Ten minutes past two. Her bra was black with lace, and I could still smell the department store she’d bought it from. This was a big deal to her. She’d bought clothes to impress me. I smirked a little at the thought. My fingers slid along her back as I pressed my mouth to her neck. I could taste her perfume and it twisted my lips into a grimace. Her brown hair fell along my vision as she pulled her head upwards to look down at me.

The grimace would not have been a happy sight for her, and so I cupped the back of her neck and brought our lips together before she could see me clearly. I spun her over, kissing along her neck despite the taste. Her body was nearly perfect. She had hourglass curves – soft breasts and wide hips. She was a girl – breasts, butt, long hair, and her lips tasted like cherry lip gloss.

The most important part of all of it, other than her being a girl, was that she enjoyed it. If she didn’t like it, then I would hear about it from half the school, somehow, some way, even if she herself didn’t talk much. People would find out.

My thrusts inside of her were slow at first, faster upon her urging, and I made myself wait until I could see the flush on her cheeks and chest and feel the vibrating silence than ran through her body before I finished. Then, I did finish, and her laugh was breathless and awed. “You are so much better than the other guys.”

I hovered over her, and she grinned when our eyes met. “Something tells me from your expression that being better than them isn’t exactly a high bar.”

Her smile was shy for a moment, and then she leaned forward and kissed me again. “Well, it’s not, but your bar is quite high.”

I hadn’t always had a high standard, and my first couple of times had resulted in horrifyingly bad disasters. The amount of online reading I’d done to ensure that I knew what I was doing was embarrassing – something about high school girls just didn’t lend itself to practice. “I’m glad you think so.”

The door opening was at the back of my mind since the feel being inside her was still buzzing in my brain. The after effects of what was an overall positive experience had me on a bit of a high. The stairs were what stirred me to action, and my jaw clenched when I recognized the quick, purposeful steps on the wooden steps outside. “Oh, shit.”

“I thought you said your parents were out of town?”

“They are, it’s not…” I grabbed the sheet for her to wrap around herself, and I managed to grab the discarded comforter just in time for the knock at the door.

“Calis? Practice started fifteen minutes ago – are you awake?” The voice was light, cautious, and exasperated. That voice had known before the door ever opened.

“I, uh… yes! I just got up – just give me a couple seconds.”

She spoke, then, with a light smile on her face. “Oh, isn’t that…”

I snapped my head across and motioned for her not to say anything. She seemed unsure why it should matter. She threw her feet over the bed, but she kept the sheet securely fastened around herself.

She wasn’t worried – his voice had brought her as much relief as it had brought me misery. Then again, that wasn’t her fault since she couldn’t have understood the situation. She kept the sheet drawn around herself as she made a motion towards the door. Panic shot through me, and I leapt from my position with my pants halfway up my legs to stop her. The motion didn’t quite work, and I hit my dresser which resulted in his lamp crashing onto the bedroom floor.

Fuck, that was the only reason that he would open the door without my consent – worry.

“Calis? Are you alright?”

The bedroom door opened to reveal the small, black-haired boy with a green soccer jersey beneath a gray zip-up hoodie. His eyes found her a few seconds after he’d checked to ensure my survival. “Oh. Oh, I… I’m sorry. I-I should go.”

Fuck.

She shook her head, but I yanked my pants the rest of the way on. “Taylor, no, wait!” I didn’t bother with a shirt as I sprinted down the stairs to catch Taylor by the arm just a second before he reached the front door. “Hey, hey, wait…”

“No, no. I… forget it, alright? I need to get to practice.” The arm pulled away from my fingers, but I kept a firm grip.

I shook my head. “Look, I told you I’m just getting some stuff worked out right now. You don’t need to be mad.”

“I’m not mad. I just… I mean, *you* kissed *me*. I never would have even… it never would have mattered, and I never would have thought anything, but…”

The hiss of breath that came out of my mouth made the customary ‘sh’ sound, and the blue eyes broke upon hearing them. Sickness bubbled in my throat as words became twisted and impossible. “Okay, look, I need to get to practice, okay? We don’t all have tenure with the team when we’re late. It’s my first year.”

“Hey, I… that came across badly. I… look, I… I don’t know why I did that. I mean, I do take responsibility for it, and I’m… I’m sorry. But… I just don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.”

Taylor nodded his head in a very deliberate manner. “Wrong idea? Does that include me?”

“No!” I paused. “I mean, yes… but… that’s not what I… I mean obviously I don’t want to give you the wrong idea.”

“Okay, so can you just tell me what the wrong idea is?”

I shook my head. In that moment, I would have argued until my death that I didn’t know, but I knew perfectly well. “Okay, come on, I mean… I just… I need to do this so no one thinks that I’m just… that I’m…”

He lowered his voice, even though the subtle anger made me aware that he wanted to raise it. “That you’re gay?”

“I’m not.”

“Okay. Fine.”

I shook my head, and I took him by the shoulders. “Look, I know you can understand this. People are going to say things about me and you… I’m just trying to make sure no one does. That’s all. And it’s kind of fun.”

His lips pressed together, and I could see the way his tongue moved in his mouth as he tried to hold back his emotions. “Okay, well, how about this? We can just not hang out anymore, and that way, you don’t have to worry about your reputation or me getting angry when you’re just trying to have a good time.”

“What?”

“You’re a senior. I’m a freshman. It’s not that hard for us to avoid one another, and that way there aren’t any chance of any bad rumors.”

I shook my head, but my tongue continued to fail. “What are you talking about? You’re my best friend. I don’t want to not be your friend anymore.”

His smile was quiet for a moment, and then he slowly removed his arm from my loosening grip. “Sometimes, people grow apart. They want different things, and that causes things not to work out anymore. You’ll be going to college soon, anyway. I just think this is for the best, okay? People will speculate, and I don’t want to ruin your senior year.”

“Taylor, no… come on, Taylor. I was just…”

“I don’t want to be friends anymore, Calis. I can’t. Please, just respect that. Some of us aren’t as sure of our identity as you seem to be.”

I wanted to stop him. A thousand words in my head would have been perfect – the things that I thought of after that moment. He wouldn’t have left. He would have stayed. All I had to say was that he was important, but I just stammered some half-formed words. He smiled at me one more time. “I’ll see you at soccer.” And then he walked out.

I didn’t follow him, and no matter how many words went through my head, I never said them to him – not at the soccer games, not for my entire senior year, not at all.

~

I stared at my computer screen, pushing my hair out of my face for what must have been the forty seventh time. “Forget it, one missed assignment isn’t going to fail me out forever. I can’t do it.”

“I’m not taking pity on you and giving you the answers, Tsrali. It’s lab questions. Make things up. Like you do with Tamara all the time.”

The first object I got my hands on was my old computer mouse, and I threw it across the room to hit him in the shoulder. “Oh shut up, Lee, I do not make things up with Tamara.”

My cursor continued to flicker in the box that should have held my answer. The assignment was due in less than twenty minutes, and I had to come up with one hundred words that made sense together before then. “I don’t see why I am even in this lab. This has nothing to do with law or anything like it. It’s my senior year of college, and somehow I am still in this bullshit course!”

“If you’d taken it earlier, then you wouldn’t be taking it now.” Lee had never been very good at handing out sympathy, though I didn’t think he tried particularly hard to be good at it.

I shook my head. “If I’d taken it earlier, I’d have already dropped out of college to become a mildly violent homeless man.”

“And if you keep this up, then that’s where you’ll end up anyway.”

His uncanny ability to be right in every situation made my teeth snap to a grind, and I slowly began the process of creating a paragraph that may not be laughed out of the biology lab. I managed to hit submit with a little over five minutes left and no proof reading. “Alright, there, he knows I tried.”

Lee, who had finished all his assignments for the week three days ago, was laid across my bed tossing a soccer ball into the air and catching it. “So, have you decided whether or not you’re coming to Tamara’s cousin’s wedding?”

“I decided that two weeks ago when you asked me – remember? I said no.” Lee turned to me with a emotionless smile, and he still managed to catch the ball and throw it back into the air.

I grabbed a pen on my desk and banged the bottom into the wood a few times. “I know you said no, but I need you to come because Tamara is going to be mingling with her cousins, and she’s going to expect me to entertain, and if you’re there, I have an excuse to slip away. Come on, Lee, I thought we were friends.”

His eyebrow quirked as he caught the ball again, and he didn’t look at me. “Well, you have misunderstood the nature of our friendship, I think. Why do you keep this ball around since you quit the soccer team, anyway?”

My mouth opened to explain, and then I bit into the side of my cheek. “I don’t know. Sometimes, I still like going outside and kicking the ball around. Please, come to this wedding. You don’t have to stay long.”

“Calis, literally nothing you say could ever convince me to come to that wedding. You have told me incessantly that Tamara is the only tolerable person in that entire family. Why would I spend an evening with them? You are going to have to spend some time with them whether I’m present or not.”

I cursed past me for having been so open about the horrors of Tamara’s family. She dealt with them well, but I had not picked up the skill in six months of dating. “I will have to spend less time with them, and no one is going to care if you go hide in the corner – no one knows who you are!”

“I’m not going.”

My eyes followed the ball as he threw it, though I couldn’t find further words to make my case anymore than I already had. I’d opened my mouth to try again, but a knock at the door stopped me. “That’s probably Tamara. She said she was coming by after her group project met today.”

I started towards the door, checked the peep hole, and opened it when my suspicions were confirmed. She graced me with a smile and a hug when I opened the door, and I returned each of them. A result of the hug was my head on hers, and in that position was when I saw the small red haired girl standing awkward behind her. “Oh, you brought a friend?”

Tamara stepped away from me, and she glanced back to the girl. “Yes, I did. This is actually one of my cousins that you hadn’t met yet – her name is Katt Mason.” I worked to keep my face from instantly falling. “We decided to go look for dresses together.”

One corner of my mouth turned upwards, though it didn’t last long. “I thought you already had your dress?”

“I do, but you know I love shopping.”

I stepped aside to let both of them inside. The fact that the red-haired girl hadn’t given me her life history yet set her apart from the rest of Tamara’s family immediately. “Well, nice to meet you, Katt. I’m Calis Tsrali.”

Her smile was shy, and she nodded. “Yeah, uh… Tamara told me… about you. Not like a lot, or anything personal… just… you know, about you in the sense that your name was Calis Tsrali and you were her boyfriend.”

“Well, that is an accurate description of me. Well done, Tamara.” My girlfriend gave a brief nod of pride, and my eyes returned to Katt who seemed content not to say anything else. “So, if you guys are going shopping – why did you come here? I am not carrying bags, baby. It’s not happening.”

She pursed her lips in disappointment, and then they moved to the side of her face before she bit down on her lip. “Yeah, well, actually… I was kind of hoping… that uh… your roommate could be Katt’s date.”

“What?” Katt and I spoke at precisely the same time, and I could tell the young woman had not been told this information ahead of time.

I laughed. “Lee? As someone’s date? Are you absolutely out of your mind? He won’t even come to the wedding, let alone as your cousin’s date?” Tamara looked as though she intended to argue, and I threw up a hand. “No, just… Lee! Lee, can you come into the main room for a second?”

A few seconds later Lee emerged with his brown hair looked messier than usual on top of his head from where he’d been lying. “What? Oh, hi, Tamara, and...” He moved to look at Katt, and his mouth seemed to skip like a scratched CD. “Uh… uh…”

“My cousin, Katt Mason,” Tamara said.

Katt’s face had flushed upon Lee’s appearance, and she was staring at her feet and fidgeting as though she might run. “W-well, Katherine… like…” She swallowed. “Some people call me Katherine. People who know me… call me Katt, sometimes. It’s… but it’s… it’s not on my birth certificate.”

Lee’s nod was slow, but Katt hadn’t looked up and so she didn’t see it. “Okay, well, Katherine.” He glanced back to me. “What did you want?”

Tamara beat me to it. “Katt is really shy, and she’s worried about this wedding. We have this really weird uncle who like… hits on us… in a creepy way, if we don’t have a date. So, I was really hoping that you might help Katt out and take her – to the wedding.”

Lee’s eyes widened, and he said nothing for far longer than I’d expected. His mouth just hung open, and he stared at me, and then at Tamara – going back and forth for far too many seconds. I just smiled.

He was spared the necessity of answering when Katt spoke. “Oh, no, it’s… no… Tamara’s being silly. We don’t… I mean… no. No, I’d rather go by myself. She’s just… she doesn’t… she didn’t ask me… she didn’t… so, I totally wouldn’t have come over here. No, just, no… it’s… totally fine.”

“I’ll take you.” Lee’s answer was abrupt, as though he’d only answered so that she would stop mumbling. The surprise of it actually jerked me out of my stance, though.

“You will?” she asked.

“You *will*?” I followed with the same question in a slightly more emphatic tone.

Lee cleared his throat, and he shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, sure… I mean, I didn’t want to go just for Calis, who will be fine without me, but if you need someone to be there with you, then whatever, I have nothing better to do.”

“I… I… I…” My eyes moved up and down as I tried to ensure that he hadn’t been apprehended by aliens and experimented on in the time that I’d answered the door to Tamara and Katt. “I…”

“Oh.” Her eyes were huge when she finally glanced across to him. They were bright blue, and the freckles on her cheeks looked faded as she blushed. “Uh… oh. Well, um… you definitely don’t have to. I-I can handle it on my own.”

“It’s fine. I’ll owe Calis a favor.” Lee seemed agitated, but I’d never seen him agree to anything that he didn’t want to do.

“Lee, thank you! Calis and I both owe you a favor!” Tamara moved across to him and put her arms around him. He didn’t hug her back, of course, but she didn’t mind. She pulled away and glanced to Katt – or Katherine. “Come along, Katt. We need to find you a dress!”

“Right, uh…” Tamara was already dragging her to the door, but she did manage one glance back at Lee. “I… thank you, thank you very much…”

Lee looked away without bothering to respond, and I waited for the door to close before I turned on him. “What the fuck?”

“What? I wasn’t going to say no to Tamara.”

“I’m pretty sure you have said no to Tamara several times, including when she was sobbing hysterically and wanting a ride home, which was still a dick move by the way.” I crossed my arms.

A smile crossed his lips, but it didn’t come anywhere near his eyes. “I suggest you stop complaining and be happy that I am actually going to be there to buffer against Tamara’s ridiculous family.”

“I… yeah, I… okay. Sure.”

“So, I guess we can just go together to Tamara’s and go to the wedding from there? I really would rather not go to the trouble of getting this woman’s address.”

My mind was still trying to figure out why Lee had volunteered to go to the wedding at all, particularly after how adamant he’d been with me just a few minutes earlier. “Yeah, I’m sure that is Tamara’s plan.

“Well, great. I guess that settles that.” Lee took a breath and started back towards our dorm room. I watched his back, narrowing my eyes. I knew that I should be grateful, and I was, but I also wasn’t stupid.

I caught the door as he tried to slam it behind him, and I pressed my back against it as I entered our dorm area. “Is it because she’s a red-head?”

“What are you talking about?”

He picked up one of his notebooks and opened it. His voice was disinterested. “Well, I’ve speculated for a while now…”

“Please don’t start this again…”

“I mean, you seem to have a little bit of a thing for red heads, even if you are not dating for whatever reason, and it’s interesting that she happened to be a red-head. Also, she was pretty cute.”

His green eyes moved so that they were glaring at me in the way they glared at me when I’d struck a nerve. “Shut up, Tsrali. Just because your instant reaction upon meeting a girl – or guy – is to rate her upon a certain set of criteria doesn’t mean that’s how we all operate.” He shook his head. “Your girlfriend mentioned a creepy uncle, and I figured I ought to help.”

“You figured you… yeah, okay, of course you did.” I crossed my arms and my lips moved to the side of my face as I considered Lee’s change of mind. “I don’t size guys and girls up, by the way. I’m in a steady relationship now.”

“If that were true, then you wouldn’t have already informed me that Tamara’s cousin was pretty cute, and I saw you looking at her.”

I scoffed. “If I was looking, it was because she was stuttering. I wasn’t sizing anyone up – especially Tamara’s cousin!”

He rolled his eyes and grabbed his jacket before kicking the soccer ball to one side of the room. “Come on. Let’s go get something to eat. I’m hungry, and I don’t want to give you too much time to come up with reasons why I’m in love with Katherine Mason.”

“You remembered her name,” I said. I grabbed my coat, though, as he started towards the door. “That’s fascinating.”

He shook his head as he glanced back at me upon opening the door. “I remember everything. You ought to know that.”

“You only remember things that are relevant to you.” I glanced back to my computer as I took another step towards the door. “Hey, hold on, one second.” There was no point. I knew there wasn’t – just like there hadn’t been for two years.

Footsteps followed me back into the room. “It is relevant because she is going to be my date, so it’d be great to remember her name. Ah, right, the weird, unexplained obsessively checking his email. I’m not convinced you don’t live a double life, or you’re waiting for one.”

A screen saver gave way to the search bar of my internet browser before I navigated to my email page to an empty inbox. I bit down on my lip, double checking the junk folder before closing the computer. “I’m not one to turn down excitement. Come on, food?”

“Sure, weirdo.”

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We had been forced to go shopping, however, as Tamara had found a new dress, and she demanded that I match her. I didn’t mind, since she’d gotten a crimson dress, which meant I got to wear a crimson shirt – which looked incredible on me.

Lee, on the other hand, was annoyed that he’d been roped into buying a dark purple shirt to go with his black pants. “I’ll buy you lunch a few times, and you can wear it again, it’s actually a good color on you.”

My eyes moved between the road and Lee’s disgruntled expression. “I can’t wear purple again. I… I cannot believe I bought the stupid shirt.”

“I can’t believe you did, either.” I glanced into the rearview mirror to get a quick look at my reflection. “The shirts are nice, though. You have to admit that.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re wearing what I presume to be your favorite color, and red looks good with blond hair. Purple, on the other hand, doesn’t look good with anything!”

I laughed. “I do look amazing – that isn’t contestable, but you don’t look bad, either. And actually, purple goes particularly well with…” I paused for dramatic effect, and his frown deepened. “…red hair!”

“Say red hair one more time, and see if you don’t end up splattered on the road.” He leaned into the window and sighed dramatically. I shook my head and turned my attention back to the road.

We pulled up into Tamara’s driveway, a townhouse that her parents owned and had given to her without charge for her duration of her time in school. I honked the horn deliberately, and Lee nearly leapt out of the car. “Calis, you can’t just honk the horn. This is a date.”

“It’s fine.”

He opened the door in spite of my words, and he stepped out of the car. I made grunted my distaste as I glanced up at him from the driver’s seat. “Fine, go get them.”

His eyebrows raised, and he nodded his head. “Okay – I will.” He started away from the door, and I slammed my hands into the wheel before I exited the car and followed him to the door. He’d just rung the bell when I moved beside him. “You decided to join me?”

“I hate you. I wish you hadn’t come.” He laughed.

Tamara opened the door. Her dress matched my shirt perfectly, and her hair was pulled up in curls with a flower decorating the binding. Her eyes narrowed when she saw us. “You better be glad you didn’t honk the horn again.”

Lee looked at me with a haughty expression, and I smiled. “I know, that was just Lee being a jerk.”

She smiled at me and glanced back. “Katt, are you coming?”

The sound that came from inside the house sounded definitively like Katt’s incoherent stuttering, and Tamara reached behind the wall to yank her forward. The purple did look good with her hair. The dress had one strap with a sparkling top layer. Her hair was curled and around her shoulders, and her heels made her legs look incredibly long.

“You two look nice,” I said. I smiled, and then my face twisted with confusion as I realized that I’d been the one to say that in Lee’s stead. I glanced over to him, and his eyes were slowly coming up from Katt’s legs to the top of her dress to her hair. “Don’t they, Lee?”

He jerked as though I’d cracked a whip near his ear, and he cleared his throat. “What? Yes, yes you do. Both of you.”

“I feel ridiculous,” Katt said. Her head was bowed, and she seemed unaware that despite their confidence levels she was currently putting her cousin to absolute shame. “B-but thanks for coming to get us!”

“Well, you look amazing,” Tamara said.

I guided them down the front steps and towards the car, and once they were walked towards it, I elbowed Lee hard in the side. He hissed at me, and we both opened the car doors on either side for the women. Tamara sat up front with me, and Katt and Lee sat in the back staring awkwardly out opposite windows.

Tamara began idle conversation before anyone else had the chance to do anything, and I kept my eyes on the two awkward idiots in the back seat as we started towards the wedding. Katt spoke after a few minutes, moving towards Lee. “Uh, you look great – I’m sure that… I know… guys don’t like purple and pink and stuff, b-but… you look really cute… good. You look good.”

Lee looked at her as though she’d insulted his mother, and then he shrugged his shoulders in an absurdly rude motion. “Purple was fine,” he said before he turned back towards the window.

A smirk moved across my face, and it was well timed, as Tamara seemed to think I was smiling at one of the thousand words she’d said in the past minute. “I really appreciate you doing this,” Katt continued.

“I said it was fine,” Lee said.

“I know, but you didn’t have to. I mean, it’s really nice of you, and you bought a shirt. I can give you money for it?”

He glared at her again. “I said it wasn’t a big deal. I really don’t care. I’ll wear it again. It’s fine.”

She bit down on her lip and her hands wrenched together. “S-so… um… Tamara said you’re majoring in chemical engineering. That’s awesome. I-I’m actually majoring in electrical engineering.”

Lee turned to look at her, and he still looked angry. “Electrical? Great.”

“I guess I probably haven’t seen you since I’m only a sophomore and you’re a senior. Well, I… actually, I have seen you in the labs a few times, but… like… I mean I wasn’t staring at you, or… or anything weird like that. I just meant… I’d seen you. A couple times. But, well, what I meant was that you haven’t seen me, or-or we hadn’t met.”

He didn’t turn to look at her, but I saw one corner of his mouth twitch for a second. I couldn’t tell if it was upwards or downwards. “Right, no, I hadn’t seen you.”

My eyes slowly moved to Tamara with suspicion, and I realized that her prattling had slowed a bit. When our eyes met, she grinned wolfishly at me. “She knew him?” I mouthed.

Her nod was quick and brief, and she said a quick sentence about one of her cousins and the cost of the cake. “She likes him?” I mouthed again.

The nod was far more deliberate this time, and her smirk kept her from managing another unimportant bit of information about the wedding. I grinned as I looked towards the road. “So, Katt, what made you want to do electrical engineering?”

Tamara answered for her. “She’s insanely smart. She actually got a full ride. She’s the prodigy of the family.”

“I… well, no, I’m… I’m not actually.”

“If you got a full ride to major in electrical engineering, then you must actually be pretty smart,” Lee said.

The awkwardness was nearly enough to make me forget how much I was dreading the wedding. “You must be. So, surely, with all those engineering guys over there, you’ve had a lot of offers for dates, huh?”

Katt made an adorable squeak, and she shook her head. “No, no, I mean… I’m pretty invisible. I just… I just do my work, and that’s… that’s basically it. No guys for me. I mean… I mean… not… I…”

“Well, you’re very pretty. Isn’t she, Lee?”

He glared at me through the mirror, and his jaw clenched. “Pretty or not, I’m sure the people in the electrical engineering department are working hard on their degrees and not worrying about dating women.”

“Well, you can work on your degree and check out women if you’re smart enough,” I said. “And you do always say you’re smart.”

“If you have no interest in it, then it doesn’t really matter,” he said. His voice was slowly turning into a growl.

“Um…”

“Okay, but, hypothetically, if you were looking for it, and you saw Katt… what would your response be?”

His teeth were grinding together, and the smile on my face was obviously infuriating him. “I don’t really feel like dealing in hypotheticals if we’re being honest.”

