-strength contraption you’ve got on, you’d stop traffic.”

He crossed his arms over his chest instinctively. “This is fine.”

“Whatever you say, Indiana.” Abigail winked. “But someday I’m going to get you to embrace what Mother Nature blessed you with.”

If only she knew. Mother Nature hadn’t blessed him, she’d played a cruel joke. Given him exactly what so many girls desperately wanted, and so many guys desperately wanted to touch.

“Can we just go?” Taylor asked, suddenly eager to escape this conversation and the small confines of their shared room.

Abigail checked her lipstick one last time. “Let’s do this! First stop, the bathroom to brush our teeth, then the T station, then the club, then possibly making out with hot strangers!”

Taylor grimaced. “Maybe we can skip that last part.”

“You do you, boo. More for me!” Abigail grabbed her purse and slung it over her shoulder. “Woo! Our first trip on the T! I hope we don’t get kidnapped and murdered!”

* * *

The T rattled and screeched as it crossed the Charles River, offering glimpses of the Boston skyline glittering against the night sky. Taylor pressed his face against the window like a child, earning an amused smile from Abigail.

“Small town girl, big city lights, huh?” she teased.

“Not technically a small town,” Taylor said, still staring at the skyline. “Bloomington’s population is around 85,000. But yeah, nothing like this.” He gestured vaguely at the window, then realized his correction might have sounded rude. “Sorry. I just... I like precision.”

The towers of glass and steel rose like mountains ahead of them, each one filled with thousands of lives and stories. Bloomington’s tallest building was the six-story bank downtown. This was another world entirely.

“Did you know that MIT’s Great Dome was modeled after the Pantheon in Rome?” he blurted. “But it’s only about half the size of the original. And it doesn’t have the same opening at the top because, you know, New England weather.”

Abigail raised an eyebrow. “That so?”

Taylor’s face flushed. “Sorry. Random facts. It’s a... thing I do when I’m nervous.”

Abigail seemed happy to fill the silence after that, divulging every detail of her life, from her love of K-pop to her parents’ messy divorce to her plans to major in mechanical engineering.

“So, what’s your story?” Abigail asked as they exited the station.

“I don’t have a story,” he replied, suddenly interested in a piece of gum stuck to the sidewalk.

“Liar. Everybody has a story. They aren’t always interesting stories, but I usually have a good nose for when somebody’s hiding something. So, c’mon. Spill it.”

He swallowed hard. “I’m from Indiana—”



“Right. Yes. Um...” Taylor’s fingers drummed against his thigh. “I’m a nerd, obviously. Didn’t really have friends in high school. Just... wasn’t good at the whole social thing. I have an older sister, Wendy. She’s a junior at the University of Miami. My mom is...my mom. She’s the hardest working person I know. She works two jobs and still somehow managed to make it to all my academic ceremonies, which, like, statistically speaking is—” He cut himself off. “Sorry. Going off on tangents again.”

“And what about Dad?” Abigail pressed.

His fingers stopped drumming. “Could we stop with the interrogation, maybe? Like, we just met only a few hours ago, and you’re already at chapter seven of my biography.”

“Okay, don’t get your boyshorts in a twist. But I’m just trying to get to know the girl I’ll be sleeping in the same room with for the next year, that’s all.”

She sounded sincere, so Taylor relented. “Dad’s... He died. A few years ago. Four years, three months ago, actually.” Taylor winced, hating how his brain automatically calculated the exact time.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Abigail said, her tone suddenly serious. “I didn’t mean to pry. Well, I did mean to pry, I just didn’t mean to hit a nerve.”

“It’s fine,” Taylor said. “It’s just a fact.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“Time heals all wounds, right?” That was something Dad used to say.

Abigail snorted. “That’s bullshit. Some wounds never heal. You just learn to live with them, like a missing limb. But enough about us sad sacks! We’re young! We’re healthy! We’re hot as fuck! The world is our oyster! Let’s go find some hotties to make out with!”

“How about I be your wingman?”

“Sure thing, Goose.”

“Goose wasn’t...” Taylor began, but she’d already taken off down the street.

* * *

The September night air was crisp as they walked the few blocks to The Beatdown. The club was in an old warehouse and the line to get in wrapped around the block.

“We’re never going to get in,” Taylor said.

“Watch and learn, girl,” Abigail said, sashaying up to the bouncer. “Hi, cutie! My friend and I are looking to have a good time tonight. You think you—”

“Back of the line, ladies,” the bouncer said, not even bothering to look at them.

“Oh, come on! We just flew in from—”

“Back. Of. The. Line.”