“Well, it’ll be good for her image, as someone in the same field as her – what do you think of her? I mean – would you date her if you were looking to date someone? Just as an objective outsider.”

“I…”

“Oh, look, we’re here! The lights are so pretty! I’m really excited for Clarise. Her husband’s a great guy. Is his brother going to be there? That guy is really weird!” Katt had sat straight up in her seat, and her hands were clasped. Her face was glowing in the dark back seat of the car.

We weren’t actually there yet, but Lee did look as though he may lion-leap across the back seat and begin the slow process of clawing out my throat if I didn’t stop. “Yeah, lots of lights… Clarise always did know how to throw a party.” Tamara agreed, apparently.

“How did they meet, anyway?” I asked.

Lee’s sigh of relief was palpable, and I thought I noticed a grateful exchange between he and Katt before I turned to Tamara. “Um, work, I think? Clarise works as a researcher in some lab, and Camden had volunteered to be a lab rat. Super romantic.”

“That is a funny way to meet someone,” Katt said. Her own cheeks were slowly cooling, and she leaned towards her window to glance at the lights. “Still, it means they have a key something in common.”

My reply was near sing-song. “That is important, particularly in your field of work, for two people.” I could feel Lee’s glare without having to look at him.

Katt’s laugh was nervous, but she nodded her head. “Y-yeah, it is. I mean, it’s not… the most important thing there is, obviously, but it is… a nice… extra.”

“I remember Calis dated a girl who thought the ‘now I’ve said my abc’s part of the abc song were actual letters.” Lee leaned back in his seat, and I couldn’t help the smile that slowly started to form when I closed my eyes. “So, the mutual intelligence and interest level is definitely big for him.”

Tamara’s laugh was one, breathless laugh, and Katt bowed her head to try to keep from giggling. “Well, my philosophy professor tried to convince us that the abc’s were a social construct, and he encouraged us to come up with our own letters to express ourselves in the way we wanted to.” She glanced at her nails. “It would have been fine, except for he wanted us to do it outside of class. He showed us his own version, and I really think he just wanted it to catch on.”

The expression on Lee’s face had gone from smug to amused, and he smiled genuinely for the first time of the night. “You should have written your test in scribbles and told him that was your method of expression.”

Katt smiled back at him. “A couple people did that. He wasn’t particularly happy about it.”

An empty parking space presented itself, and I eased the car into it between two other cars. “We are officially here.” I pulled myself out of the car, quite proud of the lack of further disgusted remarks about where we were.

Tamara joined me a few seconds later, and we walked a little bit ahead of Lee and Katt, intentionally. “I can’t believe you pulled that off. You’re more devious than I give you credit for.”

She smiled and nodded her head. “Yes, I am. So, try not to insult anyone tonight, okay?”

“Is your gay cousin going to be here?”

Her lips pursed in immediate distaste. “Claude? Yes. He is, and it’s not a good start that you’re already saying gay like it’s a curse word. In addition, he isn’t gay, he’s bisexual – there’s a difference.”

I smiled. “I said it that way because his being gay, or *bisexual*, is so far from the worst thing about him – his abhorrent personality and stench come to mind. Also, what is even being bisexual? How about being indecisive?”

She rolled her eyes and shoved me. “He isn’t that bad, and there is nothing wrong with being bisexual, Calis. That’s like saying you’re indecisive because you like chocolate and vanilla ice cream equally.”

“Everyone has a favorite.”

“That’s just not true.”

“That is your opinion.”

The conversation had extended the entire parking lot, and we stood in front of the massive wooden doors that led to the church. The length of the wedding had been promised to be short, and I crossed my fingers that I hadn’t been lied to.

People milled about in the atrium of the church, and ushers eased us into the correct location after we told them we were here for the bride. I hated Tamara’s family, and yet somehow, they all seemed to have loads of friends. The church was packed, and there were still plenty of people outside.

Lee sat down next to me, and he whispered with a tone far more judgmental than I liked. “Nice. You know, insulting something doesn’t actually make you less of it.”

“Shut up.” My voice was a hiss, and I felt defensiveness rise in my throat like bile. “It was a joke.”

“You didn’t make that clear to anyone.”

Lee and I had become best friends when we’d spent freshmen year as roommates, and he’d realized I had a tendency towards men and women somewhere within our sophomore year. His personal mission had become to make me accept myself when he realized I had issues with it. “Look, it’s a nonissue.”

“Yes, it is. Obviously, Tamara has no problems with it whatsoever. She just got angry with you for saying something like that. If you can’t tell people who would accept you, then how are you going to get to the point where you could tell even people who didn’t?”

My lips were thin as I smiled at him. “Easy, I’m not actually ever going to do that. I like girls more. You know that, I know that… the ratio is like… thirty to one.”

“That’s because you’ve been trying to convince yourself of that fact.”

I closed my eyes and snarled at the memories that flashed in front of my face. “Lee, just back off and flirt with your red head. I assure you, I do not need your counseling.”

He sighed and pressed back against the pew we were seated in. Katt looked at the two of us worriedly for a moment, and then she turned her attention towards the empty front of the church. “It’s not because I’ve been trying to convince myself of anything,” I said. “It’s the truth. Remember Razor? Yeah, that was fun.”

“That was one bad experience. Calis, when are you going to stop being so obsessed with feeling like everyone has to see you as perfect?”

“When I stop being perfect,” I said.

“You’re about twenty-two years late, then, I’m afraid…”

Our irritated glares were interrupted by Tamara’s flailing hand. “It’s about to start. Will you two stop flirting?”

The ceremony started quickly, as the groom and groomsmen took their place at the front of that stage with the preacher. Music played, and I occupied myself by finding all the people who tried to discreetly pull out their phones.

I’d found six by the time we had to stand for the bride. She was a pretty girl with a fluffy white dress that I would have definitely vetoed if I’d been given the opportunity. Her hair looked more like flowers with a few strands of dirty blonde hair mixed into it. The smile on her face was genuine, and Tamara was teary eyed when we took our seats again.

I rolled my eyes in Lee’s general direction as the preacher began to tell us about the couple and the merits of love. A ghost of a smile past across his lips as he looked towards his feet upon the exchanging of the vows.

Eight phones before the bride and groom were halfway through the vows, and I kept my eyes searching the packed church.

“Love is patient, love is kind…”

My eyes stopped moving immediately. My head lifted slightly, and I leaned forward a little bit. Black hair, olive skin, leaned forward with his hand wrapped around two fingers from his other hand. No, no, that was impossible. I leaned back, and then I leaned forward again.

“It keeps no record of wrongs.”

There were too many heads blocking my view for a clear answer, but the beating in my chest was suddenly too hard. I kept inching forward – trying to see his face, or more of his body, or anything that would make my heart stop pounding.

“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease…”

Lee jammed his elbow into my side, and I looked at him. “What is the matter with you? Are you having a seizure?”

“I thought… I…” I pressed back into the pew. There was no way. That wasn’t possible. I was just delirious from boredom. I leaned forward again, and Lee’s frustrated glare pushed me back again.

The ceremony ended, and I leapt from my seat as soon as we were allowed. “Calis, where are you going?”

I pushed through the masses of people with no regard for Tamara’s annoyed question. I just needed to be sure. There was no way that it was who I thought it was. That was impossible, and I just had to confirm that so that my heart would stop racing. People surrounded me, pushing towards the exit of the church.

Everywhere I turned there was an old woman, or a child, or a matching couple. There was no one that could have been what I’d seen, though, and I kept pushing through people to find some evidence that I hadn’t made it up. Someone here had that hair and that skin.

Gray hair, white hair, red hair, black hair, but too long, brown hair, a thousand different bodies. I didn’t understand how so many people had fit into this church comfortably. Finally, I saw a flash of a white shirt, and I moved forward only to have my arm nearly ripped out of socket. “Are you drunk?” Tamara glared at me.

I turned to find Tamara, Lee, and Katt, all looking at me as if I’d gone a little silly. I shook my head and glanced back to the point in the crowd, but there was nothing of interest there anymore. “I… no, I just… I… I thought I saw someone I knew.”

“Okay, well, relax. There is a reception, and if you know someone, I’m sure they will be there. Now, stop storming around the church like a man possessed. You nearly knocked my grandmother down.”

My cheeks burned for a moment, and there was a sense of nausea at the continuing race of my heartbeat. I hadn’t felt it this fast in a long time. “Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t know… why I was acting like that.”

We started towards the exit. The reception – maybe that person would be at the reception. Not him – just a person that looked vaguely similar to him. My throat knotted as I followed the others towards the exit. Lee touched my shoulder. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s… everything’s fine. I was just looking for someone. Don’t make it weird.”

His eyebrows rose. “Me? I shouldn’t make it weird? You kicked a child over and nearly plowed down an old woman, and I’m making it weird by asking if you’re okay.”

“There were just a lot of people.”

“Okay, sure.”

The reception was in a separate building, but there was no driving required. My hands were sweating, though, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so uncomfortable. Tamara dragged me by the wrist because I’d refused to hold hands.

The reception was as full as the church, and the idea of it made me nauseous. I had to find that person, and I didn’t want to knock over more children to do it. “Don’t make that face, Calis. You’ve been dealing with them for six months – try twenty-one years.”

I opened my mouth to explain that wasn’t the cause for my expression, but I shook my head. “You’re right. I am infinitely impressed at how well you’ve turned out.”

“Tamara!” I closed my eyes, and Lee turned his head to the older man that was approaching me from behind. “I just love the length of girls’ dresses these days. I can reach them.” He moved to grab the bottom of her dress, and I grabbed his hand before he reached it.

“Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.”

He grinned up to me. “Ah, Calis! You two are still going strong, I see! I knew I liked you!” I nodded, and Tamara bit her lips inwards to keep from laughing.

The attention shifted from Tamara to Katt, and I could feel Lee bristle immediately. “Kitty Katt! Don’t you look adorable in that dress! I can tell Tamara must have helped you pick it up. You’ve never had the best fashion sense when you’re left on your own. When you were about six or seven, you used to wear sacks that you’d colored with markers. It was adorable!”

“Because we’ve all developed a refined palate for fashion by the tender age of six.” Lee’s voice was ice as he positioned himself conveniently in between Katt and the still nameless uncle.

He glanced up at Lee, and his eyes widened for a moment. “Kitty Katt, have you gotten yourself a boyfriend? And here I was thinking a girl like you would end up alone forever.”

Katt’s fists clenched, and before Lee could respond, she did. “If I ended up alone forever, then it would be my own choice. Lee is just a friend, so no, I still don’t have a boyfriend, and I’m not altogether looking for one right now, since I have a full scholarship to a nice college, and I’m maintaining a 4.0 GPA. Also, my name is Katherine.”

“Oh, Kitty Katt, don’t be so snippy all the time! You really will never find a boy if you keep talking like that. You can’t be so talking all the time. Boys don’t like that.”

Lee’s eyes were on Katt, whose fists were clenching so hard that I was starting to worry for her palms. “Okay, whatever, thanks for the advice, Ezekial. It’s great. I’ll take it to heart, just like you take everything I say to heart.”

“Well, I appreciate that, Kitty Katt. Are you ever going to dye that hair of yours, though? It’s just not pleasing on this old man’s eyes.”

Lee’s eye twitched, and I grabbed the back of his arm, speaking gingerly into his ear. “Just leave it alone. It’s not worth it. Dude is already halfway to drunk. Katt can handle it herself.”

The approach Katt had taken was to smile and nod her head at the man who had planted himself firmly in the middle of our group. “You know, I happen to think that’s why the divorce rates are becoming what they are. You got these women doing these crazy colors in their hair, and that just isn’t what a man wants to look at it.”

I gripped Lee’s arm as tight as I could without preventing circulation, and I sighed when he spoke. “Firstly…” Tamara and Katt both glanced at him. “The divorce rate probably has a great deal more to do with people like you who think that men or any partner at all can dictate what the other member of the relationship does. As if by entering the relationship, they have an obligation to please you, and if they don’t, then you have every right to end the relationship.” He took a breath. “Secondly, you’ve probably known Katherine from birth, on the off-chance you’ve not been drunk for a solid thirty seconds in twenty some years, then you should be aware that red is her natural hair color. Lastly, her name is Katherine – stop inserting yourself where you aren’t wanted and fuck off.”

The man looked confused for a moment, and then he wandered back into the crowd without another word. Katt tried to keep from laughing, though Tamara made no such effort. “Wow, Lee, I’m really glad we brought you.”

Katt bit her lip as she looked up at him. “Thank you. I, uh… I appreciate it.”

Lee looked away, clearly wanting to forget that he’d ever started an argument – if it could be called such – at a wedding where he knew next to no one. “Whatever. He was annoying.”

“Agreed,” I said. I would have pestered a bit more if I hadn’t still been dealing with the racing heart rate caused from the glimpse of probably nothing during the wedding ceremony.

The exchange had lifted Tamara’s spirits, and she glanced at me sidelong. “You better ask me to dance tonight, just so you are aware.”

“You could always ask me,” I said.

That was a mistake, as it resulted in my being dragged onto the dance floor for two songs before I was able to navigate myself out of the situation. My escape would have come sooner if I hadn’t been using the vantage point to check the surrounding area for anyone familiar.

Lee and Katt had opted to stand awkwardly on the side of the dance floor, and I ventured back over to them under the excuse that my head hurt. Katt handed both of us punch when we arrived. “Apparently, Lee doesn’t dance,” she said.

“Lee doesn’t do anything fun. It’s against his religion,” I said. The punch was alcoholic, and I needed a downer to slow my heart rate, since there didn’t seem to be anyone at the reception that fit what I’d thought I’d seen. I drank it in one swig and set it on the table beside which they’d decided to stand. “That’s why I like to keep blackmail.”

A familiar glare pinned itself to my face, and I flashed Lee a quick smile. “I do plenty of fun things, just none of them dancing.”

“False,” I said. “Speaking of fun, there’s an open bar over there, and I am in dire need of something more alcoholic because Tamara’s mother is on her way over here.”

“Don’t leave me! Calis!”

I pretended not to hear the protest as I took Lee by the arm and guided him towards the bar. Lee glanced backwards to them, and I followed suit to find both women trapped beneath the hawk like stare of Tamara’s mom. “These people are rich. They should have something to get us both drunk enough to forget where we are.”

Lee shook his head. “Damn, I knew the family was bad, but that man was disgusting. Why did she let him openly insult her hair?”

The desire to tease him returned, but I let it wait until I had a little more alcohol inside of me. “He’s always an asshole. His wife hates him, and yet they don’t get a divorce, I guess that’s what happens…”

I leaned over the bar to the bartender’s curious stare. “Do you happen to have whiskey?”

He nodded his head eagerly, and then he changed his eyes to Lee. “Gin and tonic’s fine. Thanks.”

We leaned on the edge of the bar, and I ensured that Tamara and Katt were still engaged in conversation with her mother. “At least we get free alcohol out of this deal.” I took slow breaths, encouraging my brain to stop reinventing the image from the church.

“True, are you okay – seriously? You seem a little on edge.”

I nodded. “I’m fine. Just… her family makes me uncomfortable.” That was true enough, though when the glass of whiskey was placed before me, I threw it back in one quick motion and indicated I wanted more. “Really uncomfortable.”

“Apparently,” he said. He elected to take his drink much slower than I had.

The second shot burned my throat a little less, but I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head to fight back the sensation of it. “I knew you liked red hair. You went absolutely berserk once he insulted her hair.”

“He was insulting her,” Lee said.

“I knew you liked her,” I said. I could feel Lee’s judgment once I threw back the third glass of whiskey, but I didn’t have time to worry about it. My heart was finally relaxing, and logic was finally intervening to tell me that I’d confused the image in my head.

Lee shook his head. “I don’t like her. I mean, I obviously don’t dislike her, and I was surprised at how well she stood up for herself. That was impressive. She seemed so shy and… reserved, and then that.”

“Shy people will do that. You think they’ll just… take whatever you throw at them, and then it turns out… not so.” An image – conjured by the fact that I still wasn’t over him – the fact that I would never be over him because I’d let him walk out of my life without a fight. Every glance on the soccer field, every awkward pass in the hallways, I’d never fought at all. I’d let it happen.

Lee’s laughter felt distant. “Look at you, being all philosophical, usually all you can think about is sex after two glasses of whiskey.” My heart hammered as I recalled the feel of his wrist in my hand. The recollection was easy, since my heart had been pounding the same way as I chased him down the steps. I closed my eyes and grabbed the fourth glass of whiskey, staring into it for a moment before I looked back out into the crowd.

Bright, blue eyes, usually gentle, a fine layer of glass over a thousand emotions framed with dark, thick, lashes, a small, lithe build, stealing soccer balls like the other person was standing still, a smile that could stop your heart in your chest.

I’d lied awake a thousand nights and seen those dimples behind my eyelids – the ones that only appeared when he was really smiling – the tell whether or not he was faking. The other smile was hesitant, but warm – if you didn’t know him it was easy to assume he was fine. Sometimes, even if you did.

One side of his mouth had the beginning of a dimple, and one of his fingers rested against the top of a half-full glass of alcohol as he nodded absently to a woman on his left. It wasn’t a memory – it was real. I blinked when the sound shattered against my ears.

My glass – I’d dropped my glass. I could hear Lee’s confused complaint, but I left him standing there in a puddle of whiskey as the unicorn of my past four years became a reality. I had written a thousand emails – thought of a hundred things I could say. Maybe he’d turn around and hit me, maybe he wouldn’t even remember me, but it didn’t matter. It was him.

A voice shrieked at me to think about it just a second before my fingers touched the cotton of his button-up shirt. I didn’t stop, though, I touched him, and my heart flipped through my throat and directly into my mouth.

His turn felt slow, though that was probably me. Then, I saw him, not his profile, him. The face I’d seen a hundred times in my dreams, and the fact I’d never once done justice. Olive skin smoother than some newborn’s, pale pink lips with a full definition that belonged in a painting before reality, delicate features with a sharp turn angling towards his cheek bones, and round eyes – bluer than I remembered, deeper, sharper, enough to give a sensation of drowning, framed by those same, perfect lashes.

I’d always assumed age would steal that innocence, the delicacy, the warmth, but there was more of it – he looked better. The most beautiful person I’d ever known looked better than every daydream, every picture, every memory. “Wow.”

He blinked, and his mouth turned upwards, and then downwards, and it reminded me of someone who might be about to cry. Did he remember me? It didn’t matter. He was gorgeous, and I’d just embarrassed myself. “I… I’m sorry. I… do you remember me?”

His smile was weak for a moment, and a single laugh escaped him. “Calis. Calis, yeah, yeah, of course I remember you.”

I couldn’t believe it. My heart hurt – all the feelings I’d thought were backburner roared to an angry fire. “Hi, Taylor. It’s been… a while.”

“Yeah, yeah, it has. How have you been? You look good.” He was nervous. I knew because I’d known him since he was three.

I smiled. “I’ve been okay. You look good too, you look great, actually. I…” He had been my best friend for eleven years. I couldn’t believe the exchange between us was so awkward. “I… what are you doing here?”

“Uh, well…”

A man grabbed his waist, and he put a hand on his arm. I glanced up to find the source, and I had to close my mouth to keep from growling. Of all the people – of all the people that could have grabbed Taylor like that. “Claude.”

Taylor glanced up to the much larger man who’d seized him from behind. “Taylor, do you ever do anything without having to sightsee first? This is why I never send you to pick up the takeout.” Claude tilted his head towards me. “Oh, Tsrali. Still keeping Tamara around, are you? How do you know this guy, Taylor?”

A breath left Taylor’s lips, and he smiled up to the man still holding him. “Oh, uh… we knew each other when we were kids.”

“Yeah, I… are you going to school here, Taylor?”

“No, I’m… uh… I’m working, so…”

Claude looked at me thoughtfully. “He just moved in with me.”

“So, you two are…?”

Claude nodded aggressively, and he pulled Taylor closer against his body. The movement seemed to surprise Taylor – some part of me thought he seemed uncomfortable, but maybe that was wishful thinking. “We are. It’s been two months, now.”

“Yes, we are.” Taylor looked at his feet. He was uncomfortable due to the amount of attention being placed on him.

“Come on, baby, you did agree that you weren’t going to stand in one place for the entire night. We can dance.” Claude dragged Taylor backwards by the arm, and I moved forward a little. I couldn’t very well yank him back the other way, though.

He offered me an apologetic smile. “It was good to see you again, Calis.” He offered a half wave before he complied with Claude so that he was no longer being dragged.

My chest had gone from trying to contain my racing heart to assaulting my insides. I felt like it was collapsing onto a singular point where my heart had been destroyed. That didn’t make sense – I had Tamara. Taylor and I had never been a thing.

Lee made his way over to me a few seconds later. “Okay, what the fuck was that? My entire pants are covered in whiskey!”

“I…” I looked at the floor. There should have been a witty remark there about the whiskey, but I couldn’t say anything. I could just picture that surprised expression looking up at me for the first time in four years. “I’m sorry, Lee.”

“Everything okay? Who was that you were talking to?”

“A, uh… a friend from when I was a kid.”

Lee crossed his arms. “The one that inspired you to play the bowling ball in a room full of old people?” I smiled at him, but he drew back. “What’s the matter? Was he rude or something? I can get you another drink.”

“He wasn’t rude. No, he’s never rude.”

“Right. Well, we should probably go talk to Tamara and Katt. They’ve been glaring at us, or Tamara has anyway.”

I shook my head, and I nodded as we headed back towards the women that we’d abandoned. “I should kill you, and you didn’t even get me a drink!” Tamara shoved my chest as I approached, and I caught her arms with a brief laugh.

“Hey, it’s your mother, not mine.”

“I am your girlfriend!” she hissed.

I had to stop thinking about it. He’d probably gotten my emails, and he’d decided to ignore me. He didn’t want anything to do with me because it had been a passing crush for him – one that I had spurned onwards. He had every right to hate me.

I encouraged the rest of them to get more drinks, though the idea of putting more alcohol into my body after that experience could only end in vomit. Yet, as they got their drinks, I ordered another one and downed it. I could tell Lee was concerned, but he said nothing.

I pretended that I wasn’t hyper aware of the two of them dancing, nor was I aware of every move that Taylor made following our brief interaction. “So, Claude got a boyfriend.”

Tamara laughed. “I saw it. He’s cute, too.”

I looked at her for a long moment before I spoke. “Yeah, no, I… I knew him in high school. We were… uh, we were friends.”

Her mouth formed a perfect ‘o,’ and I shrugged. “What a small world. His name is Taylor, isn’t it? He’s so shy. He’s going to absolutely hate my family.”

“At least he has the option to get out,” Katt said.

“Taylor could do better than Claude,” I said. My eyes moved to them for a quick moment before I forced myself to look away again.

Tamara laughed. “A lot of people could do better than Claude, but surely there’s some charm in there somewhere. Maybe they’re perfect for each other.”

“I can say with absolute certainty that they aren’t,” I said.

Tamara dragged me onto the floor for a few more dances, and I was relieved that Claude and Taylor didn’t feel the need to be dancing at the same time. The amount of pain that would have caused in my chest would have been lethal.

I was so fixated on Taylor and where he was that I couldn’t even be bothered to get excited when Katt somehow convinced Lee to dance with her. “I am such a good matchmaker. They’re adorable together.”

I glanced across at them and smiled. “I definitely think he’s into her. I’ll have to ask him later when I’m not mostly drunk.”

“I’ve seen you have much more serious conversation with much more alcohol in you.”

A quick turn back towards Lee and Katt gave me another glimpse of Taylor. He was walking up the stairs, towards the balcony, alone. My eyes widened, and I stepped away from Tamara in the midst of a slow song. “Hey, uh… I’ll be right back, okay? Two seconds.”

She seemed confused, but she shrugged and allowed it. I sprinted up the stairs, turning the same corner that he had to find glass doors that led to a second story balcony. He was nearly to the edge of it as I stepped out into the autumn air. “Taylor!”

He started and turned to face me. “Calis. I just saw you dancing – what are you doing up here?”

The following seemed like a point that should not be brought into conversation, and I just shook my head. “I just wanted some air. I, uh… we got interrupted earlier. I just… I know this is really late, but I… I really am sorry about… everything that happened.”

His smile was strained, and he rolled his eyes before he shook his head and glanced over the balcony. “Calis, please, it was four years ago. We were kids. There’s nothing you need to apologize for.”

“I…” I took a breath. “I… so, you’re working now? I kind of figured you’d go to college. You were always into school way more than I ever was.”

His cheeks flushed as though I’d insulted him. “No, I… I don’t really have the money for it right now, honestly.”

Words scrambled in my throat, and I moved forward. “Oh, well, I wasn’t… I… I just meant I thought you might get a scholarship or something?”

“I got some, but I need money right now. Like more than just a place to stay and eat money. It’s a long story. I want to go, just not right this second.”

My hand slid along the stone wall of the balcony. “Well, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. It’s nothing big. I just need the money for some stuff right now, and then I’ll figure out what I want to do.”

He leaned forward on the balcony, and I bit into my lip. “So, I heard you guys were considerably less good without me in soccer?”

He smiled. “Without us, actually. I couldn’t play after freshmen year.”

That threw me, and I moved back a bit. “What? Why not? You loved soccer. You were amazing at soccer.”

“Lung condition,” he said. “Remember that, it was… anyway, it flared up really badly after freshmen year and didn’t really go away until the end of junior year, and by then, I wasn’t going to try to play again. It would have been silly.”

Taylor had been born prematurely, and his lungs had been underdeveloped. I’d been told to watch him extra carefully when we were younger to ensure that he didn’t overwork them. The condition had faded with time so much that Taylor was able to play sports – I hadn’t expected it would get worse again. “I… I thought you were better.”

“I am. It was just a weird two year stretch.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

I moved to touch his arm, and then I hesitated – not sure if I ought to do that. “Okay. No need to get snippy.”

His smile was less strained as he glanced back at me from his position on the balcony. “I wasn’t getting snippy. You’re such a girl, Tsrali.” He took a breath. “Tamara’s really pretty. How long have you two been together?”

My heart sank a little at the topic. “Six months or so. We go to school together. She’s okay, but I feel like I’m going to the Griswald’s every time we do anything with her family. Pretty sure Christmas is going to lead to a roasted cat or something.”

He laughed. “They’re not that bad. I did, however, have the misfortune of accompanying Claude and his sister to Starbucks. I’ve never seen someone cry over their coffee until that day, actually.”

God, I’d missed him. The smell, the voice, the look, everything about him – he was amazing – listening to him was like listening to my favorite song. “Tamara’s done that, I think. I don’t know why you’re being rude about it – coffee is very serious. Do you know the damage it does to someone if instead of two and a fourth of expresso you give two and a half? A lot – a lot of damage Taylor. If you walk into a Starbucks, then you should know. You have to live and breathe this stuff. I do.”

There were dimples on the sides of his face when he turned away from the balcony. “You’re right. How terrible of me. I just felt sorry for the barista. She acted like she might sue the poor guy.”

“Well, that’s one for the Supreme Court, definitely,” I said. “So, how’d you meet Claude, anyway?”

“Well, I moved up here because I was hoping to go to school in December or soon, so I wanted to be nearby. But, I don’t have a huge source of income, so I needed a roommate. That roommate ended up being Claude, and things just went from there, I guess.”

“Ah, well, he seems great.”

His lips pursed. “I don’t think you really think that.”

“No, no, I think Claude is a wonderful specimen. I… cannot imagine why anyone would not take up the opportunity to live with someone like him.”

He rolled his eyes. “He’s not bad, except for the leaving food in the sink and being generally messy. And the efforts to abuse my employee discount at the department store. You wouldn’t think someone like Claude would be into skinny jeans, but you would be wrong.”

My face must have been amusing because he laughed, and the delivery of his statement eventually eased my terror into laughter. “You work at the mall, then? Retail? That sucks.”

“It was the first job available, and I just wanted to get over here, honestly. I actually am a waiter at Bob’s Diner too, so… two really, super, glorious jobs.”

“Oh, I’ve seen that place a few times.”

He smiled at me woefully. “I highly recommend it if you’d like to have food poisoning as an excuse to miss class for a few days.”

I laughed again. “You know, you are probably being sarcastic, but there are moments when I would not hate that.”

“Then, you’ve never properly experienced food poisoning. I ate there for lunch when I first started working. Yeah…”

My laughter increased at the expression on his face. His eyes were shining beneath the light of the moon, and my heart felt sick. I let my eyes moved to his exposed hands, which were bright red with the cold. “Should we go inside? You seem cold.”

Surprise colored his features, and he shook his head a few seconds later. “Oh, no, no, I’m okay. Claude is totally drunk, and I am not in the mood for anymore slobbery, disgusting kisses. The cold is worth it.”

I moved to touch his hand, and the jolt of cold shocked my own hand. I squeezed them without thinking about it. “You aren’t going to need the food poisoning excuse if you don’t take care of yourself. You can avoid Claude inside, too, you know.”

“The cold disguises me from his super amazing senses and ability to find me no matter where I hide.” He looked down at our hands, and he drew his back as his cheeks changed colors to match his hands. “Obviously.”

“Obviously,” I said. My hand clenched where his had previously been. “I… you know, maybe we could do lunch sometime, or get coffee, and take it very seriously.”

His laugh was quiet, but he lowered his head. “I… Claude probably wouldn’t approve of that. He gets weirdly jealous.”

That annoyed me, but I smiled. “If you don’t want to hang out, you can just say so. You don’t need to make up an excuse. It’s me, Taylor.”

“No, I know. I wouldn’t. But Claude is super weird about that stuff.”

“Right. But, you wouldn’t mind seeing me again, if Claude were to meet with an unfortunate accident?”

He laughed and shoved me a little. “You are not going to orchestrate any unfortunate accidents for Claude! But no, if not for Claude, I… I wouldn’t mind seeing you again. Unfortunately, that is the problem with being gay – no hanging out with the same sex.”

“Or, or, you could be gay and have a normal, sane, boyfriend, and then you could hang out with whoever you wanted.”

“Tamara is okay with you hanging out with other girls?”

I nodded. “Yeah, she’s not the jealous type.”

“Must be nice.”

The words spilled from my mouth before I had a chance to consider them. “Well, I can see why someone would worry about losing someone like you, you’re… well…”

“I’m what?” He narrowed his eyes, and a small smile formed on his lips as though he didn’t quite understand the language I was speaking.

I laughed. “Well, you’re…” He was gorgeous, perfect, funny, smart, hard-working, wonderful, and a thousand other things that would have been perfect to say in that moment. “…you.”

“I’m me?” He moved his weight to his back foot. “Do I strike you as the type to cheat?”

I smiled softly. “Not at all, Taylor.”

The coldness in the air was starting to press into my own shirt despite the rush of heat that came from standing next to him. “I’m glad I don’t come across that way because I wouldn’t.” I could see the subtle way he’d started to shiver.

“Is avoiding Claude really worth hypothermia? I’m starting to doubt the happiness of your relationship!” I didn’t touch him again, despite what my heart told me to do. “How am I supposed to be jealous if you’re not even in a happy relationship?”

He pulled away from the balcony and turned to me with a tilted head. “You wouldn’t be jealous, anyway, unless you’re still trying to get your head on straight. I assumed a six month long relationship would be the end of that.”

My teeth came together in a snap, and I cursed the relevance of Lee’s life advice. “I, well… yeah, I mean, I have. I just… I think I like both.”

His eyebrows rose, and I was thrilled that I’d taken him off guard. That was tapered with the fact that he may find out that I wasn’t exactly public about that. “So, you’re bisexual? So, some guy finally proved to you that hiding it wasn’t worth it, then?”

There it was – the damning statement that I’d been waiting for. “I, well…”

“Calis! What in the world is wrong with you tonight? Is there something in the whiskey?” Tamara’s voice made me jump a little, but Taylor’s smile was gentle as he glanced behind me to find my girlfriend approaching. “Oh, hi there. You’re Claude’s boyfriend, aren’t you?”

Taylor nodded once, and Tamara glanced up to me. “What are you doing out here? You said you’d be right back.”

“I got…” I glanced at Taylor. “…distracted.”

She rolled her eyes, and then she turned to face Taylor, entirely oblivious to the volcanic feelings that he inspired within me. “So, you’re dating Claude, huh? I don’t know how anyone manages to put up with that asshole – so all the kudos to you.”

“Claude’s not so bad. He has his days, but generally, he’s actually fairly likeable.” My jealousy sparked again, but I forced the smile to remain unmoved on my face, which probably looked a bit creepy in retrospect.

Tamara shrugged. “Well, I guess I’ve only seen him on his days. So, is it weird if I ask if you’re gay or bisexual too? Wow, that felt rude, please ignore that I said anything like that just now.”

The smile on Taylor’s face was the warm, fake one he used when he was uncomfortable and didn’t want anyone to know it. “No, no, it’s fine. I’m, uh… I’m gay, actually. I don’t mind talking about it.”

This conversation was steering dangerously towards a topic that I didn’t want to touch. “Yeah, well…”

Tamara ignored me and continued. “Oh, wow. Claude is such a jealous person. I feel like he’d project his bisexuality onto anyone that he dated, so that must be hard for you. Or maybe it’s less hard… I have no idea. I’ve never dated a bisexual.”

Fuck. Of literally every statement she could have made – that was the one she’d chosen. Taylor’s flicker of a glance was enough to prove that I’d made it quite clear that I’d matured none in the four years we’d been apart. He smiled at both of us, then. “Right. Well, it’s not that exciting, I assure you. I should go find Claude, speaking of his jealousy. It was nice to meet you, Tamara.” He turned to me, and I could see some of the emotions that I’d ignored for two years during our friendship. “And good to see you again, Calis.”

He walked away from us without another word on the topic, and if I’d known him less, then I would never have known that he was disappointed. Tamara shivered on the balcony. “Let’s go inside. I am freezing out here! I have no idea how you two stayed out here as long as you did!”

I guided her back into the heat of the reception, and I stared at my feet as my own idiocy played in my head. “So, were you two close when you were younger?”

“Yeah, yeah, we were.”

“What happened?”

My jaw clenched as those final moments played again in my head, and the weeks leading up to those final moments. “We just… grew apart I guess.” Tamara nodded as if this was a normal occurrence, and I glanced over the edge towards the dance floor.

Taylor had found Claude, and he was in the middle of a conversation with his boyfriend and two other people. “Well, Katt was wanting to head back. You about ready to go? Apparently, she has a ton of homework, and I think Lee would be a really good candidate to help her with it.”

I laughed, though my eyes didn’t divert from Taylor’s quiet smile as he interacted accordingly with the people surrounding him. “Yeah, well, good luck getting him to agree to that.”

We left, then, and I knew they noticed how much less talkative I was on the way back, but no one said anything about it. We dropped Katt and Tamara off, and then we headed back to our dorm. Lee didn’t say anything, and I fell asleep fast enough so that he wasn’t tempted as the alcohol started to leave our systems.

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My lecturer went on and on about a topic that I’d heard next to nothing about as I stared at the keyboard in front of me. It had been a long time since I’d opened the folder, but all the emails were still sitting in my sent folder. The number at the bottom read two hundred and twenty one. Surely, he’d seen them, though anything I’d said would likely have been erased by the knowledge that I was still lying about myself.

A voice behind me scared me enough to jump. “You know, the lecture ended half an hour ago. Do you want to go get food?” Lee sat down beside me, in a much more cheerful mood than was normal.

“I should probably eat, yeah.” I glanced across to him. “How was your lab?”

He shrugged his shoulders and waved away the possibility of talking about school. “Cafeteria, come on, let’s go. You already made me wait as it is.” He dragged me upwards, and I closed the laptop on the emails.

I followed him so that he didn’t need to drag me, and we walked along the sidewalk that led to the cafeteria. “The fact that you sat there for a half hour after the class had let out does not speak well to how much attention you were paying.”

I smiled at him. “When have I ever paid attention? When as there ever been a question that I might pay attention?”

We grabbed trays of food and found a table that no one else had claimed yet. I stared at the turkey wrap that I’d grabbed. “So, what were those emails you were looking at?”

I started a little. I hadn’t considered that he’d bring them up, even if he had seen them. “I… just emails that I’d sent to old friends from high school. I saw Taylor, and so I was thinking about them.”

“It looked like they were all to the same person.”

I stabbed my fork unnecessarily into the wrap and glared at him. “You were right. You’re right. I shouldn’t insult bisexuality. I should accept that…” I closed my eyes. “Just…”

“You and Taylor, in high school, I’m assuming the two of you were more than friends?”

“No, we weren’t. Well, I mean… we… he was…” I gritted my teeth. “I wanted to be. I think, no, I did. We were best friends since we were little, and then, I felt… there was something else…” I spoke quietly, ensuring no one around me could hear. “…he just made me happy when we were around, and it felt like more than friends. I wanted to touch him and be near him, and it scared me, because I didn’t know what that meant. He was a guy, and… I was supposed to like… girls.”

The expression on Lee’s face was gentle, and I would have preferred he make a remark about how much of an idiot I was. “So, you never told him?”

“No, well… I sort of told him. One day, after soccer tryouts… he’d found out he made the team, so we went and got something to eat to celebrate, and then afterwards, we were sitting on the field. I was just looking at him – thinking he was amazing, so I tried to say it… say that I was proud of him, but I wasn’t surprised that he’d made the team. He just laughed at me, but I realized that I wanted to say more, so… he was lying on the field, and I just… I kissed him.”

The rest of the cafeteria felt quiet, though some part of me could hear the sounds of people talking and carrying on their lives with no interest in me. “I kissed him, and then I ran off without saying anything. I tried to pretend nothing had happened because it scared me, and he didn’t say anything because he’d never want to make me uncomfortable. Then, when we were alone, I’d hold his hand, or kiss his forehead, but we never talked about it, and when we were in public… I didn’t. So, the more I liked him, the more I… didn’t want to like him. I started sleeping with girls, and it just… he couldn’t…”

This time, the expression was no longer gentle when I looked into the green eyes. “You’re a fucking idiot. You were… you found someone who made you feel like that, and you decided the best thing to do was the sleep with other people?”

“I just didn’t want to be that weird kid!”

“Jesus Christ, Calis. You still like this kid? He was the one you sent all those emails to you, and he – what? Ignored you? I don’t blame him.”

“I don’t blame him, either.” My head fell against the table, and the memories that I’d stirred pelted me like heat during a summer run. “I want to see him again, but he said he couldn’t hang out because his boyfriend was jealous.”

Lee rolled his eyes. “Ah, yes, as if you didn’t stunt him enough in high school, why don’t you rekindle his feelings for you and break up his relationship?”

I slammed my fist on the table. “I don’t want to do that to him. I just want my friend back!”

“Bullshit. I saw the way you looked at him. You have a responsibility to make up for what you did to him, and that means leaving him alone and letting him be happy. He already ignored your damn emails!”

The wrap tasted bitter in my mouth, and Lee’s words felt like a death sentence. “I can be friends with him again. I want him to be happy, I do, and if Claude is his happiness, fuck me, but I can deal with that. But, is it really that bad of me to pursue a friendship with him?”

Lee was eating his own food, and he looked irritated with me. “I’m just not sure that you know how to be friends with him.”

“I have Tamara. I wouldn’t cheat on her.”

His eyes moved away from his food to peer at me. I looked back at him. I had been a jerk to Taylor, and there was no getting around that. “How could he still have feelings for me, anyway? I hurt him. If he ignored my emails, then he’s over it, right? We can be friends.”

“I’m just not sure that you’re doing this for the best reasons.” He looked away. I wanted to strangle him for failing to understand that I wouldn’t hurt Taylor any more than I already had. “And it bothered me because… he said he wasn’t allowed to hang out with guys because Claude got so jealous. Isn’t that weird?”

Lee groaned. “You’re going to pursue this, even though he told you that it’s likely to piss his boyfriend off?”

“He shouldn’t be restricted because of what his boyfriend is or isn’t okay with! The decision not to hang out with me should be his. Claude has no right to impose those restrictions on him!”

Suspicion clouded Lee’s eyes, but he seemed to lighten up. “Well, you’re not wrong. I’m not sure that it falls to you to make sure of that, and the last thing you want to do is screw up his relationship.”

“I’m not going to screw up anything.”

“That’d be a first.” I threw a piece of food at him, and he laughed. “I, uh…” Telling Lee what I intended to do would probably have been met with more disapproval, and so I changed course. “So, you seemed like you had a decent time with Katt?”

He shrugged. “She was actually not bad to talk to. I mean, not in the way that you’re probably thinking, but yes, she was nice.”

“Nice. Okay.”

“Oh, don’t start, Tsrali.”

I saw Tamara’s blonde ponytail a few seconds too late, and I bit back the sigh as she made her way to our table and sat down. “Wow, I never see you guys at lunch!”

Tamara was pretty, and she was fun to talk to, but I’d felt angry with her since what had happened with Taylor. I knew that it was my fault, not hers, but the whole notion of her seemed to be part of the reason I’d lost Taylor. “Well, usually, we hide under the tables until you leave, but we’re a bit distracted today,” I said.

She rolled her eyes at me. “Katt had a really good time Saturday night, Lee. I really appreciate you going with her.”

This made Lee as uncomfortable as Tamara’s existence was doing to me. He rolled his shoulders and smiled thinly. “Right, I… it was fine, I didn’t mind going.”

“You looked like you were having fun,” she said. She glanced at me. “Which is more than I can say for some of us.”

I smiled. “I had fun. I had a lot of fun. I was especially happy to see Claude again. I like that guy so much.”

She slapped me on the shoulder. I thought she might catch onto the fact that Claude’s mention was a direct link to Taylor, but she left it alone. “You didn’t even talk to Claude that much. I thought he was on good behavior, maybe his boyfriend is going to make him a better person.”

Taylor could certainly make someone a better person, but I didn’t like the idea of his talents being wasted on Claude. “Yeah, I don’t know, everyone in my family tends to think that you’ve made me a worse person, Tamara, and that sort of thing is usually genetic.”

“Yeah, personality is genetic. Calis, you’re such a dick. The world is just lucky that your sibling isn’t as awful as you are.”

Lee laughed. “Not true, if Adrian and he had shared the wealth, maybe some of the horribleness would have been distributed, rather than being so concentrated in Calis – so we wouldn’t have to put up with it every day.”

The joke may not have hurt as much if I hadn’t been feeling so sorry for myself given what had happened with Taylor. I had no right to feel that way, given everything that had happened was my own fault. “You two are extremely rude, and I find none of what you’re saying as amusing. I’m not a dick, I am a wonderful, upstanding citizen, and you should both feel privileged to know me.”

They both thought that was funny, and I stood with renewed conviction to pursue the only way I could stop feeling like this. “I’m going to run to the store – does anyone want anything while I’m out? I ask because I’m a good person.”

“Oh, can you pick me up some of that white wine I like so much?” Tamara asked.

“No,” I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me, and I threw my hand up in concession to acknowledge that I would actually collect her request. “See you guys tonight,” I said. She tilted her head up, and I paused for a moment, before I lowered my head and kissed her lightly on the lips.

The drive to the mall was a short one. I hadn’t taken it much, since I had no use for the mall, other than when Tamara forced me to go shopping. However, I was excited, just this once, to be there. He’d said department store, and there was no guarantee that he was working, but I had a feeling in my stomach that assured me he was. I hoped so because the idea of asking about him seemed just too creepy to actually enact.

The mall was noisy as always. The college campus being in town always ensured they had more than enough business to make any introvert feel very out of place. Not that I was an introvert.

I was, on the other hand, very overwhelmed at the amount of stores that the mall contained. I’d never stopped and observed the place as a whole. I started towards one of the bigger stores near the back of the mall, and I tried to ignore the voice in my head that continued to accuse me of being a stalker.

The first store revealed nothing, and the sureness I’d felt on the drive over was beginning to fade into panic and guilt. Three more stores yielded nothing, and I was about to leave with what was left of my dignity before I saw a flash of black hair through some glass. A high-end clothing store that I hadn’t checked yet, and he was there in a black collared shirt and pants.

I had to consciously work not to sprint into the store before I saw him standing at the register with a brunette paying for what appeared to be a lot of clothes. “I fully support department stores getting more clerks like you.” That was flirty if I’d ever heard it.

Taylor smiled, and there was barely any indention on his cheek at all. “Thank you. I’m pretty sure most of the clerks here could have given you the same advice, though.”

The girl leaned forward, and I rolled my eyes, at him and at her. “Well, I mean the advice was good, but I was more talking about the view.”

His eyes widened briefly, and he stared towards one of the windows. “Oh, uh, I… oh… ah… well, thank… you. You… I… I’m sure everyone would say the same about you.” His cheeks were bright red, and the girl’s smile widened.

“You know, we could go somewhere, together, I mean you deserve to see the outfit, since you helped me put it together.”

He floundered, but his hands diligently removed the last plastic from the clothes she’d purchased. He placed them onto the table, and he tried to laugh. “Oh, no, I… I’m… uh, I’m… I’m working, and I’m… uh…”

“It doesn’t have to be right now.” My first instinct was to blame the girl for not picking up the signs that Taylor wasn’t interested, but his sweet demeanor and refusal to believe that he was being asked out on a date was making that a hard bet. “I could give you my number.”

“Y-your number? F-for what?”

I scoffed, and I bit my lips to keep myself from making so much noise that they both turned to look at me. She giggled. “For a date or something? You’re adorably oblivious.”

The blush increased, and he moved backwards a little. “Oh, o-oh. Oh. Oh, I… oh… well, uh… I’m actually… I’m, uh… seeing someone, at the moment. I… I… not that you aren’t extremely attractive, a-and… well, I just…”

The girl laughed again, and she leaned over the counter. “Of course you’re taken, that is exactly my luck. Whatever – if you happen to get untaken, she slid her receipt back across the counter before grabbing her bags and heading towards the door.

He watched her for a few moments before his head jerked to the receipt. He pulled his head to the side and shook it. He let the girl leave the building before he shredded it and threw the pieces into the trash. His breathing was erratic, and he leaned against the counter with his head in his hands.

I decided that was as good a cue as any, and I stopped a foot short of the counter. “Hey, good looking, if I put on something too small for me, would you help me get it off?”

He leapt away from the counter, and he’d halfway started a helpful remark before he realized. “I mean, yes, if you need h—what?” His eyes found me, then, and his mouth dropped. “C-Calis! What-what are you doing here?”

“Shopping, obviously.” I scoffed, and then I eased into the counter much like the girl before me. “You get hit on often?”

He closed his eyes. “N-no, no, I don’t. Really? You just happen to be shopping at the mall, after I told you that I work at a department store in the mall.”

My affronted expression didn’t do much for him. “I need to get a birthday present for my mother. It’s in a few weeks, if you remember.”

“I also remember that you never buy birthday presents more than a day in advance.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “You seem to remember a lot about me. You remember that you happen to mention you worked at a department store, and you remember my method of buying birthday gifts. I might even say you’d missed me.”

His jaw clenched, and a thin smile formed on his lips. “Missed you? I have remembered two things about you, neither of them favorable.”

“I wouldn’t say the department store thing was unfavorable. So, you didn’t miss me?” I knew I shouldn’t be making the jokes given the emails, but I figured if he was content to pretend they hadn’t happened, so was I. “That’s hurtful.”