Abigail huffed and stomped back to where Taylor was standing. “Well, that was a bust. I guess movies lied to me about bouncers being easy to charm.”

“Maybe we should just head back to the dorm. By the time we get in, it’ll be time to leave anyway.”

“No way! I won’t let our first night out crash and burn.” Abigail’s eyes suddenly lit up. “I know! It wasn’t the what, it was the *who*.”

Taylor shook his head. He didn’t like the way this was going. “What are you talking about?”

“C’mon!” Abigail grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the club. “We need to find a bathroom for you to change into my dress.”

“What? No! I—”

“Tay, we’re going to put those amazing boobs of yours to use. This will totally one hundred percent work. You’ll see!”

A convenience store three doors down had a single-occupancy restroom with a flickering fluorescent light. Abigail somehow convinced the bored cashier to let them both use it at once.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Taylor muttered, struggling to pull the tight dress over his hips without touching the questionably clean walls.

Outside the stall, Abigail—now dressed in his T-shirt and



jeans—provided a running commentary: “Pull it up from the bottom! No, like, bunch it up first, then slide it over your head!”

“I know how to put on clothes,” Taylor snapped.

“Well excuse me, princess! I’m just trying to help before you rip my favorite dress.”

The fabric strained against his thighs as he twisted and contorted. “Why is this so small?”

“Because it’s supposed to be!” Abigail called through the door. “That’s how club dresses work. They’re like sausage casings for hot girls.” She pounded impatiently on the door. “Hurry!”

What the hell am I doing? Taylor thought, struggling with little straps. I must be out of my mind!

The problem was, Abigail was like a tornado of enthusiasm and Taylor couldn’t help but get swept up in her wake.

When he finally emerged, the dress clung to his body, highlighting the very parts he usually tried to hide—especially his chest.

“You look incredible!” Abigail gasped, eyes widening. “I’m jealous. I hate you. Now, c’mon!”

Minutes later, as they approached the bouncer again, Abigail squeezed his arm and whispered, “Okay, remember—you’re hot, you’re

confident, and you're here to have a good time."

"Right," he said, trying not to puke.

She gave him a little shove. "Go get 'em, tiger!"

The bouncer's eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw Taylor.

"Hey, um, I know there's a line but—"

The bouncer unhooked the velvet rope. "Not for you, gorgeous."

"Oh. Uh. Thank you," Taylor said, feeling a mix of relief and nausea. "Can my friend come in too?" He gestured to Abigail.

"Of course, doll," the bouncer said, his eyes glued to Taylor's cleavage. "Have a great time."

Abigail grinned as they walked into the club. "I told you it would work!"

The Beatdown was packed, and the music was so loud Taylor could feel the bass vibrating through his entire body. Lasers and strobe lights crisscrossed the room, making it difficult to see. People were grinding on the dance floor, their sweaty bodies moving in hypnotic rhythm.

"This place is amazing!" Abigail shouted over the music. She grabbed his hand and pulled him onto the dance floor.

Taylor tried to relax and enjoy himself, but he couldn't help but feel self-conscious. He'd only worn one dress before and had hated every moment of it. This time was no different. The fabric clung to his thighs like plastic wrap, and every time he moved, he was convinced the hem was riding up to reveal... well, everything.

And dancing was a special circle of hell he'd never voluntarily entered before. In high school, he'd skipped every dance, claiming they were "conformist rituals" In reality, he'd been terrified someone would notice his chest bouncing if he moved too much.

Now here he was, in a club, in a dress—a little black dress, specifically—expected to move his body in ways that somehow matched the beat. He tried a cautious side-to-side sway, arms rigidly at his sides. A guy nearby was doing something that looked like he was swatting invisible flies. Maybe that was acceptable club behavior?

Taylor attempted to mimic the motion, immediately feeling ridiculous. His elbows knocked against someone behind him.

"Sorry!" he yelped, his voice momentarily slipping back to its natural register.

He could feel everyone's eyes on him, judging him. That couple in the corner was definitely laughing at him. And that group of girls by the bar? Absolutely dissecting every inch of his borrowed dress, probably wondering who let him out of the house looking like that.

Abigail, meanwhile, moved like water—effortless, natural. She'd close her eyes and let her body respond to the music, while Taylor calculated each motion like a particularly difficult physics problem with too many variables.

When she spun around, her face fell. "Are you having a stroke?"

"Not yet," Taylor replied, his arms still locked at a weird angle.

Abigail laughed. **“Just stop thinking so much! Feel the beat!”**

Feel the beat. Right. As if the bass wasn't already vibrating through every cell in his body, including parts he'd rather not think about. He tried to loosen up, rolling his shoulders experimentally. The dress shifted, and he quickly grabbed at the neckline, terrified it would slide down.