A cross between a sigh and a scoff escaped his lips, and then he shook his head a few times before he looked at me. “I’m sorry – can I help you find something?”

“Sure, you can help me find the pieces of my heart that you just shattered.”

“Yeah, actually, I think I saw a few of them actually leave the mall. I’m working. Can you just buy whatever you’re here to buy and leave, please? I don’t need the distraction.”

I frowned, and even if there were traces of amusement on his face, the deepest emotion he felt appeared to be hurt. “Fine, I will go purchase the item that I came to buy, and then I will leave.”

“Thank you for that elaborate itinerary. You could always draw out the route that you intend to take around the store.”

I grabbed one of the rolls of paper for receipts and tore off and ending. I proceeded to draw a point labeled cash register and circle it several times. I slid it across to him. “That’s me. I’m confused and lost. Please help.”

He fought with every inch of him to keep the smile off his face, but the appearance of both dimples, and the sharp twist of the corners of his mouth were indicators that I wasn’t bothering him too badly. He grabbed the pen from me, and extended one of the circles down the page before writing the word exit over it. “There. Follow that.”

A quick laugh escaped me, and I tilted my head. “Should I do the circles?” That drew an actual laugh from him. “Because I think the other customers might start to get alarmed…” He bowed his head, and he quit trying to disguise the laugh. “…hi, yeah, police, I’d like to report a man who thinks he’s a shark.”

Taylor’s hand slammed into the counter, and he resumed his war against the very attractive smile on his face. “The shop a few stores down sells swimwear, maybe you can find a rubber fin for your head.”

“Now, you’re just hoping I’ll look ridiculous!”

“I am hoping, Calis Tsrali, that you will stop bothering me while I am trying to do my job.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but a woman interrupted me without the slightest concern that I might be an actual customer. The woman was bigger, and the article in her hand looked like it would barely fit over her pinky toe. The article was pink and purple, and designed to go around much more than that, though not cover much more.

My eyes widened in horror upon the discovery that such a garment existed, let alone that this woman seemed to want to purchase it. My mouth hung open at the continued exposure to it.

“Hi,” she said. “I didn’t see any on the rack, but is it possible you have this in a size up?”

I turned towards him, positioned behind the woman, and I shook my head aggressively. His eyes flickered to me for a moment, and he pressed his lips into a firm line, even as one corner twitched upwards.

This was important. No one should be allowed to wear an article of clothing like that – no one should have been selling one! I shook my head again and again, and for good measure, I cut my hand in the air across my throat.

“I, uh…” Taylor was doing everything in his power not to laugh, but his expression of amused horror was absolutely amazing. “I’m not…” His eyes moved back to me, and then they went back to her. “Uh… l-let me check.” He whirled and darted towards the back of the store.

The woman nodded and turned to me after a few moments, and I did a quick nod and wave towards her, while contemplating the best way to steal that garment, buy it, and burn it. I wandered towards a rack of clothes while she waited for his return, and I saw him shake his head, much to my relief, when he returned.

The woman left, and I intended to walk towards him, but his phone rang, so I stayed back. “Hello?”

“Hi Claude.”

“Yes, yes, I am still at work. I told you I worked until three.”

Pause. I couldn’t see his face. He lowered his voice a bit, though I could still hear him.

“I’ll pick it up after work.” Pause. “I already wasted my break calling twelve different pharmacies, Claude. My head is killing me. I do not have time to run it home before three. That’s in an hour.”

Pause, and Taylor turned a little so that I could see the way his lips were starting to tremble like they did when he was flustered. “I’m not being mean. I have no more breaks. I will get it to you, as soon as possible.”

I didn’t need to hear the end of the conversation, as spying should have been beneath me, though it clearly wasn’t. I started across the mall and found the first coffee shop I could find. It had been four years, and it was entirely possible that he liked entirely different things, but I may as well try.

I gave my order to the barista. Chai tea coffee with one pump of expresso that Taylor hated ordering himself. I ordered it, grabbed the coffee, and returned to Taylor’s store to find him ending his conversation. “Yeah, okay, love you too. Bye.”

He hung up the phone, and I smiled a little when I noticed that he looked for me. There was a tinge of disappointment on his face, and then he closed his eyes, as if he’d made himself angry. I smiled at how entirely easy he was to read. I approached the counter again and set the coffee down. “Did you think I was gone? No such luck, compadre.”

He jumped a little, and then he glanced down at the cup I’d put down on the counter. “You went and got yourself coffee? Couldn’t you just go home?”

“Not me, you.” His eyes widened, and his cheeks flushed.

“Wh-what did you get, then?” He grabbed the cup, opening the lid to investigate what was inside. “Didn’t we just say that coffee is serious and you can’t just order whatever you think someone would like?”

“Well, you liked it freshmen year of high school.”

His eyes moved to me, and his cheeks got a bit redder. He tried to laugh, but he looked too taken aback to do it properly. “That’s…” He took a drink of it. “You… you remembered my coffee order? Yeah, as if that’s not weird.” He smiled and bit his lip – his happiness made my heart flutter more than it should have. “What made you go get coffee, kiss-ass?”

“I’ll accept that. I heard you say you had a headache, and before… when you had headaches… it was usually from caffeine withdrawal.”

“I…” He couldn’t even articulate his joke. “I… yeah, no, I-I couldn’t get any today, and… uh… th-thank you, Calis… really.” The stammering had brought a well of irritation into him, and his fingers drummed on the counters. “But really, why are you here?”

I looked at my own hands for a moment, and then I took a breath. “I wanted to see you.”

His laugh was stale, incredulous, and he looked around the store as if there was another customer, but there wasn’t. “You wanted to see me? Well, that’s a first.”

My fist balled, and I thought about the emails. “Is that what you wanted? You wanted me to show up at your door and beg you to be my friend again?”

Anger flared his nostrils, and his lips pursed at the clench of his jaw. “Yes, Calis, that’s exactly what I wanted. That – nothing other than absolutely that.” He shook his head. “Look, I’m working. Can you please leave?”

I closed my eyes. He was the one with the right to be angry – not me. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t come see you. I’m sorry I was so stupid during senior year, but I do want to be your friend.”

“My friend?” His words were derisive. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t we have this discussion four years ago?”

“Yes, and I never got to make the argument because I didn’t know what to say. I don’t know why you don’t want to be friends with me, but you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I never feel as myself as I do when I’m with you. You are important to me.”

His lips were trembling, and he kept his eyes firmly averted from mine. “Calis, you still haven’t figured yourself out. I know it’s hard for you. I know your parents put a lot of pressure on you to do everything right, and… and I know you aren’t obligated to say anything, but you… I…”

“My parents have nothing to do with it,”

He shook his head. “I promised myself I might consider being your friend again once you’d gotten everything sorted in your own head, but no, you sit there and tell me that you are bisexual, and then you are still lying about it?”

“Why does that matter? Why does that mean we can’t be friends?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re such an idiot. I don’t know, Calis, I don’t know why it means that, but we can’t be friends because Claude doesn’t like me hanging out with other guys. Period.”

I leaned towards him. “You shouldn’t let him dictate what you do.”

“Oh, please,” he said. His eyes kept drifting to the clock and to the entrance, looking for an excuse to stop the conversation between us. “How about you stop letting people dictate what you do by just existing?”

“Look, I’m not hiding it. I’m not lying about myself. I just don’t broadcast it for absolutely everyone to hear. I’m sure you’re aware that it isn’t always accepted with the most poise and grace?”

Finally, he took a drink of the coffee I’d gotten him, and the relief it brought him was clear. “You know, I would understand that, if you hadn’t been dating this woman for six months – that seems pretty serious, do you not trust that she wouldn’t – I don’t know – stay with you if she knew?”

My groan was more dramatic than necessary, and I could tell that I was pushing him further away with every action of this conversation. “The moment hasn’t come up. She’s a girlfriend, and sorry, I haven’t just randomly found the time to be like ‘oh, hey, I sleep with other guys on occasion.’”

His face whitened, and he licked his lips briefly as he played with a piece of plastic left over from one of the wraps he’d put clothes in. “You’ve slept with them, then? Guys?”

“Yeah, not a lot, just a few of them.”

His smile was strained, but there were dimples on both corners of his mouth. “Did you have to google that too?”

My cheeks flushed, and I narrowed my eyes at him. “That’s none of your damn business, and I’ll thank you to stay out of my affairs.” His eyes moved across to me, and I smiled. “No, I didn’t google. I wasn’t that worried about impressing them.”

“So, what happened there? Did you just agree to keep that under wraps?”

“I guess. It’s all been one-time things. Nothing serious. My friend Lee keeps prying and even asking if I actually like them, or if it’s just a curiosity thing… and maybe I’m not bisexual.” The hurt in his eyes made me flinch. “I mean… the only guy I’ve ever… that it’s ever been more than… was…”

“That was probably just because we were friends, honestly… you never did know how to navigate your emotions very well.”

“No.” The response was weak, despite the screaming protest in my mind that no statement had ever been more wrong. “That wasn’t it.”

He glanced up at the clock, and a girl strode through the doors at precisely the same moment. Her appearance prompted him to finish the entire cup of coffee and grab his jacket from beneath the counter. “Hey, Stella. Nothing’s really pending. I’m probably going to go.”

She nodded her head, and the blonde girls on her head bounced with her. “Cool, is it slow today?”

“Fairly,” he said. He moved out from behind the counter, and she took his place. Her eyes found me, and the smile on her face was flirty.

“Did you need help?” she asked.

My eyebrows rose briefly. She was good looking, though no one could have made the black uniform look as good as Taylor did. “No, I’m okay, thanks,” I said.

“You’re cute. Do you go to school around here?”

Taylor was out the door before I could even respond. I shook my head and bounded towards the door muttering a quick goodbye. I caught up to him a stores later. “Wow, run much?”

“I have to pick something up and get it home. Claude has been waiting all day. Besides, I didn’t want to stop you flirting with her.”

I frowned. “I was not flirting with her.”

“I really don’t care if you were. I just didn’t want to stop her. Stella’s really attractive, and I’m sure she’ll sleep with you if you ask nicely.”

My hands flourished outwards, but the pause cost me ground that I couldn’t afford. “Why are you being so hostile? Firstly, I’m in a relationship, so I wouldn’t sleep with anyone, and secondly, I came there to see you – not Stella.”

“Great – you saw me. Now, you can leave.”

He pulled his jacket over his shoulders as stepped into the autumn air which was only a bit warmer than the reception on Saturday. “I want to get coffee – or lunch – it doesn’t have to be long. Claude doesn’t even need to know.”

“Yes, because I want to hide things from my boyfriend. That isn’t a recipe for disaster.”

The parking lot felt far too small, and his steps were light and purposeful as ever. “It isn’t like I’m asking you on a date. I want to hang out.”

“No.” He stopped in front of an old white civic, and he glared at me as if surprised that I’d followed him all the way out to his car. “You’re being a stalker. Just leave me alone, seriously, Calis. You left me alone for four years, so I’d say you can do it again.”

My mouth fell open. “Well, that isn’t entirely fair, Taylor.”

“Right – right, I’m sorry. I’m sure college kept you exceptionally busy. I’m not hanging out with you. I cannot do this right now. Claude and I just moved in together, and if he sees me going to eat with some other guy…”

I grabbed his wrists, and his expression was affronted. “Is this really about Claude? If this is about me, and what I did to you, tell me that.”

“No, it’s Claude, and also, it is vaguely ridiculous that you still haven’t come to terms with who you are and are still hiding it.”

“So, you really don’t want to see me anymore? At all?”

His blue eyes flickered, and there was a lengthy pause as he tried to catch his breath. His tongue moved around his mouth, and I could see the beginnings of the ‘n’ on his tongue, but he couldn’t make it. “I have to go, Calis.”

I smiled, and a breath escaped my mouth when I opened it at the rush of excitement that came with his inability to say it. “Tell me, Taylor, please. If you don’t want anything to do with me, if you have no interest in seeing me, then say it right now, and I will walk out of your life and leave you alone. I promise – I’m not going to get angry with you.”

He opened his car door without looking at me. I pressed on the car door, trying to encourage a more tangible answer. He jerked in spite of me. “Calis, let go of the car door. I have somewhere to be!”

Pulsing desperation moved through my body and refused any sort of obedience. “Please, be honest with me. These past two years – you haven’t wanted to see me?”

“Obviously, I’ve… that’s not the point. The point is that I don’t know that… the point is that Claude would kill me.”

“I am really trying to understand if that’s an excuse, or if he is the real reason that you don’t think you can have friends. Taylor, you know if you get in this car and drive away without being honest with me, then you’re going to see me again. You know me.”

His jaw clenched for a moment, and I released the door to allow it to swing backwards a bit. His eyes turned to me for a moment with a thousand emotions raging behind the glass. He closed them, and he pulled himself into the car. “Bye, Calis.”

He shut the door, and I didn’t stop him. I watched him drive off, and I bit down on my lip as my lips formed an expression between a smile and a cry. I laughed again, in the middle of the parking lot. He wanted to see me again, and he was going to see me again.

~

I opened the door of my dorm to the sound of Lee and Tamara in the middle of a very serious argument. “I am helping her do homework. What universe do you live in to have to refer to that as a date? We both had to take the class.”

“I just think it’s interesting that you’ve never helped any of the other engineering students, that’s all.” Tamara was sitting on her couch with her foot up on the coffee table, and Lee was standing near the door of our section of the dorm.

Lee growled. “It isn’t like I get letters upon letters asking for my assistance on people’s assignments. I help Calis all the time. Calis, do I not help you with your homework all the time?”

I smiled. “Actually, I’m pretty sure that you’ve refused to help me at all on several occasions.”

“Refusing to give you answers, and refusing to help you, are two entirely different things. I highly doubt that Katherine is going to ask that I give her the answers to her assignment. She seems more respecting of her education than Calis, or you, Tamara.”

The argument continued as I stepped past the threshold to find one of our suitemates enthralled in the television despite the war being waged around him. “If you do not stop with your nonsense, then I am going to call her and tell her that I can’t come.”

“You wouldn’t do that because you want to spend time with her.”

The sound that came from Lee’s throat was bestial, and I smiled as I looked between the two of them. Lee glared at me. “What do you look so happy about, you enormous ass? This isn’t a date. In no universe, ever, would it ever be considered a date.”

That wasn’t the source of my happiness, but I didn’t think that I’d tell him that. I shrugged my shoulders instead and turned my attention to our suitemate. “What are you watching, Leif?”

He glanced back at me, as if his name had yanked him from the trance he’d entered to avoid hearing any unnecessary conversation. “Huh? Oh, it’s a crime show. I’m not really watching, though, since I’ve been hearing about dates and engineering for the past half hour.”

“You have a TV in your room, Leif,” Tamara said.

“Yeah, and you don’t even live here, so I will not be kept from the large TV in the living area just because you want to hassle Lee about some girl that he likes.”

“I don’t like her! I mean – I don’t like her as more than a friend! I think she’s perfectly tolerable as far as friendship goes. Far more so than anyone standing in this room currently!” He took a step towards our door, and Leif laughed.

I inclined my head. “Does that include you, Lee? You are standing in this room?”

“Oh, shut up. Where have you been, anyway?”

That was his revenge. He likely knew exactly where I’d been, and he’d likely established that I hadn’t brought back anything from my shopping venture. “Oh, yeah, Calis, did you not get the wine that I asked you to get?”

My eyes widened. “I, uh… I couldn’t find what I was looking for, and so I ended up getting distracted. I was frustrated, and I guess I just forgot… I can go back out if you really need it, Tamara.”

Lee’s voice was snide. “You don’t look frustrated in the least. I get the feeling that you found exactly what you were looking for.”

A groan came from Tamara to mask my embarrassed scoff. “Whatever, it’s fine, I’ll just get it on the way home. You are so scatter-brained, Calis.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Yeah, seriously, Calis, you loser. I would have needed the wine just to cope with the fact that I was dating someone was unattractive as Tamara.”

Her teeth gritted, and she moved across the room to hit Leif hard on the shoulder. Lee shook his head and disappeared into our room. “Unattractive, really? Well, you’re certainly one to talk, Leif. I’ll probably have nightmares tonight from having spent this much time with you.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I’m beautiful.”

Leif’s laugh was loud, and he looked back towards the TV. “Maybe you’re beautiful in the same universe that Lee and Katherine are not going on a date.”

“You’re just mad because I’m so far out of your league.”

He shook his head, and his eyebrows rose when he glanced across at me. “Yeah, Tsrali, how did you get so lucky?”

There were several ways that I could have answered that question, but I just smiled and shook my head. Tamara answered for me. “Because he’s not an absolute douche with no notion of how to treat a girl.”

“He forgot your wine, though. I’d say that’s worth a breakup.”

“I’m sure you’d like that, Leif. Then, maybe you and Calis could date.” The comment sent a sort of jagged pain up my spine when I recalled the hurt on Taylor’s face when I’d talked about my experience with men.

Leif leaned back in his chair. “I’d date him before I’d date you.”

“Ugh, Calis, I can’t sit here with this asshole anymore. If you want to go eat later, just text me or something. Thanks for failing to get my wine.” She walked across the room towards me, and I kissed her on the cheek when she reached me. “See you later.”

I waved, but I said nothing. Leif looked at me as though I had turned purple, and then I retreated into the sanctuary that should have been my own dorm room.

“Did you really go stalk him? Please, tell me I’m wrong, and that you didn’t go find Taylor on some weird whim that you had?”

“Okay, you’re wrong, I didn’t go find Taylor on some weird whim that I had.”

Lee fell onto his own bed, and he sighed. “You’ve absolutely lost your mind.”

“He said he wanted to see me again, though.” I paused, knowing that Lee would never understand any of what I was going to say. “Well, he didn’t say that he did, but I told him to tell me if he didn’t because I’d leave him alone, and he didn’t say anything.”

“Oh. My. God. You are absolutely off the deep end! Do you understand how absolutely like a stalker you sound?”

Frustration ran up my spine, as I considered what had happened. “Taylor would have told me if he didn’t want to see me. I know him. He… Lee, please, I’m not stalking him. I would never do anything to make him uncomfortable. I begged him to give me a reason not to, and he didn’t.”

“Calis…” Lee’s eyes softened for a moment, and then he shook his head. “Calis, you realize that there is a large possibility that you kicked this kid out of your life, and he doesn’t want back in it? You probably hurt him.”

“I did hurt him. I know I hurt him, and I want to make it up to him.”

The passion behind his statements had subsided, and he let his head rest against his pillow without further goading. “You’re still in love with him.”

The statement jarred me, and I nearly fell out of the seat I’d been about to take. “I… I… I… I was never in love with Taylor, so it would be… it would be impossible for me to still be…” I could still feel the rush I’d felt grabbing his arm that day.

I could still feel my hands on his face at the soccer field, and the fire that had been lit inside me when our lips met one another. A feeling I’d been chasing with every relationship after. I wasn’t in love with him, though. I had always been attracted to him, but I couldn’t be in love with him. If I was in love with him, then my life would…

“I’m not. I’m not in love with Taylor.”

“Okay,” he said. He didn’t argue the point further, and that only meant that he felt no need to argue it further because he felt secured in his rightness.

The notion was bizarre, and I refused to entertain it further. He could think what he wanted. “He was my best friend, and I want to make sure things are alright. That’s all.”

He said nothing further to me. I assumed he was angry over my refusal to acknowledge his rightness. “Are you going to go eat with Tamara tonight? Or are you going to call and tell her that you’re bisexual, oh, and by the way, you might be in love with another guy and he’s the reason you forgot her wine?”

I grabbed the TV remote and flipped it on. There was zero reason to respond to him when he was behaving this way. The show on the television was a crime show, and it was enough to make me forget that roommate was an absolute ass for a bit.

Eating with Tamara didn’t seem like the best idea, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to sit in the room with Lee the Judgmental for too much longer, either. “I thought you were going to help Katt with her assignment?”

“That’s not until tomorrow,” he said.

“How did Tamara talk you into that?” Idle conversation was better than sitting in silence and being fully aware that he was thinking terrible thoughts about me.

He sat upright. “Tamara didn’t talk me into it. Katt asked, and I told her I would. There’s nothing weird about it.”

“Your defensiveness speaks for itself.”

“I could say the same about you.”

I fell back onto my bed, and I wished that the crime show had never ended. My mind drifted back to Taylor. The last thing I wanted was to screw up his life, but I did want him to be in mine again. Maybe that wasn’t fair of me.

The fact of the matter was that he knew me well enough to know that I would leave him alone if he asked, and he hadn’t asked. “It’s really awkward when you’re sulking,” Lee said.

“I’m not sulking. I don’t know what to say because you’re making this an enormous issue between us.”

He leaned towards my bed. “I’m not making it an enormous issue. I just want you to make sure that you don’t hurt him or hurt yourself in trying to get back someone you already lost.”

The idea that he was already lost punched a hole in my heart, and I looked away from him. “I’m not stupid. I’m not going to get hurt, and I’m sure as hell not going to hurt him. I’ve done enough of that for one lifetime.” I looked at him. “If he really seems like he wants me to leave, then I will go, gladly. He just seemed… I don’t know… weaker than he used to.”

“Weaker?”

I shook my head. “I want to find some stuff out. If I can get him to agree to hang out with me, then maybe you can meet him and tell me if I’m crazy.”

He was silent for a moment, and then he laughed. “Sure, if you manage to get him to do that, then I would be glad to tell you whether or not you were officially out of your mind. Though, if he agreed to hang out, then I think it would already be clear that you weren’t.” He paused, and his arms flailed. “That was not a challenge!”

I shook my head. “I’m not treating this like a game, Lee. I’m really not. Taylor has never been a game to me.” My teeth snapped together. “I am also, however, not in love with him! I just want to… make up for the things that I did.”

Lee quirked an eyebrow. “That isn’t how the first sentence sounded, but sure, I’ll let you live in your delusion.”

~

Tamara chipped away at her salad as she sat across from me in the restaurant that we’d elected to visit. She hadn’t been directly angry, but there was an air about her during the morning that told me that I’d made a mistake in not asking her to dinner the night before. Therefore, we were eating lunch now.

“I almost drank that entire bottle of wine,” she said. “You really should have called me because I had such a terrible hangover this morning.”

My own food seemed less and less appetizing with every bite I’d taken. “I didn’t sleep well, either, if it’s any consolation. I’d have asked you out, but I didn’t feel well. I had… horrible dreams all night.”

Her brow furrowed. “You know, I think that can be a sign of a fever – do you feel achy or anything?”

I shook my head. I had an inkling into why I felt bad, mostly because I knew what the dreams had been about. “It’s nothing serious. Don’t worry. If it was serious, then I wouldn’t have asked you to lunch.”

A smile brightened her features, and she took another bite of her salad. “I really think Katt and Lee make a good match. I know she doesn’t necessarily need a guy in her life, but if the two of them work well together, then why not?”

“They could always break up, and it be catastrophic to both of them.” Her eye twitched for a moment, and I smiled. “But I’m probably just being negative.”

“Katt and Lee are both level-headed people, and if they break up, then I am sure that both of them would be able to handle it.”

That was true, at least. I shrugged to indicate my agreement. “What would you do if you and I broke up?”

She started. “Well, that was not at all abrupt or ominous. Why? Are you planning on breaking up with me?”

I chewed my lip before I shook my head. “No, but we were talking about breakups. I was curious.”

Intrigue colored her gaze as she peered at me across the table. “I guess we were.” She leaned back, then. “I don’t know. I mean, it would suck, but you have to move on after these kinds of things. I’ve dealt with breakups before. What about you?”

“More or less the same.” I wondered if that wasn’t a sign that maybe we weren’t such a great couple. Some part of me felt like a couple should at least fear the prospect of a breakup. “Sorry if that was a weird topic.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s good to talk about those kinds of things every now and then.” Her smile was wistful, and I wondered if she hadn’t just had the same thought as me.

We ended lunch, and I dropped her off at her apartment. She didn’t ask me where I was going, though I’d already prepared the blatant lie. I parked outside the mall, and my eyes found the same car that had driven away from me the day before. The time was fifteen till three, and I’d have to hope he had the same shift as yesterday.

The first fifteen minutes, I sat in my car and listened to any music I thought might calm me down. Then, I milled around the front of the mall near the fountain as I waited for him.

Half past the hour, just when I was starting to think I needed to go in, he walked out in a black hoodie and jeans. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and I was contemplating how to approach him when one of his feet seemed to catch on thin air. He lost his balance entirely, and I lunged forward to catch him about the waist. “Taylor.”

His eyes had squeezed shut to prepare to hit the ground, and then he opened his eyes to find my arms and then my face. He blinked a few times, and he worked his jaw as a bright red spread across his cheeks. “I… Calis?”

“Hi… are you okay?”

“Th-thanks… I thought maybe you’d taken the hint and left me alone.” His voice was so light – almost relieved – and then he jerked away from me. “But, you are an absolute stalker. How long have you been out here?”

My heart was racing at the feel of my arms around his waist. My throat felt knotted with the pressure from the beating, and my fingers twitched with the desire to have him back there. He’d been so light.

“Not that long. You got off at three yesterday, so I thought I’d take a chance.” He rolled his eyes and started towards his car. I followed. “I didn’t want to bother you while you were working again.”

He kept walking, though my pace was easily enough to match his. “I don’t have time for this today, Calis.”

“So, you have somewhere to be every day after work, then? Does your boyfriend time you, or what? Because that doesn’t sound like a great relationship.”

He snarled his annoyance with me, and his pace increased a little bit. “Thanks for your commentary – please, feel free to call the complaint hotline for further concerns. It’s 1-800-FUCK-OFF.”

The insult stung, but I laughed. “I just want to go eat, get coffee, anything – it wouldn’t take more than thirty minutes.”

The pace only increased, and I was sure that I wasn’t getting anywhere today. “I already gave you my answer to that, and I don’t understand why you keep bringing it up!”

“I gave you the opportunity to tell me to get away from you, and all you did was stare at me and drive off, Taylor. All I want to do is make sure that… I just want to be friends with you. I want to make sure… can you just stop for three seconds?”

He whirled on me, and I saw the way he reached for his head for a single moment before his hand pulled back to his waist. “I can’t. I cannot stop for three seconds to humor you and whatever quest you’ve put yourself on. I am fine. We are fine. But we cannot be friends, period.”

“Is your head hurting again? There’s a coffee shop literally ten feet from where you work.”

A snarl was his answer as he spun and headed towards his car again. I followed him, desperate to make him stop. “Just talk to me. We don’t have to go anywhere. I just want to know how you are.”

“I’m fine,” he said.

We were at his car. “What about your Mom?”

His jaw clenched, and he glared towards the pavement. There was a break in his voice when he answered. “Fine.”

He moved towards the car, but I blocked him. “I know you’re lying. We were best friends. You can tell me. I know she couldn’t have been happy about you moving all the way out here.”

A thin line formed in place of his lips, and there was a shimmery quality to his eyes before he spoke. “She… got cancer. It was treatable, but the surgery took every bit of what we had saved for college or anything else, and it’s still not paid off.” He paused. “I didn’t want Raleigh to drop out of school, and so I told her I’d work to help her get it paid off, since she can’t.”

The flood of information startled me, and my limbs felt too heavy to keep moving. My fingers twitched. “Wh-what? When? She’s okay? Are you okay?”

“She’s fine. It’s over now. We just have to get the debt handled.”

The notion that he was working two jobs had been bothering me, though he’d always been such a hard worker that I hadn’t realized that there would be a more horrifying reason behind both of them. “That’s… Taylor, I’m so sorry. I… you… you put aside scholarships to help out your brother? That was… awesome of you.”

He shook his head. “He’s halfway finished. He didn’t need to drop out. I told Mom that I’d help, and she demanded that if I was going to do that… that I had to move out here, and… be near the college. That was the only way she’d accept it. Raleigh is there for her if she needs anything. I-it’s not a big deal. It’s a delay. I’ll get it paid off, and then go to college. Not a big deal.”

It was a big deal, but Taylor had always had a habit of making his big deals into small deals for the rest of the world. “You’re wrong. But… I-do you need anything? Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yes, Calis, you can wave your magic wand and magic away the debt. No, there’s nothing you could do – what would you do?”

“I don’t… know. I just… I’m sorry I wasn’t there. You could’ve told me.” I’d asked him a thousand times how things were in those damn emails, and never once had he responded to me with any of this.

He snorted. “Right. Because that wouldn’t have just looked like a vie for sympathy. I’m fine, Calis. It’s all fine.” His hand moved to his temple. “I really need to go home.”

“Are you okay? You said your lung thing had gotten bad, and you had a headache yesterday too.”

He sighed, dramatically. “I just said I was fine. I don’t have a headache. I’m just annoyed with you.” The tension along his jawline said otherwise. “The lung thing was during high school. Totally fine now.”

My body tingled with disbelief, and my hands clenched. What if he was lying? I’d left him alone to deal with so much – his health had to have suffered for it. “You have to take care of yourself. You felt pretty light. Are you eating?”

“Oh, don’t start. You don’t get to play mom anymore. I eat plenty.”

That meant that he wasn’t eating – at least not enough. He likely hadn’t been able to get caffeine, either, given that he seemed to have another headache. “I’m not playing mom. I want to make sure that you don’t run yourself ragged. You’re working two jobs, and that isn’t something most people do lightly.”

“I’m taking care of myself. I wouldn’t be so stupid as to screw up my health and screw my own mother over.” His lips pursed, and he turned towards his car, pressed his arm against it as he bowed his head. “You really can go away.”

“But you don’t want that,” I said.

“I want…” He jerked towards me, and his eyes widened before he turned to stare at the pavement again with a flush on his cheeks. “I *don’t* want to screw up my relationship. I don’t want to end up hurt over you again.”

“Hey, I’m not going to hurt you, Taylor.”

His laugh was breathless and cold. “Right, of course you’re not. Where would I get such a crazy notion?”

“I know I messed up before. I’m sorry.”

He closed his eyes. “You didn’t mess up.” A sigh pulled from his lips. “Maybe you did, but it wasn’t all your fault.”

I touched his shoulder, and my body purred at the physical contact. “I missed… talking to you. I really did.”

His laugh broke a little, and he shook his head. “I need to go, Calis.” He pulled away from the car, and he looked at me. Our mouths weren’t more than an inch apart, and I didn’t move to step away from him. “Thanks for catching me.”

“Do you work tomorrow?”

His teeth gritted, and he squeezed his eyes shut. His head shook, which I thought was a no, before he spoke. “Yes. I do. Are you – just… I can’t hang out. I can’t. I have to go.” He got into his car, then, and I didn’t stop him as he shut the door.

Still, he’d opened up a bit, and I knew what I needed to do for the next time I saw him, and any subsequent times I saw him after that.

~

The amount of times that I’d pulled Lee out onto an empty soccer field to kick a ball around had dropped significantly in the past year, but he didn’t resist when I yanked him onto the field when I returned from my visit.

The ball felt natural between my feet, and he humored me, despite his general dislike of anything relating to sports. “So, you actually took Tamara out today. That was nice of you.”

I dribbled the ball for a few feet, stopped, and kicked it by him to slam into the upwards half of the goal. He sighed and moved to retrieve it. “I think she didn’t like that I hadn’t called her to go out to dinner before.”

An awkward kick on his part brought the ball back to me, and I obligingly passed rather than shooting it by him this time. “And then you went to see Taylor?”

My cheeks flushed, and I nearly missed the ball when he kicked it back to me a little harder. “Just for a few minutes. His mom apparently had a major surgery, and he isn’t going to college so he can help her pay it off. I… can’t believe I missed that.” The ball barely reached Lee from the lack of force I put behind it.

“Well, you can’t completely blame yourself for that. You did send him two hundred something emails. Did he bring those up?” He kicked the ball back with less force.

I shook my head. “No, and I haven’t either. I can only assume that he got them, and that he wasn’t overly impressed with just email.” I took the ball down the field a minute before I turned around and kicked it back to him.

“You never tried to call?” Soccer held no interest to him, so he never did more than kick it back to me.

“I did. I got some old lady who could barely understand me. I called her a few times, and I finally realized that the number had been changed. I almost offered to take her to lunch.” I kicked it back. “And I mentioned in the emails that I’d tried to call him.”

Lee shook his head. “Well, I can see wanting an in-person visit. I know you moved over one hundred miles away, but if you really were sorry, then it wouldn’t have killed you to go back, even if your parents had moved.”

I accepted the ball when it came back to me, and I placed my foot on top of it. “I… I thought about it. I even got in my car a few times, but I just… I would play the scene in my head and just embarrass myself. He wasn’t answering the emails – what if he got a restraining order or something?” I kicked the ball back to him, and he missed it due to his brief laughter.

“Because no way he’d get a restraining order with you staking out his place of employment.” He kicked it back after a brief jog back to his position across from me.

Embarrassment shot through me, and I gritted my teeth before I kicked the ball hard enough so that it sailed into the ball again. “It was different – I saw him, and it was like he wanted to see me too. I had this image of him in my head – just entirely fine and okay and better off without me. Then, I-I saw him, and he wasn’t the happy kid that I remembered… I just… want to help him.”

He snorted at me before he was forced to retrieve the ball again. “That, or maybe you just saw him and realized how much you still liked him, so it didn’t matter if he was okay or not.”

“That’s not it, Lee. I wouldn’t do that to him.” I stopped the ball. “He deserves to be happy, even if it’s not with me. I-I don’t even want it to be with me.”

“How is living in that much denial, Tsrali?” He turned his head towards a group of freshmen laughing too loudly at one of the tables near the café. “I’m supposed to help Katherine with that assignment soon.”

“Oh, yeah, Tamara’s matchmaking scheme. So, jokes aside, you really aren’t interested in her cousin at all?”

His kick sent the ball slamming towards my face, and rather than step aside, I caught it with my hands. “I have no interest in dating, period. I have a degree to focus on, and if you’re any indication, dating is just an enormous distraction.”

“You aren’t like me, you know, you’re always the first one to point that out.” I dropped the ball and kicked it back to him. “So, are you saying that you do like her?”

“I’m not saying anything. I’m saying she’s fine. I have no problems with her, but I do have a problem with dating being the center focus of my life, just like I have a problem with dating your girlfriend’s cousin. That’s awkward.” He kicked it back, and I was happy when it didn’t nearly clobber me this time.

I kicked the ball into the air and bounced it off my knee a few times. “I don’t see what my girlfriend has to do with any of it. If you like her, you like her.”

“I don’t like her as in romantically, and it matters because it feels like I’m playing into a setup, and that isn’t how I do things.”

I scoffed. “That’s the most illogical thing I think you’ve ever said. Just because Tamara is involved, you’re refusing to even entertain the notion of a girl that you seem to have a lot in common with.”

“Don’t lecture me. We both know that in this relationship, I am the one who lectures, and you are the idiot!” He jerked his head away from me, and then he kicked the ball towards me with as much force as he could muster.

The ball slammed into my knees, and I caught it beneath my foot again before I laughed. “I’m not contesting that, but wouldn’t it be nice to think that some of your lectures are starting to pay off?”

Skepticism played across his eyes. “If that were the case, then you wouldn’t be stalking your high school flame.”

“My high school flame is not a matter on which I will listen to anyone, and that is because relationships should have nothing to do with anyone else!”

He knelt and plucked the ball from the ground with a smirk. “And now you’ve admitted that you want it to be a relationship!”

“Friendships are relationships!”

The ball fell to the ground before it was returned to me, and he shook his head. “Well, I do have to go. Just consider what you’re doing, Tsrali. This kid may have a great relationship, and even if he does still have feelings for you, would it really be fair to ruin that for him?”

My answer died on my lips as he started away from me. I glared towards the goal on the other side of the field. “I have no intention of ruining any great relationship for him,” I said to no one. “I don’t want to hurt him anymore!”

The final syllable saw my foot crash into the ball, and it sailed clear across the field to slam into the back of the net. The shot was good, and it should have thrilled me, but I just snarled my distaste as I thought of my past.

~

The prattling on the other end of the line felt endless. She’d been talking for, and I’d timed it, seven minutes without so much as a singular word of input from me. I’d pulled the phone away from my ear on several occasions to spare myself even a few precious seconds.

“Your father says he called Professor Ingram yesterday, and he said that you hadn’t been staying after class or anything extra. You know you have to talk to them if you’re going to get a really good recommendation letter, which are going to need if you’re going to law school!”

My hand clenched the steering wheel, and I slammed my head back against the headrest of my seat. “Why would I hang out with him? I have a perfect average in his class. There’s no reason he wouldn’t give me a good recommendation.”

“A good recommendation isn’t enough, Calis,” she said.

I mocked her without words, and I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I’ll talk to him tomorrow after class.” This brought a sense of relief to her voice.

“Thank you. We only want to make sure that you succeed. Are you going to bring your girlfriend home with you over Thanksgiving? Your father really liked her. Interior design is such a good profession for a girl like her.”

My mouth twitched downwards. “I… I don’t know. It will depend on her plans for Thanksgiving. We haven’t really talked about it.”

I glanced across to Tamara, who gave me a sympathetic squeeze from the passenger seat of the car. “Well, you need to make plans that aren’t just the day before, Calis. Your brother is bringing his wife, so it would be nice if you brought her – the family is starting to wonder if you’re going to be able to maintain a relationship.”

My lip hurt when I realized that I was biting it. “I’m twenty-two. I don’t need to get married yet.”

“Twenty-two is plenty old enough to have a girl in mind. You don’t need to be dating someone who you don’t think you could marry.”

Annoyance slashed through me, but I took a breath. “Right, well, I’ll talk to her about her plans. I need to go, though. Class starts in fifteen minutes.”

“Okay, make sure you talk to the professors. Of all the classes, not just the law-oriented ones. You have to make a good impression. I love you, sweetie, talk to you soon.”

“Yeah, love you too, Mom.”

I hung up the phone and eased it into the cupholder between Tamara and myself. She said nothing for a moment. “Nothing like some good, old-fashioned pushy parents to start the day off right.”

“What am I supposed to talk to Professor Ingram about? Hi, Professor, that vest you’re wearing is a particularly lovely shade of brown.”

She giggled at the thought, and then she shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Just talk to him about an assignment. Just wing it. It really does help to talk to them, or that’s what my parents tell me. They don’t know much about interior design, but they sure know how to pressure me to sweet-talk my professors.”

“I think I might prefer that they had no idea about my prospective career, sometimes.”

“Okay, well, thanks for the ride, baby. Tell me what Lee says about Katt if you get a chance to ask. She seemed absolutely bubbly yesterday!” Tamara leaned forward and kissed me on the lips before she slid out of my car without further instruction. I started to drive away, but she gestured for me to roll down the window. “Oh, and tell your suite mate that he owes me lunch. He came into McDonalds yesterday while I was there, and he literally ate my entire plate of fries.”

I laughed. “Did he at least say hello?”

“Not really!”

She pulled away from the car, and I drove away from her class’s building with a long sigh. I had no class in fifteen minutes – it had been rescheduled to another day for the rest of the year, and it was fortunately one of the professors that my parents weren’t best buddies with.

I headed towards the mall again, stopping on the way to pick up the food I wanted, and I arrived there at eight thirty. I had no idea what time he started, but the store didn’t open until nine, so I was hoping he was opening the store.

My timing was perfect. His car pulled into the parking lot not thirty seconds after I had. He pulled himself out of his car with a quickness, and his phone was pressed into his shoulder as he carried on a conversation.

Excitement laced through my system, and I got out of my car. I didn’t interrupt him, and so I could hear his conversation. “Yeah, no, it’s two separate prescriptions. One’s a… yeah, no, they’re both in my name.”

A pharmacy again. I was immediately worried.

“No… no, I’m not trying to refill that one. That’s for my Mom. These are mine.” His words were clipped, and he had four bags in his hands that kept him from being able to hold his phone. “Yeah, I know… no, I know… I know. No… yes… yes, no, I need both of them.”

He sighed. “No, I’m only taking one a day. Yes. I know this one isn’t quite ready, but can I just pick them both up? I’m going by there for the PAH medicine today, so I just...” His jaw clenched. “No, I know it’s controlled. But I’m not abusing it. I just need to pick it up early.”

Eavesdropping felt mean, and so I moved towards him and took three of the bags he was holding. He looked prepared to defend himself, and his eyes widened when he saw me. He was able to grab the phone, and he kept walking despite the obvious shock. “W-well… no, you know… nevermind. I’ll, uh… I’ll just get the other one today.” He looked nervous, and I was immediately worried he was afraid of me. “It’s fine. Yes, that one. Okay, thanks.”

His breath shook when he hung up the phone. Why did he seem so scared – trembling as though someone was going to hurt him? I stepped back. “Hey…”

Then, he looked at me, and his entire countenance changed. There was no fear, no trembling, and he narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing here, Calis?”

I couldn’t get the fear out of my mind completely, and so I thought I’d have to proceed with caution. If he was allowing me to stay around because he thought I’d get violent or angry, then I didn’t want that. “I brought you breakfast because I figured you weren’t eating it.”

I extended the bag to him. His mouth fell open as he stared at the bag of food I’d purchased and the smoking cup in my hand. “Y-you…” For a moment, there was a flash of a smile on his face. “You bought me breakfast? You didn’t need to do that.”

“I know, but you worried me yesterday. Anyway, I just wanted to bring it to you. Taylor, if I’m making you uncomfortable… I’m sorry. That’s not my intention.”

His mouth worked for a few moments, and he flushed. “Uncomfortable? No, you’re… you’re not… I don’t mind seeing you again. I mean, I can’t… go out or anything, but… I…” He ran a hand through his hair, and he tried to take his bags back.

“I-I can walk you in. Your hands are full, and you’re not going to make it if you try to carry it all.” My brow furrowed. I couldn’t get his clenched jaw out of my head. Was I really being a stalker? “I mean, I don’t have to…”

His laugh was abrupt. “Are you alright? You look a little nauseated.”

“Yes, I mean, no… I mean, yes.” His continued smile tried to put my mind at ease, but there was no mistaking what I’d seen. “Taylor, you don’t have to be nice to me, at all.”

Confusion wrinkled his features. “I wasn’t being that nice,” he said. “You’re the one that brought breakfast, and…actually, how much was that?”

I shook my head. “No.” I chewed my lip as I looked at him. “I just… you don’t think I’m going to get upset with you or try to hurt you if you tell me to get the fuck away from you, do you? Because I want to hang out with you, I do, but…” I sighed and shook my head at how absolutely ridiculous I sounded.

His shoulders fell a little. “Calis, I don’t understand. I’ve been entirely honest with you.”

“Just… when I walked up… you seemed nervous.”

His mouth parted for a moment, and then he turned his gaze towards the pavement. “Oh, no, that was… I was on the phone with my pharmacist. I was trying to, uh…”

“You don’t have to explain the medicine, if you’d rather not.”

One corner of his mouth twitched upwards. “Well, I was trying to get some prescriptions refilled. And, they, uh… they wouldn’t refill one of them. I mean, I didn’t figure they would, to be honest. It’s not up for refill for another week and a half, but I was asking if I could go by and pick it up when I got the other one, which is due to today.” I could see the slow return of the feelings I’d seen when I’d approached him. So, maybe it wasn’t me.

My eagerness to help decided that my wariness of his feelings was less important and leapt into action. “I can get it for you when it’s due. Would that help? I promise not to read the label, but if you don’t have time, I can help.”

Again, he laughed, and then he kept smiling when he shook his head. “I-it’s not that, really. It’s complicated. I don’t mind going to get it when it’s up for refill.”

“Taylor…” Worry shot through me, and despite my head’s refusal to believe anything of the sort, I knew he’d been through a lot. “Taylor, if that’s a controlled substance… you can’t take more of the pills than they give you! I know things are hard, but please, it’s controlled for a reason!”

He flinched away from me as if I’d hit him. “No! No, not… I wouldn’t… I-I’m not abusing the drug, Calis. I wouldn’t do that. I don’t even *take* it – I wasn’t even getting it refilled, and I left it on the counter one day and Claude…” His mouth opened, and his eyes were struck with horror as he realized what I’d said.

The distaste must have been obvious because his teeth clenched together, and he shook his head. “No, no, no, Calis… i-it’s not. I-it isn’t… he just… he doesn’t like going to the doctor, and it just so happened that what they prescribed me helped him. I… it wasn’t malicious. He needs it. He really does. I-I’ve been trying to get him to go. He just…”

Anger kept my jaw firmly closed for a few seconds, as I had no intention of shouting at him in the parking lot of his employer. “He could get you in trouble.” I didn’t believe the story – even if I should have taken Taylor at his word, I refused to believe it was as cut and dry as he said. “If you don’t need the drug, then stop getting it refilled. Are you paying for it so he can abuse it? Because that’s bullshit!”

“It’s on my insurance,” Taylor said. “It isn’t much, and-and I’m only going to do it until the refills run out.”

“You don’t need to be doing that for him. You could get in trouble.”

His eyes narrowed, and he started towards the building without warning me. I followed him. “You don’t know anything about it. Stop acting so self-righteous.”

“I’m not being self-righteous, Taylor, but you know that it’s illegal. He shouldn’t be taking your pills at all. Hey, why are you getting mad at me?”

He didn’t look back. “Because you’re an ass who thinks he knows everything!”

The issue needed to be pressed. Taylor shouldn’t have been using a medicine prescribed to him to feed Claude’s addiction. He seemed so frustrated, though, so I let it drop for the moment. “Okay, so what are these bags? Clothes?”

“Yes,” he said. “I need to take them to the dry cleaners. I usually just bring what I wear to interviews, but the washing machine at the apartment is out, and so I just brought everything. The guy gives me a decent price.”

I stood back as he unlocked the gate that blocked the store, and he pushed it open before he moved to flip the switch as light illuminated the rest of the store. I followed him to the desk and set the bags down. “When does it open?”

“At ten,” he said. “I’ll take it over there on one of my breaks.”

I slid the breakfast in front of him, and I looked at him severely. “You need to eat. I’m not leaving until you do.”

There was a flush on his cheeks, and he sighed as he opened the bag to see what was inside. He didn’t exactly have the space to eat an enormous breakfast, so I’d settled on a sausage and egg biscuit and a hash brown, which again, he’d liked it high school.

He pulled out the biscuit, and there was a temporary emotion in his eyes before he bit his lip and looked away from me. “Uh… wow, it’s… been a while, since…”

I shook my head. “Well, breakfast is really important. I’m assuming you still dislike eating in front of people, so I will go pretend to care about those bedazzled skirts over there, and when I get back, please, let it be gone.”

I left him standing there after he nodded at me, looking at me a little like I was an alien. I moved to the skirts that I’d mentioned and stared at them while my mind raced. Claude made me nervous – yes, I could objectively admit that some part of me was jealous of him. He had my high school crush – of course, I was jealous. But, he also made me immensely nervous. Taylor had now told me he was insanely jealous and using Taylor for pills. The thought made my stomach churn.

The thoughts were rampant, and I knew before I could make any judgments, that I’d have to talk to someone else. Lee would be able to tell me if I seemed crazy, but no one could deny that using someone for their prescription was bad.