He tried not to think about it too much and just let the music move his body. But his brain kept screaming: *Your hips don't move that way! Your arms look like pool noodles! You're in a dress! You're wearing makeup!*

A guy with gelled hair and too much cologne danced past, giving Taylor an appreciative once-over that made his skin crawl. Great, so he was convincing enough as a girl to attract male attention.

“You're dancing like someone has a gun to your head!” Abigail shouted, grabbing his hands. **“Here, follow me!”**

And so, Taylor danced.

Not gracefully at first. Really, more like a malfunctioning robot with joints that needed WD-40. His movements were tentative, a strange mix of what he thought girls were supposed to do and what his body actually knew how to do. He kept glancing down to make sure everything was still... contained. The dress felt like it might betray him at any second.

“Stop looking at your feet!” Abigail shouted, grabbing his wrists and lifting his arms. **“Nobody cares if you mess up!”**

That was demonstrably false. Taylor had spent years cataloging precisely how much people cared when you messed up. But he reluctantly let Abigail guide his arms above his head. The motion stretched the dress fabric tight across his chest, making him painfully aware of the two biological traitors that had landed him in this predicament.

But then something strange happened. As Abigail danced opposite him, mirroring his movements without judgment, Taylor's brain—his overactive, overthinking, over-analyzing brain—began to quiet down. The music wasn't just sound anymore; it was like an electrical current running through him.

He moved in rhythm to Abigail's swaying hips, his arms remaining cautiously up in the air. When he accidentally bumped into someone and nearly lost his balance, Abigail caught his elbow, laughing. Not at him, but with him. Taylor found himself laughing too.

“That's it!” she encouraged over the thumping bass. **“You're getting it!”**

Was he? He had no idea what “it” was, but for the first time, he wasn't mentally calculating every shift of his weight or worrying about what his face was doing. His body just... responded. A shoulder roll here. A hip sway there. Nothing coordinated enough to win any competitions, but movement that felt almost natural.

The beat was inside of him, vibrating through his bones and



flowing through his veins. His chest, the source of so much misery, was now just part of his dancing body, rising and falling with each breath, no different from his arms or legs. For once, Taylor wasn't thinking about how his body looked or what was wrong with it; he was just experiencing how it felt to be in it.

The epiphany nearly made him stumble again. Was this what normal people felt like all the time? Just... comfortable? Present?

A strobe light flashed, temporarily transforming the club into a series of freeze-frames. Abigail's hair whipping around her face. The crowd's hands in the air. Taylor's own smile, caught in a moment of pure, unfiltered joy.

He felt... alive. Not Taylor the freak. Not Taylor the girl. Not even Taylor the genius. Just Taylor, existing in this exact moment, his heartbeat syncing with the bassline.

The revelation was almost enough to make him forget he was wearing a little black dress. Almost.

"I'm gonna get us some water!" Abigail yelled after several songs, fanning herself dramatically. **"Don't move!"**

Taylor watched her disappear into the crowd, suddenly feeling exposed without her buffer. He swayed awkwardly, trying to look like

he belonged. That's when he felt someone behind him.

"Hey there, I haven't seen you here before," a guy in a backwards baseball cap shouted over the music, his breath hot against Taylor's ear.

Taylor froze, grip tightening on the hem of his borrowed dress. All the comebacks he'd rehearsed in his head over the years—things he wished he'd said to Malcolm and his crew—evaporated. This wasn't being bullied. This was... interest. And somehow that was even more terrifying.

"I'm with someone," Taylor said, voice barely audible over the music.

"I don't see anybody," the guy replied, moving closer. His hand reached for Taylor's waist. "One dance?"

"She said she's with someone." Abigail appeared, thrusting a plastic cup into Taylor's hand and shooting daggers at the guy with her eyes. "That would be me. So bye!"

The guy held up his hands in mock surrender. "No problem, ladies. Have fun." He melted back into the crowd, already scanning for his next target.

"Thanks," Taylor said, taking a grateful sip of water.

"Men, right?" Abigail rolled her eyes. "Though I'm kinda incredibly jealous. You've been here twenty minutes and already got hit on. Must be the dress."

When the next song ended, they were both breathless. "Well," said Abigail. "I think I just met the real Taylor Hughes. And she's pretty cool."

Taylor wiped the sweat from his brow. "I'm not, but thank you."

"Tay, we're going to have so much fun this year!" Abigail yelled, hugging him. "I can't wait to see what other surprises you have in store!"

Taylor hugged her back, but suddenly those ninety-eight days seemed impossibly long.





MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MIT