My head moved backwards to find him through a rack of clothing. He was eating, and he looked as though his mind was moving as fast as my own. His fingers were always spaced perfectly over what he ate, and he took bites with more efficiency than anyone I’d ever met. Even my mother had complimented him once.

A smile found its way across my features as I saw him inspect the hash brown as though it were an important clue. I had promised not to watch, though, and so I moved to another section of the store. The time could have been spent to find my mother a gift, but I’d never bought a single gift that she’d liked.

The clothes all seemed like ones I’d gotten before – ones she’d returned the next day. I didn’t much care for validation, but there was no point dragging it home if it was going to get mailed right back. I grabbed a scarf, and when I pulled it away, the amount of fabric involved in it frightened me.

I set it back on the shelf in time to hear him call me. “Okay, Mom, you going to come inspect my happy plate.”

The words made me laugh, and I walked across the store to see the discarded paper that had held the food. “Aw, good boy.” I put my hands in his hair and tousled it before he could wriggle himself free.

He glared at me for a moment, and then he sighed. “Thanks, though, really.” He took a drink of the coffee, and his eyes looked a little brighter. “I really should eat breakfast more, I just… I never have time to pick it up.”

“Then, I will pick it up for you,” I said.

He laughed. “Right, so you’re just going to bring me breakfast every day? Like that wouldn’t be incredibly inconvenient.” My face didn’t change, and he started. “Calis! No, you don’t need to bring breakfast to me! I can take care of it!”

“It gives me an excuse to see you, and I get to feel helpful.”

His cheeks flushed. “Don’t… come on, don’t say things like that, please.”

My own face pulled into a frown as I failed to understand his problem. “I’m being serious, Taylor. I’ve made it clear that I want to hang out with you, and you won’t go anywhere with me. Will you… go somewhere with me?”

“I can’t, Calis, I’ve told you that.”

Annoyance colored my face, and I drummed my fingers on the counter. “Okay, then, let me bring you breakfast, then. I have nothing to do in the mornings, anyway, and I like seeing you.”

The red on his cheeks were more obvious, and he growled. “That’s ridiculous. You can’t drive to the mall every day and give me food.”

“I can, if you’ll give me permission to do it.”

His laugh was breathless. “I… I don’t mind you coming up here, if you really want to hang out, but breakfast is entirely unnecessary. If you’re going to bring it, which you shouldn’t, then I’m going to have to give you money.”

My face brightened at the invitation, which was the first that I’d received from him. “Breakfast is entirely necessary,” I said. “And you aren’t giving me anything. You said you’re helping your mother, and this is my way of helping you, you know, since I couldn’t find my magic wand.”

“Calis…” His voice was a whine, and it made me smile.

“I will take that as resignation.” I could see the lights of the mall starting to come on, and I turned back to him. “Well, I have class at 9:30. Do you always start at 9?”

“Usually,” he said, though he still didn’t look quite pleased with the way the conversation had turned.

I leaned towards him briefly. His face was bemused, annoyed, but not entirely displeased. “Okay, so I’ll see you tomorrow, then?” I asked.

The issue with Claude would have to wait until I’d proven myself to be a little less fickle than I had been in high school. What I’d done in no way compared to what his new boyfriend was doing, but it certainly didn’t qualify me to make demands on his life.

He wrapped his hand around two of his fingers, and he nodded. “I’ll, uh… see you tomorrow, but really, you don’t need to bring me anything.”

“I want to,” I said, and then I left him to tend to his duties in the store.

I returned to my car with a mixed bag of feelings. I was thrilled that he’d acknowledged that he didn’t mind seeing me, and I was terrified at what the new information meant for Claude and Taylor. Jealousy wasn’t helping, but my instincts were begging me to pay attention to more than just my own problems with the relationship.

~

I was equal parts happy and frustrated to see Katt and Lee sprawled out on our suite floor knee-deep in what looked like engineering work. Katt was the one who glanced up to see me. “Oh, Calis! I-I’m sorry. We are totally in the middle of your floor… I did not mean for all of my stuff to get everywhere. Oh, man.”

Lee muttered a soft, “It’s fine.”

I waved my hand to indicate the mess wasn’t a problem. “I’ve done much worse, Katt. Don’t worry about it.” I stepped around them to the door of our dorm. “I think I’m going to take a nap.”

“How was your morning?” Lee asked. His eyes were like knives trying to tear apart my soul. He was terrifying like that.

I smiled. “Good, but interesting. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Katt looked between us with a wide-eyed expression. “What? What happened? That was extremely cryptic! Are you guys involved in some sort of gang-related activities? Are you selling drugs? That’s really dangerous!”

We both moved to look at her with skeptical expression. “Really? Your first guess is drug or gang related?” Lee asked.

“W-well, well, I mean… no… I mean, I just like to get the worst possible scenario out of the way before I start moving up the list. I-it makes it easier on my heart.”

Smiles were not exactly a gift Lee bestowed on many people, and yet the explanation had drawn a brief smile across his face. “Right… I guess… that makes sense. I feel like that could lead to a lot of insulting people, though.”

“Well, well, yes… it… it kind of has. I… I really offended my sister once, she came home a little upset over something, and I asked i-if she was pregnant. I-it wasn’t because she was fat, or-or even that she did things like that, but when you see a high school girl crying really hard – I mean, that comes to mind! A-apparently, it was just a… bad test grade… but, our… our mother overheard my question, and kind of assume that…”

Both of us laughed at the story. “Yeah, and yet you keep at it,” I said. “I like that kind of persistence. Putting yourself above the silly offense others may take. Brutal honesty.”

“Very brutal,” Lee said. “Anyway, Calis, you can regale me with the details of your drug cartel dealings tonight. We need to finish this assignment because I’ve got one due, too.”

Katt narrowed her eyes as she turned to Lee. “That isn’t going to be funny when your mother overhears, or-or not even your mother, maybe the room is bugged, and people are going to think you’re really dealing with drug cartels!”

“A chance I’m willing to take,” Lee said.

I moved to grab the door handle, content with waiting on Lee to finish his homework. I had some of my own to do, but a nap sounded easier. “Actually, Lee… the term PAH – associated with possible lung conditions… do you happen to know what that is?”

“Yes. Pulminary Arterial Hypertension.” He rattled off the name as though he’d lived with it all his life.

He likely knew more than that, but I was sure that google would be able to oblige me now that I had the name of the disease. “Thanks.”

“Oh god, it’s an organ trade… you’re like repo men. You steal people’s organs.”

I laughed and shut the door behind me before I could hear Lee’s rebuttal to that particular statement.

My google search soured my mood immensely. The disease wasn’t curable, though I’d always known that about Taylor’s lung condition. Limited activity, fatigue, fainting, they were all problems caused by the illness, and all I could see in my head was Taylor dragging those bags in one hand and talking on the phone in the other.

How bad was his condition? He was taking medicine for it, apparently, but which of the medicines had he opted not to take? Surely, that was only a painkiller. My mind raced as I clicked through every google page I could find on the matter. He’d never named his condition when we were children.

His mother had commented on it. She’d tell him to be careful when we played outside, and as we got older, she’d tell me to make him be careful. I always had, even though I didn’t fully understand the condition.

No nap or homework was accomplished before Lee walked through the closed door of our dorm and started upon seeing me staring blankly at the screen. “Are you actually doing your homework?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m… Taylor has that. PAH. I was looking it up.”

“P-A… wh-oh!” His face twisted. “You’ve been googling that for the past two and a half hours, Calis?”

I glanced at the clock, and I rubbed the back of my neck. “Apparently.”

He moved to sit on his own bed, and he said nothing for a moment. “Well, it’s totally treatable. It can be completely under control.”

His words were an attempt to soothe me, and yet I didn’t feel any better. “I never thought about that when I let him leave. I… it never even… in that whole year at school, I would see him… I’d think about the things we did together, I’d think about wanting to touch him or hug him, but I never thought about his illness. No one was there to help him make sure that he didn’t push himself too hard. Why was I so fucking selfish? How did I forget that?” I slammed a few of my books to the floor in a moment of anger.

He jerked back at the outward display. “Hey, you were in high school. Yes, you were a dick, but you’d be hard pressed to find someone that wasn’t either a complete idiot or a dick when they were.”

“Taylor wasn’t,” I said. “At all.”

Lee shook his head. “Well, his illness was probably not something you wanted to think about. You were figuring things out, and… and, if it wasn’t a huge deal…”

“It wasn’t. I mean, when we were kids, his mom would bring it up a lot... she’d tell me to make sure he was okay, but he just never seemed to… I mean, I always was super careful about it. But, as we got older, it just faded into the background. I would always tell him to slow down or be careful, but I never even connected it. It was just ingrained into me that I needed to do that, and the reason completely just… wasn’t there anymore.” A mix between a snarl and a scream slid through my gritted teeth. “But that’s not a fucking excuse!”

Lee didn’t move towards me, but he looked more sympathetic than he had the last time we’d spoken. “Calis, it’s in the past. He’s okay. He managed on his own.”

“But, he shouldn’t have had to…”

“Don’t dwell on it,” Lee said.

I took a breath and pushed it away from me, though a few of the articles continued to dance across my mind. “Yeah, uh… well, apparently, he had medicine for it, and they… well, they prescribed him… I don’t know. I don’t know what they prescribed him, but… he was trying to pick up a refill on a prescription that wasn’t ready. And-and when I asked about it… he said that Claude was using it. He hadn’t been using it, and then Claude started… and… and, that’s horrible. Isn’t it?”

The look on Lee’s face was as disgusted as I’d hoped that it would be. “Yes, that is horrible. He should cancel the prescription if he doesn’t need it.”

“Claude isn’t good for him.”

“Are you saying that because of the prescription or because you want him?”

I shook my head. “Lee, I don’t want him. I can’t be with him. My parents freak out when I wear shirts that aren’t approved by the FDA of lawyer’s. Do you have any idea – any idea – at all – what would happen if they found out that I liked Taylor? Th-that he was…”

The rant had brought me to my feet, and I twisted myself away from him as emotions pounded against my chest in more abundance than I’d wanted. My breathing was hard for a moment. “I… I know, Calis, I know your parents make it hard, but that doesn’t change the way you feel.”

“It’s not about me wanting to be with him. I can’t be with him. Yes, okay, yes, maybe I am slightly jealous that the guy that made me happier than anyone, whose kiss I still fantasize about four years after the fact, who was my best friend, and coincidentally very, very attractive is with… someone else. Yes, okay, yes, I am slightly jealous, but I can’t be with Taylor, and I want him to be happy, but Claude isn’t making him happy! He isn’t fine! He isn’t okay!”

“He might not be, but just because his boyfriend has a flaw that you don’t particularly approve of, doesn’t mean that his relationship is garbage.”

“Yes, it does.” I paused. “Okay, maybe it doesn’t, but I know Taylor, and he doesn’t need to be with someone who will take advantage of him. He… he doesn’t do a very good job of saying no.”

This seemed to strike Lee as amusing, but he was trying not to laugh. “Well, he certainly managed to say no to you.”

“He said no to me because we were best friends, and because I was one of the only people he could be honest with. He missed a lot of opportunities to say no to me before he actually managed.” I clenched my fists. “He said he didn’t mind me coming up to see him in the mornings.”

His surprise was frustrating. “He said that?”

“Yes, he did, asshole.” My phone buzzed, and I looked at it. I had to fight down the feeling that it might be from Taylor, as he likely didn’t have my number anymore.

It wasn’t from Taylor. “What the fuck kind of normal college kid asks their professors to go out to lunch? I fucking hate my parents. I hate them.” I rolled over and attempted to suffocate myself on the pillow. “And Ingram calls them and tells them when I don’t do this crap, I swear… I don’t even want to be a lawyer.”

Lee leaned back on his own bed. “I think you’d really enjoy being a lawyer, but your parents are ruining it for you.”

“Yeah, that’s the same way I feel about being alive. I don’t actually hate it, but they are making it impossible.”

~

Taylor remained accepting to the idea of my bringing him breakfast, though I couldn’t seem to find a decent time to bring Claude up. I didn’t have a ton of time to spend with him, and the idea of wasting it on Claude irritated me.

He seemed okay. I never saw any signs that his lung condition was affecting him, and he just acted offended when I’d tried to bring it up. It was under control, and that was all he’d say on the matter.

The condition was his, and I had no right to ask him about it. I had no right to even speak to him, but he was letting me, and I was doing everything in my power to keep from ruining the possible reclaiming of my best friend. Even if we couldn’t be together as a couple, I knew I would rather have him as a friend than nothing, and I hoped he felt the same.

The weeks had sped by, and I’d somehow managed to come up with an excuse to avoid inviting my professor out to lunch for every day that passed. I was running out of options, but I could still be excited that I’d managed so far without my parents threatening my life.

“Look, I just want you to think about it. You and Lee could come, and no one would have to dress up, and I could use you as a reason for why I couldn’t dress up. It’s perfect. Katt could even use Lee. They’ve been hanging out all the time, and so he can’t really say he doesn’t know any of them, anymore.”

“No, no, no, and no.” I took a breath as she eased out of my car with a wounded expression on her face. All a ploy to get me to agree to come to this Halloween party. “One, I hate Halloween parties – hate them. Two, it’s your family. Three, I would not put Lee through that. Katt or no, that is going to be miserable.”

“I hate you.”

I smiled at her and left her standing on the curb outside of her classroom. I wondered if Katt wouldn’t ask Lee herself, as they really had been together a lot, recently. I somehow doubted she had the nerve, however, since they weren’t dating as Lee had all but screamed in my face a million times.

My routine didn’t change. I got the food and parked my car and waited for Taylor. However, for the first time in the three and a half weeks that I’d seen him, he wasn’t there at eight thirty. I considered that he wasn’t working, though in the past, he’d told me his schedule. He worked every day – and that was the way he wanted it.

Worry was becoming painful by the time eight forty five lit my clock, but his car pulled into the parking lot a few seconds before I could panic. When he got out of his car, however, he wasn’t wearing the black uniform that he had to wear.

I got out of my car and approached him with a small degree of caution. He smiled at me, and I observed him curiously. “Why aren’t you in your uniform?”

“I’m not working today,” he said. “They insisted that I take the day, though I think it’s because they’ve hired too many people, which is incredibly unfortunate.”

One of the toes of his shoes kicked into the ground, and curiosity continued to hold the dominance of my features. “So, what are you doing at the mall?”

He ducked his head. “W-well, I didn’t want to just leave you up here… waiting for me… a-and, I didn’t really have anything else to do.” A grin split the whole of my face as I realized that he’d come to the mall because he wanted to see me.

“Well, I do appreciate the thought.” The question of his number died on my lips as nervousness choked it back down. “So, we can go somewhere and hang out, then.”

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. “N-no, I shouldn’t go anywhere. Claude’s really good at finding that stuff out. I can’t. I’ve got errands to run today, anyway. B-but, I have a little time, so… so, we could eat… like, in my car or yours, i-if you wanted to do that.”

That was an upgrade if I’d ever heard one. I nodded and gestured to my car, which had much more space than his appeared to have. He slid into the passenger side of my car, and I was overwhelmed with the idea that he was there again, after all this time.

I could still see him breaking open mozzarella sticks from Sonic and nibbling at the cheese because the bread made him full. I could hear his assuring that 80’s music really wasn’t that bad as he twisted the dials of my radio. I could still see his soaked and horrified expression as we sat in a car was with the windows down.

My rush of feelings much have lasted longer than anticipated because his brow furrowed as he looked at me. “Wh-why are you staring at me?”

I jerked my head towards the wheel. “I… uh, I… sorry, I just zoned out for a second.”

“Right.” He pursed his lips and unwrapped his breakfast. He didn’t look at me when he started to eat, and I had brought my own, so I unwrapped it to keep up with him. “Thanks for coming up here every day, Calis. It really is nice of you.”

“I like it,” I said. A thrill ran through me at the fact that he didn’t look at me warily before he’d started to eat. “I like seeing you.”

“Yeah…” He never returned the sentiment when I said it, and I wondered why that was. His actions said that he did enjoy it, but he didn’t want to say that to me. “So, did you ever ask your professor to lunch?”

I flailed with my arms. “That is off-limits. We do not talk about that. No, I haven’t, since you’re interested, but I’m going to have to soon. I’m… I… I already sit after class and talk to this boring old man for an hour every class period I have with him. Why do I need to take him to lunch?”

Taylor laughed. “You really don’t. Your parents always were go-getters. You think they’d react well if you told them that you thought it wasn’t necessary?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, because they react well to any opinion I have that doesn’t match perfectly with theirs. No, I’ve tried, and they both get angry with me.”

There was concern on his face as he looked across the seat me, and his eyes narrowed just a bit with what appeared to be sadness. “Calis, you don’t owe them anything. You’ve done very well for yourself, and you shouldn’t let them bully you like they do.”

I stared at the half eaten sandwich that I’d stopped eating. “They don’t bully me.” They did, though. “Whatever – they just want me to do what they think I should do. I’m sure they are right in part. I am fairly irresponsible.”

“But you have a right to be irresponsible. You have a right to be you. You’re amazing, even if they don’t agree sometimes. Their opinion doesn’t change that.”

The fact that he’d called me amazing had my insides ablaze, and my cheeks were red enough to make that obvious. “You’re calling me amazing? That’s impressive, given the way that I treated you.”

“You didn’t treat me that badly,” he said. “I got caught up in something, and I hadn’t let you figure everything out. It was my right to walk away, but it was also your right to do what you did.”

His empathy had always been one of his best traits, and my face twisted with what might have been tears as I looked at him. “I didn’t want to let you walk away. I just… I didn’t know how to make you stay there.”

“I didn’t want to walk away…” He stared out the window, and then he laughed. “But, it’s okay. We don’t need to dwell on it.” I said nothing, and he twisted his shirt. “Shit, maybe I do need to go to the mall… Claude’s trying to get me to go to this Halloween party, and I figure if I buy a costume stupid enough, he’ll agree to let us both go as nothing.”

My eyes widened as I thought back to Tamara. “A Halloween party? As in, his family?”

“Not sure. He didn’t say it was, but he isn’t the best about giving me all the details on his plans.”

“Tamara asked me to go to a Halloween party with her family. Is it on the actual day?”

He smiled. “As in, tomorrow? Yes. Huh. Maybe we’ll both be there, then. Are you going?”

“Yes.” My answer had been swiftly and profoundly changed since I’d spoken to Tamara. “I am. Not dressing up, but going.”

His cheeks burned, then, and his eyes remained pinned to the floorboard. “Oh, now, I really don’t want to wear a costume.”

“I’m sure you’ll be adorable in whatever costume you wear.”

A squeaking sound escaped him, and he shook his head. “Come on, Calis, don’t… don’t say things like that.”

“Truthful things?”

“I…” He seemed more upset than I’d expected, and so I decided I’d try not to do whatever it was I’d done to upset him. “Just…”

“Well, hopefully, I’ll see you there.” Lucky for Tamara, I would have driven through the gates of hell themselves to get more time with Taylor, and it would be interesting to see he and Claude together now that I wasn’t suffering from the shock of his reappearance.

Taylor looked at me as though he intended to speak, but then he opted to twist his shirt up around his hands. I nudged his arm. “What is it?”

“Well, I… just… with Claude… he… just don’t mention I was at work today, and… don’t mention the medicine thing, please. He’s sensitive about that stuff, and just… if he knew how often we were hanging out, then…” He closed his eyes. “I mean, I know it isn’t like that. I do. But, he probably wouldn’t understand. I just… I don’t know how much I’ll be able to talk at the party.”

A snarl raised in my throat, and I bit it backwards. “Claude seems pretty controlling, but that’s just my opinion.”

“Yeah, I mean… he can be. But, he can also be great. Just… he’s just bad about this particular topic. So, please?”

I nodded. The last thing I wanted was to make Taylor unhappy, even if it meant making Claude unhappy. “Absolutely. I don’t want to mess up your relationship, so long as it makes you happy.” There was a pause. “It does, right?”

“What?”

“Make you happy?”

He blinked a few times, and then he nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes, it does. It absolutely does. I love Claude. He’s great.”

The words stung, and I looked out the window to keep the distaste from displaying to him directly. “Yeah, well, that’s good, then I’m not going to cause any problems for you. I wouldn’t do that.”

He loved him? Taylor loved Claude?

“You guys have only been together for a few months, though, right? I mean, are you sure you’re in love with him?” The question spilled from my mouth before I could stop it. I really wasn’t good at filtering with Taylor.

He blinked. “Well, no, I… I didn’t mean like… I love Claude, I just meant… like love him, as in, he’s great, as in, I’m sure that with some time and stuff, that I will be in love with him.”

That brought some relief to the burn in my chest, but I didn’t feel completely calmed with the notion that Taylor could be falling in love with this asshole from Tamara’s family. “A-are you? Are you in love with Tamara?”

The laugh sounded harsher than I’d meant it, and I clicked my teeth together. “Tamara? I don’t know. I don’t know what love is, really, probably. My parents like her, though. They want me to marry her.”

“Oh…” I tried to pretend that his voice didn’t sound disappointed, and the smile on his face helped that notion. “Well, you should make sure you’re in love with her first. She isn’t marrying your parents!”

“Thank god for that,” I said.

He laughed, and some part of me wondered if I wasn’t going to regret the decision to go to this party. I didn’t know if I could handle seeing him with Claude. “So, do you still play soccer? You hadn’t mentioned it.”

I shook my head. “No, I lost interest, I guess. I played my first two years of college, and then I just got burnt out, everything remind…” I stopped myself, and I considered the words I was about to say. Was that why I’d quit soccer? “I think I peaked in high school.”

He looked curious, but he nodded his head. “You were really great in high school. I’m sure you still are.”

“I kick the ball around with my friend Lee sometimes. It helps me think. He might be at the party. You should meet him. You’d like him.”

“I think I saw him at the wedding.” He seemed startled at his own words. “Not that I was staring at you, or anything, I just happened to notice that you were with Tamara and, two other people…”

I nodded, somewhat thrilled at the prospect that I wasn’t the only one stealing glances. “Yeah, that was him. He’s basically the only reason that I haven’t gone insane.”

Some part of my words had brought a genuine smile to his face, and that made me smile like some sort of lunatic. He laughed and looked out the window again. “What are you smiling at, you weirdo?”

“I don’t know! You were smiling. I thought we were smiling for some reason!”

His laughter was quiet, and he looked back at me a few times, and the glances seem to make the concept more funny to him. The problem was that his glances were making me laugh. “So, you just sit around and wait for smiling moments?”

“Hey, at least I don’t initiate them like you seem to be doing! What is so funny?”

“You!”

“That’s extremely rude. I’m taking my breakfast back.” I grabbed the bag that I’d given him, which was empty, and it slipped out of my hands and flittered back to the ground. “Dammit! I’m leaving!”

I actually moved to get out of the car, and this made him laugh a lot harder. “This is your car, you idiot!”

I sat back down and closed my eyes, trying to keep myself from laughing because I didn’t know why I thought everything was so funny.

Finally, we both seemed to get ahold of ourselves, and I looked across at him. “Are you done? Have you had enough fun for one day?”

He grinned again, but he shrugged. “I think so. I think I’m good.”

“Awesome. Great.”

He smiled again, but I immediately moved to tousle his hair to keep myself from falling into another fit of idiotic smiling. “Well, it’s getting close to 10. People in the parking lot are going to start to think we’re weird. I’ll, uh… see you tomorrow?”

My bravery had been enhanced by the laughing, and I spoke without thinking too much about it. “Do you mind giving me your number?” He paused. “I mean, in case there’s another incident like today, where… you don’t want to leave me hanging.”

“I…” He looked as though he was going to refuse for a second, and then he grabbed a napkin and a pen from my cup holder and wrote out the numbers. “Just don’t… uh, don’t call me or anything in the afternoons. Claude will freak out.”

“Of course he will.” I took the napkin. “I’ll send you a text, and that way you’ll have mine.”

He nodded, and he smiled for a moment before he pulled himself the rest of the way out of the car. “I’ll… um… well, thanks for breakfast, Calis. I really enjoyed it. I, um… well, bye!” He left almost before I could get off my own goodbye.

That afternoon, Tamara was ecstatic with my change of heart. She needed no explanation as to why I had, but she was jumping around the room like a child with too much Halloween candy. “Oh, that’s great! Oh, yes, I don’t have to wear that stupid costume! Thank you, thank you, thank you, Calis!”

“Sure… I mean, I guess I’m not doing anything else, so why not?” The words felt like a lie, but telling my girlfriend that some other person had changed my mind about the party seemed mean-spirited.

Our eyes both moved to Lee at the same time. His head was so deep into a textbook that I wondered if he wasn’t about to get sucked into it like some sort of fantasy movie. “No,” he said.

Lee always looked like he wasn’t paying attention, but it was hard for me to think of a time when he’d missed some part of a conversation. “Lee, come on, I know Katt would really appreciate it,” Tamara said.

The textbook lowered, and his eyes moved between the two of us. “Lee, seriously, just come, okay? It won’t be that bad. We don’t even have to stay long.”

His eyes narrowed when they stopped on me, and I bet he could guess the real reason my answer had changed. “I don’t want to go with Katt twice. Your family will think I’m her boyfriend.”

“They don’t care,” Tamara said. “Besides, who cares what they think?”

“I do. I don’t want Katt having to deflect all sorts of questions, and when they find out we’re not dating, they’ll probably upset her by saying something rude.”

This was the first time I’d ever heard Lee worry about someone other than himself in these matters. “And you think they aren’t going to ask her where you are if you don’t come to this thing?” I asked.

He sighed and stood. “Whatever. As long as I don’t need to dress up, then I’ll go to the stupid party. Leif is just going to spend the whole night paranoid that we’re going to get pranked, and I really don’t want to be part of the tin hat, glow-in-the-dark, booby-trapped room again this year.”

Tamara clapped her hands together, and she hugged both of us, though the hug she gave to me lasted considerably longer. She pulled my head down to her and kissed me more deeply than she had in a long time. A moment passed before I was able to properly return it. “Thank you both so much! I can’t wait to tell Katt! See both of you later!”

She was to the door before she stopped and turned around. “Leif really does all that to protect the dorm?”

“Yes,” Lee and I both said. “It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s necessary!” The voice behind the other door startled Tamara and I, though Lee just turned his head as though Leif had been standing there the whole time. Even though he was still behind his door. “College kids suck!”

Tamara laughed. “You are a college kid, idiot!”

“Yeah, and I happen to be very aware of how much I suck!”

That made her laugh, and she waved to us before she turned and shut the door behind her.

Lee looked at me with an abysmal expression on his face. “Taylor is going to be at this party, isn’t he?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because Katt told me earlier that you absolutely refused Tamara when she mentioned the party to you, and I know you don’t change your mind unless you want to.”

I shimmied back into the room before I was forced to answer him. There was no reason to vocalize it, after all, he obviously already knew.

~

The party was in the barn of one of Tamara’s more country-type aunts. Their family was not the only people present, but she recognized as little as I did. Lee looked disgusted by the amount of ridiculous costumes, and Katt was standing more closely to him than she ever had at the wedding.

The atmosphere would usually have irritated me, but I had only one thing on my mind. I didn’t see him when we walked in, and I fought down the worry that it was another party entirely. “There’s nothing like dancing bottles of ketchup and mustard to liven up a party,” Tamara said.

I stared at the wooden dance floor that was set up. There were more people than the ketchup and mustard, but they really did steal the show. Approximately half of the population had donned a costume, and the other half looked much saner.

“I want to dance, but I don’t want to dance with the ketchup and mustard.” She shook her head. “Oh, Katt, isn’t that your mom?”

Katt lowered her head and covered it with her hands. “No, no, just don’t look at her. Pretend she isn’t there. I should have moved away like Kara. It would have been so much easier.”

Lee’s awkward pat looked less consoling and more frightened, but he was making an effort. “Hey, most people can’t say they could comfortably dress up as ketchup and mustard in their best day, let alone in the autumn and winter of their relationship,” I said.

“Most people can’t say that, because most people understand that it looks ridiculous!” she said.

I couldn’t argue with her there, but I was glad that we could avoid the dance floor until the condiments made their way elsewhere. Tamara pulled me over to the punch bowl, and Katt and Lee followed since they had nothing better to do.

Several of the women had dressed up as really skimpy versions of super heroes, maids, witches, and other things that were just an excuse to show off their bodies. I had no problem with it, but Taylor was not among the crowd as far as I could tell, and I did have a problem with that.

“Last year, my family tried to play spin the bottle.” Tamara stared at me over her third glass of punch in three minutes, and she raised the glass a little before she threw the entire drink back with one motion.

My mouth fell open. “As in… kissing cousins?”

She nodded and poured herself another drink. “Yep, and the bad part was, most of them didn’t have the excuse of being drunk. Ezekial spent the whole night trying to convince me to play. It was terrifying.”

Katt fell back against the table, and Tamara slid her a drink of her own. She blew a puff of air from her mouth that fluttered her hair. “Last year, I had bronchitis. I wish I had it this year.”

That made Lee laugh, and his smile lasted while he glanced across to me to revel in the incredulity of the situation. I poured a glass of the punch, since Tamara had only deemed Katt worthy of getting a drink.

One of Tamara’s cousins, one that didn’t look quite as ridiculous as the others, found the four of us and struck up a conversation with Tamara. I pulled backwards after the initial reintroduction and glanced at Lee. “To be any more obvious, you’d have to get out a spotlight and shine it around the party while announcing your intent over a PA system.”

I sighed, and I firmly planted my eyes on the punch bowl in front of me. “He did say that he didn’t know if it was the family party. I swear, if I wasted my time at this ridiculous event, and…” I made myself take breaths. There was nothing wrong with being here for Tamara.

“If that’s the case,” Lee said. “I am going to laugh at you.”

“Thanks, Lee, you’re great.”

A few drinks and boring conversations later, Tamara dragged me out on the condiment-free dance floor. I knew she’d had too much to drink with the close way that she was grinding against me. I didn’t hate it, but my mood was not as elevated by it as it ought to have been, as Taylor remained steadfastly absent.

Tamara pulled me down into a long kiss, and her hand slid up my back. I could taste the alcohol she’d been drinking, but I kissed her back, anyway. I laughed when I pulled my head up. “Tamara, I understand the need for alcohol at these things, but babe, it’s like… not even been an hour and you’re drunk.”

“Shut up and make out with me, you asshole.”

I could see Lee’s disapproving from the punch table, and Katt’s curious and confused expression as she looked away and looked back again. Tamara kept me out there, intermittently sucking my face and grinding far too close to me, for another little while before I eased her off the dance floor and made her sit down.

“I’m sorry, I just get so horny when I drink,” she said. She looked at me through apologetic eyes, but I could still see the lustful need raging behind them.

I laughed at her and patted her once on the head. “I’m going to get you some water,” I said.

“Yeah, after that, can we have sex?”

“At the party?”

“Whatever.”

I wandered up towards the house to find somewhere that would have drinks that weren’t alcoholic, and usually, at parties like this, the only place was inside. I walked to the other side of the dance floor, and my eyes found him immediately. His eyes looked panicked when they met mine, and he looked back towards Claude, who was standing next to him.

My fists clenched, but I kept going towards the house. I’d promised to get her water, and she really did need something. I retrieved the water and returned to her. Had he seen her kissing me like that? Did it matter? He had Claude, so it shouldn’t matter, so why did I feel bad?

Tamara drank the water with a quick thank you, and she put her elbow up on the table as she watched the dance floor. “Still not drunk enough,” she said.

I waited until she pulled herself off the chair. I wanted to go talk to Taylor, but I didn’t know how to approach him when he was in the midst of a conversation with Claude. A coincidence seemed like the best way for the two of us to speak without risking Claude’s irritation.

To my surprise, though, Claude looked straight at us and started in our direction without any question. My heart pounded in my ears as I considered what his intent might be. He was pulling Taylor by the wrist, and I caught a glimpse of blue eyes as worried as mine.

Claude moved to stand directly in front of Tamara, and he didn’t look at me. “Tamara!”

She glanced to him with pursed lips, and her smile was slow when she realized who he was. “Claude. You didn’t dress up.”

“No, I didn’t, and I didn’t think you did, either, until I saw you out there impersonating a slut.”

My anger roared to life, possibly spurned by what I knew, but I stepped in front of her and put a hand on his chest. “Hey, fuck you, asshole. If it’s too scary for you, then go the hell home.”

“Oh fuck, Calis, you’re turning me on so much right now.”

Katt tried to keep her giggle from bubbling into her throat, but she didn’t succeed. I didn’t care what Tamara did, though, Claude wasn’t going to insult my girlfriend or take Taylor’s medication.

Claude threw up his hands, and he grinned at me. “I’m sorry, bro. Just commenting. This is a family party – maybe you could keep it PG.”

“Claude, don’t…”

Claude rolled his eyes backwards at Taylor, who seemed positively embarrassed on his obnoxious boyfriend. “I just want to know why Tamara and Calis think it’s okay to have sex in the middle of a family function.”

“Wow, that sucks, Claude. Did your parents never have the discussion with you – that’s not quite sex, buddy. It’s okay, one day you’ll get there.” Claude lunged forward, and he grabbed my collar.

“You’re really starting to piss me off, Tsrali.”

Taylor moved between us, yanking Claude’s hands off my shirt with authority. “Claude. Stop. You’re being rude.”

The way Claude looked at Taylor scared me for a moment, as though he might grab him and hit him, and then he rolled his eyes and stepped back. “Whatever.” He whirled and shoved Taeru, and then he walked back into the crowd without a glance back in our direction.

Taylor turned back to the four of us with wide eyes and an embarrassed expression. “I’m so sorry. He’s just in a mood tonight.”

Tamara laughed and shook her head. “It’s whatever. Not like that’s the most disgusting thing anyone in this family has ever said to me.”

“Don’t worry about it, Taylor,” I said. “You didn’t do it.”

The flush hadn’t faded from his cheeks, and I got the feeling that he was lumping himself into a singular entity with Claude. “Well, I’m sorry anyway. It was unforgivably rude.”

“Kind of was, but you didn’t do it,” Lee said.

The blue eyes looked towards the crowd, and I touched Taylor’s shoulder briefly. “Oh, Taylor, this is my friend, Lee, and Katt is Tamara’s cousin. And you know Tamara.” I urged him towards them. “Guys, this is Taylor, who I went to high school with, and who is one thousand percent less obnoxious than his boyfriend.”

Katt smiled brightly and waved. “Nice to meet you, Taylor, but my name is actually Katherine – like… that’s what’s on my birth certificate. I don’t mind being called Katt, but it’s just… you know, it feels dishonest.”

Lee looked towards the ceiling with a quick shake of his head as we heard Katt’s spiel for the second time. Taylor laughed. “Okay, well, it’s nice to meet you, Katherine.” He took Lee’s hand when it was extended. “And you, Lee, I… assume that is the official name on your birth certiciate.”

Once again, Lee laughed, and I marveled how much he’d been doing that tonight. “Yes, that is it. Lee Kelsin. Middle name redacted.”

“Lee Redacted Kelsin,” I said.

Taylor glanced at me for a second, and then he laughed. “Well, I should probably go make sure Claude doesn’t offend anyone else. It really was nice to meet you two, and good to see you and Tamara again, Calis.”

I didn’t want him to go, but there seemed like no logical way to ask him to stand there and stay with us.

The pain on his face was obvious, and he turned to go after Claude once he’d uttered another apology. There was no question, now, though, Taylor had seen me dancing that way with Tamara. Tamara grabbed my hands and whirled me to face her, even as I tried to watch Taylor vanish into the throes of people. “Thank you, baby, that was really sweet.”

I shrugged awkwardly, and Tamara kissed my cheek without taking it any further than that, which was a testament to how grateful she was. My eyes moved to Lee, and he seemed to understand my irritation.

The fact remained that there was very little I can do, other than make sure that Claude kept his stupid words to himself. The party progressed, and I pretended not to see Taylor and Claude dancing – again. As if Claude had any right to dance with Taylor after the way he’d acted.

Tamara worked to become less drunk, and it worked a little, though she was still holding my hand more than her normal. Katt had managed to get Lee on the dance floor again, and Tamara sighed. “I’m going to go try to find a bathroom, and maybe some Advil. My head is starting to hurt.”

“Okay, I’ll be here.” She nodded and headed off towards the house.

My eyes scanned the party again, and my heart leapt into my throat when I saw Taylor standing against one of the pillars of the dance floor by himself. A quick look around revealed no Claude or anyone that seemed to know he was standing there. I crossed the room and stood beside him. “Hey – I see you got out of the stupid costume.”

He smiled at me and nodded. “I did. And so did you, but I guess it wasn’t never an issue for you, huh?” He lowered his eyes. “I really am sorry for what Claude said about Tamara.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said. I looked around again. “Where is your super charismatic boyfriend, anyway?”

Taylor sighed. “He left with some guys to go get some kind of beer. He didn’t like the kind they had here.”

I frowned. “So, he totally abandoned you. Man, this guy just keeps racking up the points. You really hit pay dirt with him.”

The flustered expression on Taylor’s face meant that I didn’t need to joke about it, and I touched his shoulder gently. “I’m sorry. I’m just messing with you. You okay?”

He looked at me for a long moment, and then he looked towards the ground. “No, yeah, I’m good. Just kind of tired. I worked a long shift today…”

I hadn’t gone to see him this morning, either, though I’d informed him of my plans before I’d not done it. Tamara had car trouble, and the ordeal had lasted the entire morning. “And then you got the imponderable joy of coming to this party – what a day!”

His laugh was more exhausted than usual. “Yeah, it’s been pretty stellar.”

I wanted to grab his hand or touch him in some way that might console him. He looked small standing next to that pillar. An altercation behind us startled us both so that we turned to face it. Two men that neither of us seemed to know were yelling at one another about something or other. The first one pushed the second, and his body slammed into Taylor who got knocked back onto the dance floor.

He would have fallen, but I caught him by the arms and pulled him back upwards. He blushed and shook his head. “Today just keeps getting better,” he said.

I realized that we were standing on the dance floor, and I had his arms, though neither of us were moving. We weren’t far from dancing with one another, and I laughed at the absurdity of it. “Hey, it’s okay. You should dance.” I gestured around to the people around doing a mixture of making fools of themselves and actually dancing.

He flushed and shook his head, though the idea seemed to have brought an amused smile to his face. I grabbed his hands, bringing them back and forth, and he laughed. “Calis. Don’t. I don’t want to dance, I’m tired.”

“Look, you already are dancing. Can’t turn back now.” I bit my lip, and I kept swinging his arms, since every time I did, his smile seemed to get a bit brighter. I rolled his eyes, and he actually moved his hips a little bit. His rhythm had always been better than mine, and I tried to ignore the knot that seeing his hips move like that formed in my throat.

I watched him for a minute, and I kept moving, despite the feelings of inadequacy and guiltiness at the fact that I was dancing with him. The movement seemed to be making him feel better. I was dancing with him, though. I was dancing with Taylor – and my heart felt as erratic as a high school kid’s at prom.

“You’ve certainly come a long way – in high school, you never danced,” he said. We weren’t close to one another, but he was dancing, and his eyes were on me. Dancing.

I shrugged. “I’m trying to learn to be less serious,” I said.

His laughter was real this time, and he shook his head. “Sorry, I’m not quite the dancer that Tamara is,” he said. The movement was getting quicker, and I could feel myself starting to sweat, likely a result of my heartbeat.

“I bet you are,” I said.

The movement came without anticipation. I pulled his arm up and twisted it, bringing his body back against mine so that his back was pressed against my stomach. I could feel heat coming off his body despite the cold air. “Sorry,” I muttered.

He pulled himself away, and I could see him trying to find words before he stumbled and nearly fell into me. I caught him, and he wrapped his arms around my neck to steady himself. “Sorry, I don’t know why I did that.”

My hands had moved to his waist, and I realized why. The song that had come over the speakers was slow, and I was dismayed at our somehow perfect timing. “It’s okay. You were dancing. Just got lost in the beat.”

He hadn’t moved his arms, and I wondered if that was his giving me permission to actually slow dance with him. I pulled him to me a little and rocked his body as gently as I could. “Right, I let the music move me.” I thought for a moment. “Is that from a movie?”

His head moved to rest against my shoulder, and the heat in my body moved to entirely new heights. “I shouldn’t be dancing with you,” he said.

“Why? Claude?”

“No.”

He didn’t elaborate, and I was too afraid to ask him further. He was dancing with me, which meant that some part of him wanted to. I moved him and marveled at the perfection that was him in my arms. His body had definition, though it was delicate under my fingers. “You still play sports?”

His laugh was quiet. “I was about to ask you the same question. You’re muscular.”

“I go to the gym sometimes,” I said. “You smell really good.” I laughed at myself. “Wow, could I sound any more like a terrible prom date?”

His breathing slowed, and he kept his head where it was. “No, probably not,” he finally answered.

I thought back to my last prom – I hadn’t had a date despite all the girls that had wanted to go with me. I couldn’t decide on any of them, and I’d been at the dance before half an hour before I’d returned home and cited sickness to my parents. “Did you go to your prom?” I asked.

“No. Didn’t really have anyone to go with, and the timing was bad, anyway. You went to yours, didn’t you?”

The memories were distant, fuzzy, and I hated them even as I reflected. “For a little bit. It wasn’t particularly fun. You should have heard the earful I got from my parents for not taking anyone.”

He looked up at me. “Why didn’t you take anyone? Everyone in the school loved you.”

I furrowed my brow and considered mentioning that the one person that I wanted to take didn’t much care for me at all. Instead, I shrugged. “I guess just didn’t find the right person to go with.”

“Too bad Tamara wasn’t around,” he said.

I couldn’t bring myself to agree, and I closed my eyes and listened to the song and felt him. His body fit against me so perfectly – like I’d been made to hold him. He’d always been small, and I’d always love the feel of my arms around his waist, and the years of absence had made the feeling stronger. I stared down at him as I breathed, feeling the agonizing bout of feelings that came from him. He made me happy and sad, all at the same time. Angry and complacent – so many contradicting emotions that set me on edge and relaxed me.

The song was coming to an end, and he moved his head up so that he looked into my eyes. Our lips weren’t an inch apart, and my heart started pounding a little harder as I looked at them. They were pink, defined, not-quite-full, and slightly parted. I could still remember touching them with mine, and I could still remember the taste, and the fireworks that they’d brought to me.

I wanted it again. My parents didn’t matter, Tamara didn’t matter, Claude didn’t matter – none of it mattered except for the fact that I wanted to kiss him again. I moved my head towards him, just barely, and he didn’t immediately pull away.

Tamara’s voice pulled me from my trance, and we both turned to look at her immediately. “There you are. What are you doing?”

My mind begged me to pull away from Taylor to avoid suspicion, but the fear that I’d never get to hold him again forced him to be the one to step back. “I, uh… I fell into him,” he said. Now he was helping me lie – just like high school. He looked at me. “Sorry.”

My eyes were wide, and I shook my head a hundred times as I tried to find the nerve to call him a liar. “Aw, well, it was cute – it looked like you two were dancing.” She smiled at both of us without a trace of animosity.

He laughed, though I still couldn’t force my mouth to function. I wanted to put my arms back around him. I still wanted to kiss him. “We were not. Claude would kill me,” he said. His eyes moved away from Tamara and I, and all at once, his body froze as though someone had hit him. “Uh…” He recomposed himself, and he smiled at both of us. “Speaking of, I should probably go see where he is.”

“Taylor?” He’d already started walking away before I could get the words out of my mouth. His obvious fear had finally shaken off the feeling of losing him, and he turned back towards me briefly to wave his hand.

Tamara tugged my arm. “Okay, it’s like… getting pretty late, and my head is really hurting, and I think I saw a bottle, so… you want to head?”

I looked back towards Taylor, but I couldn’t find him in the crowd of people anymore. Why had he looked so afraid? Tamara dragged me to find Katt and Lee, who were standing over one of the punch tables and refusing to acknowledge the existence of anyone but each other.

We started back towards the car, and I tried to convince myself I’d made up his weird reaction. He’d probably just been nervous that Tamara had suspected the two of us of doing more than falling into one another. Lee tilted his head as he looked at me. “So, I definitely don’t think you’re a stalker, anymore, but… I’m not sure just friends can be a thing with that guy.”

“What? Why?”

“I… well, he obviously like being around you, but you obviously… I mean, Calis, I know you don’t want to admit it, but…”

I let out a breath, though there wasn’t much I could do even in my own head to deny that I really did feel more than friendship for Taylor. “We can be just friends. I’m sure we can…” We climbed into the car, and I started the engine.

That’s when I saw both of them. Claude and Taylor were separate from the rest of the party, and Taylor looked like he was trying to convince his boyfriend of something. His hands were raised, and Claude was turned away from him. They were fighting. Had Claude seen us?

Claude started walking away from him, and Taylor moved forward to stop him. He was trying to talk, but Claude didn’t look interested. Finally, Claude spoke, and he grabbed Taylor by the collar and threw him backwards. My hands gripped the steering wheel, hard.

“Are we moving? Why aren’t we moving?” Tamara sounded in pain in the passenger seat of the car. “I need my bed.”

Claude had stormed away from him, and he threw up his hands. My throat knotted, but they seemed to have come to a resolution. I sighed and started the car, and I tried not to let my imagination run away with me as I drove home.

~

Anxiety clogged my throat as I sat in the parking lot. I’d opted out of driving Tamara to school, solely so that I could be there early. I’d had a thousand dreams – half of them having to do with the dance, and half of them having to do with Claude. Lee assured me that I was being over the top, probably because of my feelings.

Still, I’d been sitting in the parking lot since seven, and he arrived at the same time that he’d arrived every other day – well, save the eight forty five day. I waited for him to get out of his car, but he sat in it for longer than he usually did. When he didn’t get out after another few minutes, I pulled myself out of my car and walked across the lot to his.

He had his hands on his temples, and he was glaring at the wheel. Dismay twisted my body as I realized that he had tears in his eyes. I thought about knocking on the window, though that didn’t seem like the best idea. Finally, he yanked the door open and climbed out. “Taylor?”

His body froze and twisted, as though expecting someone to tackle him from the side, and then he turned to look at me. “What? *What*?”

I held up my hands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m just… I’m fine.” I could still see the tearstains on his cheeks, but he didn’t wait around for me to say anything else and started towards the entrance.

I grabbed his arm, and he whirled on me. “Don’t touch me. Don’t… just… do not touch me. You cannot touch me right now.”

My arm snapped away as if burned, and my heart sank. “Taylor, please, talk to me, what’s the matter with you?”

We walked several steps before he turned to look at me, and pain lanced through me when I saw his expression “Look, I just… I’m not having a good day. I just… I didn’t think you were coming up here anymore. Why are you here?”

“Taylor, why would I not come up here?”

“Because… because…” He choked on the tears that he was holding back, and I moved to grab him but stayed back upon remembering the way he’d reacted. “Please, just… just go away today, okay? Come back tomorrow.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t exactly want to leave you like this. What happened, Taylor, please talk to me.”

“Nothing. Nothing happened. I just had… car issues this morning, and just… stupid stuff. It’s fine. I just… I really want to… I just need to be alone this morning. Okay? Everything’s fine. I just… need some time to myself.”

“Okay…” I moved forward and extended him the food. “Well, at least take this.” He stared at it as if it might spring to life and attack. “Please?”

He took it with a shaking hand, and then he nodded to me. He looked at me warily, and then he turned and started back towards the mall doors. I didn’t follow, even though every cell in my body pushed me to. Then, he stopped and whirled around without warning. “Do you want to go somewhere? L-like next week… I’m not working at the diner.”

His tears were close to falling, and I took a few steps towards him. “Yes! Yes! I… yes, absolutely! I would love to go somewhere with you!”

He laughed and looked to the side. “Okay, I’ll text you.” He wiped one of the tears from his cheek, and the smear seemed to discolor his skin.

“Taylor! Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. I am. Just… see you later, Calis.” He spun on his heels and went into the mall without looking back at me.

The weirdness of the encounter stayed with me, and I remained outside the mall for several minutes, contemplating whether or not to run after him. He’d asked me to leave him alone, but the implications of this morning were terrifying.

Finally, I turned and got in my car, hopeful that the breakfast would be enough to make him feel better. He’d asked me to hang out, and the last thing I needed to do was get that invitation taken away from me.

~

My phone kept turning in my hands, and I stared at it as the temptation of using the number I’d been given shrieked into my head. He’d been crying – Taylor never cried. I’d never seen him cry, even when he struggled to breathe under the pressure of his lung condition, even when he’d had his ankle run over my his mother’s vehicle – he’d never cried.

“Hey, Earth to Calis… Calis!” My head snapped towards Katt’s voice, where she lay on the floor next to Lee. “You look like you’re having some kind of religious experience – everything okay?”

No, it wasn’t. I nodded my head stiffly and tried not to focus on what I’d seen this afternoon. They had been working, and I’d hoped I could sit in my dorm in spite of their low voices in the suite room.

Leif walked into the suite a few seconds later, and he sat down on the couch beside me with a long sigh. I glanced at him, relieved that he hadn’t tried to strike up conversation. “Do you two ever stop doing homework?” he asked.

His eyes scanned across the books and papers that lined our suite floor. Lee shrugged at the mess. “It kind of comes with the territory of engineering. Sorry we aren’t all majoring in criminal justice so all studying consists of is watching crime shows.”

The expression on Leif’s face meant he took this as less of an insult and more as an appreciation for his choice. “Well, I guess that says which of us is the practically smarter one, doesn’t it?”

The door to the suite swung open, and I glanced across to find Tamara in the doorway, completely soaked from the rain that had started to fall. She glared at me. “Damn it to hell, Calis! Do you ever look at your damn phone?”

The fact that it was in my hands did not do me any favors. I glanced down to the text messages that I’d been ignoring, all from her. “Oh, shit, I’m sorry, Tamara.”

Leif laughed aloud. “Holy shit – did you just walk from your class to this dorm, in the rain?”

She wasn’t in the mood for playful remarks, and she moved so that she was standing in front of me. “I don’t mind walking to class because you have something going on, but can’t you at least think about me when the weather is like this? Fuck – what do you even devote your brain to?”

My sour mood rose into my mouth like bile, and I glared at her. “Why don’t you check the weather forecast and drive instead of walking?”

Her eyes flashed with anger. “Because I like to walk, in case you’ve forgotten that, which would be likely since we’ve spent a total of four hours a week together recently!”

I glared at my phone, scanning through the steadily angrier text messages, and then I turned it away from me. “I’ve been trying to avoid being hassled by my parents, which you would understand if you ever thought about me in a context besides whether or not I can drive you to school!”

Her blonde hair twisted and curled around her face as rivulets of water slid down them. At one point, I would have said she was beautiful, but at the moment, I wanted to shove her. “Oh, I’m the one who doesn’t think about the other in this relationship, now? Really? Fuck you, Calis!”

“Hey, take it easy, guys.” Leif was the one who tried to come between us, likely because Lee knew from experience that there was nothing to be done.

Tamara snarled, and she stared at me through a soaked expression. “Will you at least take me home?”

The idea of spending even a second in the car with her made me sick to my stomach. “I can’t. I have to go talk to my professor.” Her mouth fell open, and the anger seemed to drain from her face as she looked at me.

“Fine, go talk to him.”

I wondered why she looked calmer, and I lowered my eyes as I turned towards the door to grab the umbrella. Leif seemed stunned, and Lee and Katt pretended to be enthralled in their assignments. “Tamara, I can drive you home.”

I heard Leif offer his own services, and some part of me thought I ought to have been jealous, but I walked out the door without so much as a whisper of it. There was nowhere else to go, and so I did walk the length of the campus to stand outside of Professor Ingram’s office door. The afternoon hadn’t ended, so he was likely still in there.

I knocked on the door despite every part of me screaming to leave. He opened it a few seconds later, and he seemed surprised to see me. “Hi, Calis. What are you doing here so late?”

“I was going to ask if you wanted to go eat. I know I’ve been blowing you off recently, and I’m sorry, but I’m free now.”

He looked like he might say no, and I wouldn’t have been devastated, as that would have let me go hide somewhere with the excuse that he’d sent me away. Then, though, he smiled and nodded. “Sure, do you care where we go?”

I did care. I wanted to go nowhere. I shook my head, though, and he went inside to get his jacket and umbrella. I followed him to his car, and he glanced at me. “I was really thinking that you were just going to avoid this until you managed to graduate.”

The laugh in my throat was raw, and I shook my head again. Even if he was right, admitting to that would be an insult. His car smelt like a mix of peppermint and old people, which was bizarre, because he couldn’t have been more than fifty-five.

“Have you ever been to Bob’s Diner?”

My eyes widened, and I slowly turned towards him with a pale expression that was simultaneously elated and terrified. “I… no, but I’ve heard of it,” I said.

“Well, if you don’t have any other suggestions, then that’s one of my favorite places.”

Hadn’t Taylor said that he’d gotten food poisoning the last time he’d eaten there? I wondered if Professor Ingram wasn’t secretly trying to kill me. Fine – I was okay with that. Still, as the car started down the road, my heart pounded. Taylor was going to think this was intentional, and yet I couldn’t make myself give the professor a reason not to go to the diner.

He may not even be present. My heart pounded in my ears until we pulled up to the small diner tucked into a dozen other small shops. The professor held the door for me, and I let my eyes ease around the room.

Black and white tilted floor greeted me, with silver and red tables, and neon signs decorating the whole of the interior. Diner was a very good word for it. “Ethan!” One of the waitresses looked by me to Professor Ingram. “You brought a student today!”

I glanced back at him. Ethan? He did not look like an Ethan to me. He nodded his response, and the waitress saw us to one of the tables. Taylor wasn’t in the front of the restaurant, and I wondered if that meant he wasn’t working.

Professor Ingram, or Ethan, talked about our class for a moment, and I could feel myself starting to glaze. I ought to pay attention to him, lest he report back to my father and tell him that I was disrespectful.

The conversation was interrupted, and my heart fell straight out of the chair and into the floor. “Hi, Ethan – you want a coffee and water?”

The professor looked up at him as if he wasn’t the center of the universe, and I wanted to grab this old man and tell him he was wrong. Taylor hadn’t turned to look at me, and panic gnawed my insides. “That sounds good.”

Taylor’s mouth was open, and when he turned, he shut it promptly – so promptly that his jaw clicked. “C-can I get you anything to drink?” he finally said.

I hoped my eyes conveyed the resounding unintentional nature of this encounter, but I glanced at the menu. “Uh, w-water… water’s fine.”

“Great,” he said. His smile was so fake that it was almost comical, and then he turned to the professor. “I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared to get the drinks, and I considered reaching into my chest and ripping out my own heart to make it stop pounding. “So, Calis, I know you do a lot of hanging around for your parents sake, and I do appreciate that…”

I looked to the professor with wide eyed. I couldn’t find any of the usual charismatic things to say like it wasn’t my parents, and so I just stared at him like a confused deer. “But, you are extremely, and I mean extremely, talented at understanding concepts. I know you spend less than half of the time the other students spend studying, and your assignments are just… naturally… near perfect.”

The compliment made me squirm in my seat. I wondered if he said this to everyone that he was forced to go to lunch with him. “Thank you,” I said. “I, uh… work… really hard at it.” That was a lie.

He knew it too. He shook his head with a smile. “No, you don’t. You don’t work really hard at it. You just get it. You’re better at case studies than even your father ever was.”

That was startling to hear, since to hear my father tell it, he was the greatest lawyer to ever walk the face of the Earth. “Oh, well, my dad would probably disagree with you, there,” I said. I glanced towards the silver door that Taylor had gone through.

“Not if he read some of these.”

“W-well, I appreciate the support, professor. Hopefully, I can stay as impressive when I actually get into law school.”

He steepled his fingers and stared at me over them. “Actually, Calis, I was hoping to get a chance to talk to you about that.”

“A-about what?”

“Law school. I actually sent some of your…”

He stopped talking as Taylor reappeared and set the drinks on the table. He looked at both of us, and my heart hurt at how wide and bright his eyes were. “Are you ready to order?” he asked.

The professor nodded his head diligently. “Yeah, but I’m sure you already know what I want.” Taylor’s smile was quick, and he scribbled into the notepad briefly before he turned to me.

“And you?” he asked.

I stared at him with a half-opened mouth for a moment. The uniform was collared, and the button-up shirt had pinstripes down it. I wanted to ask why he looked so good in everything, but I realized that I had not even looked at the menu. “Uh… uh… uh…” I grabbed the menu and stared at it.

The words were all but illegible in my panic over the fact that I wasn’t ready to order, and he was having to stand there and stare at me. The menu was removed from my hands and replaced with his quick hands, and I realized I’d had it upside down.

My cheeks hurt from the heat, and I glanced at him for a moment. His smile was gentle, then, and I could see the formation of a dimple on both sides of his cheeks. “Sorry…”

“It’s okay.” His voice was gentler than his smile was.

My head bowed, and I spouted off the first item I recognized as a food item I’d had before, and he nodded at me brightly. “It’ll be right out.” He took the menus and disappeared back towards the door again.

Professor Ingram was looking at me. “You know that young man?”

Just as I’d been about to relax, the panic exploded through me again like a kick drum. My mouth failed to operate, and I rubbed the back of my neck. “Taylor? Uh, well, uh… well, we, uh… we went to school together.”

The professors smile was amused, and there was a sort of twinkle in his eyes that made me want to run out of the restaurant. “He’s an excellent server,” he said. “But aren’t you in a relationship with that lovely young woman majoring in economics?”

“What?” I waved my hands in the air as though he was aiming a gun at me. “What? No! No, I don’t… I mean, no…we’re just… I mean… no, no, I mean… Tamara is… Taylor and I… just friends. We’re just friends. We’re not… I’m not… no.”

The smile didn’t fade from his face, and he nodded his head as he stroked his chin. “Just friends? Then, I’ll assume the notion of talking about law school is what made you so nervous, Mr. Tsrali.”

“Law school?” I stared at him for a moment, and then my mind returned to me the conversation we’d been having before Taylor appearance. “Oh, oh, yeah. Yes. What were you saying about that?”

He laughed for a moment, and he shook his head. “Well, I sent some of your work to the top law schools, and they were really impressed.”

I tried to keep my head downwards as I recalled Lee’s words from the party about how obvious I was. “Oh? What? When did you send them that? What did you send them?”

“Just some of your case studies and essays. I occasionally do it with some of my more promising students.”

That was unnerving. I could see a council of stuffy old men in my head scrutinizing the nonsense I’d scribbled at 4AM in the morning. “Ah, so… what did they say?”

His eyes rested on me for a moment, and I looked around to try and ease the awkward tension that this moment had created. “They were as impressed as I was. You really are very good at this type of work, and I can’t imagine how good you would be if you applied yourself.”

I squirmed in my seat. The thought gave me a flash of pride, but then I just felt the enormous pressure of my next 4AM assignment being of less quality. “Well, that’s good. I’m, uh… cool, glad they approved.”

“They did approve, Calis, and one of them thought so highly of you that they wanted me to send your current GPA and brief dossier on you.”

That sounded a little like an assassin plot waiting to happen, and I smiled as my eyes slowly moved towards the back of the restaurant. “Right, well, I hope you didn’t talk to Dr. Ross about my latest biology lab, then.”

He laughed at me briefly, though I was floundering in a mix of curiosity and awkwardness. “I don’t think law school is particularly interested in your ability to dissect frogs.” I shrugged in agreement.

“They were really impressed, Calis. Really impressed. With your father’s history at the school, and my recommendation… they mentioned working out a form of early admittance in the spring semester so that you could audit some of the classes to give you a better understanding for when you start next August. They even offered to let you live on campus fully funded.”

My mouth fell open. “Wait, what? What?” I leaned forward, trying to find some reason not to believe this. “I don’t understand. My father went to UCLA. Are you talking about UCLA? That’s in California!”

Taylor reappeared at precisely the moment that my voice had risen to a crack, and he diligently kept his head down as he put the food in front of both of us. My attention went from point A to point B with zero lag time, and I stared up at him again.

He pulled away from us, obviously aware of his position as a waiter – not wanting to interrupt our conversation. “Let me know if you need anything else.” His eyes lingered on me for a single second, and then he turned and headed back towards the bar.

My mouth opened as though anything I could say could have drawn him back without making the situation entirely weird. I looked back to the professor after a moment. “Sir, what… in California? I won’t even have graduated by then.”

The notion of leaving this town now, when Taylor had just shown up, felt agonizing. Lee was my best friend, and Taylor… Taylor had just gotten here and this man was talking about a move halfway across the country?

He took a bite of his food, though I couldn’t find the courage or willpower to even look at mine. “I’ve discussed everything with your current professors and the dean, and we think that if you completed a few key assignments, you could graduate in December.”

“D-December?” I shook my head. “What? Like how many key assignments?”

He laughed. “You wouldn’t be doing every assignment for the classes, just demonstrating a fundamental knowledge of the subject areas. I don’t think you’d have any trouble with it at all.”

My heart felt like it was going to implode in my chest. I didn’t know how I felt, but my breathing was irregular, and I stared at the food in front of me. “W-well, but… what if I didn’t do this? I mean… I could still apply later.”

“Calis, an opportunity like this does not come along often. I’m sure you could still get into the schools, but this would provide you with an opportunity to talk to the professors individually and develop a repertoire with them before your class.”

I didn’t want any more repertoires with any more professors. I wanted a repertoire with the young man standing across the diner, and I wanted one with Lee and Katt, and even Tamara. “Yeah, but, I…”

“Your parents think this is a really good idea.”

My parents – he’d already told my parents. The thought brought my teeth to a grind, and I could only imagine what they’d say to me if I tried to turn it down. “I…” There was no other way to go about it. If I turned down the opportunity, my parents would kill me. “I… that’s great. When am I supposed to get the assignments?”

He seemed elated that I’d agreed, though I wanted to run to the bathroom and puke. I smiled at him through my discontentment, and I bit my lip upon realizing that I wouldn’t be able to touch any of the food.

“I’ll discuss with the other professors, and we should be able to get them to you as early as next week. We’ll try to make it a little more challenging for you than the usual ones.”

He finished his food, and I pushed mine around on the plate and pretended to eat it. Taylor came by a few more times to refill our drinks, but he made no idle conversation, and he didn’t meet my eyes when I looked at him. His appearance still made me nervous, but now it had the added effect of making me want to cry.

The professor stood to leave, and I glanced back towards Taylor one last time. This time, he was looking at me, and I thought there was something sympathetic in his expression, but that could have just been my own projection of feeling sorry for myself.

~

“That’s two months, Lee. I don’t want to leave in two months.” The conversation with my parents had gone as expected, though they hadn’t needed to lecture once I told them I had already agreed to it.

Lee was lying on the bed, and he’d suppressed his own irritation when I’d first revealed the news, but four years with him was enough for me to know that it upset him. “You could always just forget to do the assignments.”

The idea of that would have been appealing, if my father’s thunderous expression hadn’t been looming in the background of my thoughts. “Imagine how that would affect my recommendations when I tried to get in next Fall.”

Our silence spoke volumes, as neither of us had any idea of what to say. Some part of me had expected Taylor to text me and ask about what had happened, but that had been wishful thinking on my part.

I rolled onto my stomach. Tamara had sent a text telling me she was sorry for being so angry, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell her the news, either. Mostly because I wasn’t sad about leaving her like I should have been.

“California.” I’d never been overly interested in travel, though I’d always assumed I’d end up in California due to that being where my father went to law school. I didn’t want to go – at all. California had never once appealed to me in the thousands of brochures my father had thrown my direction.

Lee had pulled one of the books off his shelf that wasn’t a textbook, and he buried his nose in it. We both knew there was nothing either of us could say that would make this suck any less. “I wonder what the assignment will be.”

“Probably a research at the courthouse or something like that,” he said. I could tell that he wanted to go further, but he just resumed reading.

The ceiling above my head made me claustrophobic, and some part of me wanted to spring off the bed and run back out into the now misting weather. I could still see Taylor’s gentle expression when he’d turned the menu around, and I begged for the return of that moment. “I feel like my entire life is making a mockery of serendipity. I spend four years trying to find a way to get this guy back into my life, and then he shows back up, and I’m supposed to go to fucking California.”

The book lowered slowly, and I could feel Lee’s eyes on me. “Well, maybe you could just tell them that…”

“Hilarious, Lee, seriously. You’ve met my parents.” He was wrong, and he ought to know that. I’d never had choices in my life.

Words failed him, and he shook his head though no sound came from his lips when he opened them. I just sighed and pulled my pillow over my face to keep from staring at the looming ceiling. “What do I say? Hey, I think I’m in love with someone over here, and I’m trying to prove to him I’m not a complete asshole, so if we could just hold off on the career plans for like twelve seconds – that’d be super.”

My own words played back in my head, and I cringed at the realization of what had come out of my mouth. Lee didn’t say anything, but I could feel his acknowledgement of the statement. “I’m not in love with him,” I clarified. “I was exaggerating.”

Lee shook his head. “I never mentioned it.”

The thing was – Lee could mention things with his expressions that he never opened his mouth about. “You were thinking it. It was just an expression to demonstrate the absurdity of what I was saying.”

His smile was placid, and he rolled over to return to the book that he was probably only pretending to read. “You shouldn’t let them make you miserable.” His words were abrupt, as though he’d repeated them a thousand times in his head and forced himself to say it.

I stared at him. “They aren’t making me miserable. They’re just annoying.”

His teeth pressed together, and he put the book face down on his bed. He never put books face down – he said it ruined them. “You were right,” he said. “You were right when you said that about Katt. You told me how stupid it was for me to let Tamara’s involvement obscure the way I felt.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Holy shit, are you saying that you like Katt?”

He stood up. “I… Calis, that is what you told me. You said it was dumb to let something like that stop me, and look at you… look at us both. How are you any better off, Calis? You can’t be bisexual because your parents would get mad at you? How is that any way to live your life?”

Fury cut up my spine, and I stood up to match his own gesture. “You think you feeling weird about being set up is the same as me having to go home and face my parents massive disappointment over their failure of a son? This is my entire life – every expectation ever placed on me, and you think that’s the same as you not feeling comfortable about a girl you barely know?”

His fist clenched, though I didn’t know why I’d expected he would back down. I didn’t know why I expected he would understand. Lee’s parents had always encouraged him to pursue what he wanted. “All you ever do is feel sorry for yourself and whine that you don’t have any options. You have plenty of options, Calis!”

“I have the option of letting my parents down, or I have the option of making something out of myself.”

“Yeah? Is that it, Calis? Is that it? What about him, huh? What about the kid with the lung condition that you let walk right out of your life because you were too scared that it might make your parents uncomfortable? What about the guy you cornered into being your friend again – that you’re going to abandon for the second fucking time? You were right. You don’t deserve him as a friend. Have fucking fun in California.” He shoved me in the chest, and he stormed out of the dorm without pausing to look back.

My anger and breath were stolen from me at the same time, and I fell down into a sitting position on my bed. I did want to help Taylor, but we couldn’t possibly have any sort of relationship with my parents disapproving every single thing we did. He wouldn’t be happy – I wouldn’t be happy…

I drew my hands over my face and tried to pretend I couldn’t feel the tears that had started to fall down my face.

~

Lee and I didn’t speak much the next few days. I couldn’t even force myself to go to the mall to see Taylor after what Lee had said to me, and my mind was in a haze until I received the text. “I can hang out today at 3:15. I’ll be at the bistro near the mall if you want to stop by.”

The haze lifted to reveal an explosion of sunlight and feeling sorry for myself felt like the opposite of an option. I’d started on a few of the assignments that Professor Ingram had given me, but I abandoned them the moment I got the text. I didn’t have to abandon them, as he’d sent the text seven hours before I had to meet him.

Suddenly, my not going to the mall felt like an enormous betrayal. I was surprised he’d mustered up the strength to send me the text at all. I couldn’t wait the seven hours, so I replied to him. “I’ll be there. I’m sorry I haven’t seen you the past few days. There’s been a lot going on.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

I wondered if he really understood. He’d been nearby during my conversation with the professor, and I doubted he’d gone the whole length of our meal without overhearing some of the commentary.

The hours passed slowly, and I couldn’t focus on any assignment long enough for it to pass the time. I kicked the soccer ball around the field for an hour, and then I walked around the field briefly before the sadness overwhelmed me, and I went to go sit in my dorm for the rest of the day.

I was at the mentioned bistro a solid thirty minutes before he’d said to be there. I paced outside the front, ignoring the glances I got from the staff that lurked behind the doors. They weren’t busy, so they just stared at passerbys – especially repeated passerbys.

Taylor was punctual as ever, and he got out of his car at precisely 3:15. He looked apologetic when he saw me. “I’m sorry. How long have you been here?”

There was something about him that made it easier to breathe – and for just one moment, I forgot that I had to go to California in less than two months. “No, I… not long. It’s fine.” My words were rushed.

He smiled at me, though, and I walked into the restaurant and requested a table. We ended up tucked into a corner, which was as relief, and he spoke directly. “So, California? Not excited about it?”

My eyes widened, though I’d already told myself that he must have known. I swallowed and peeled at the table with my finger. “Yeah, California.” I couldn’t bring myself to answer the second half of the question.

He leaned towards me. “That’s amazing, Calis. To have impressed your professors as much as you have. You really should be proud of that. You are so smart, and even if this feels pushy… please, don’t forget how absolutely impressive that means you’ve been.”

My cheeks flushed, and I stared across the table at him. No one had brought that up out of everyone I’d told. Tamara had been startled, but she’d assured me that she didn’t mind. Lee had been angry for more reasons than one, and my parents had been elated that I’d accepted the opportunity. But no one had mentioned the accomplishment until that moment. “It… does feel pushy.” I smiled at him. “Thank you, though, Taylor.”

“You’re welcome.” He paused so that we could order our drinks, and I couldn’t stop staring at him. I’d spent so much of the past few days staring at the floor, and now I didn’t want to look anywhere but as his face. “You don’t have to go, you know… you already did so much.”

“I do have to go,” I said. My hands trembled for a moment, and I kept the emotion firmly in check. “You know my parents, Taylor. I don’t really… have options. I just… kind of… try not to piss them off.”

His eyes were bright when he shook his head. “You do have options, Calis. You deserve to be happy. You have friends here. Tamara is here, and weren’t your parents pushing you to marry her? Lee is here. You deserve to be able to say that, and if they don’t accept it, then… it’s okay.”

My lips pressed together. “Is it okay? What happens if they don’t accept it? They could stop helping me get through school, they could kick me out of the house. It isn’t like they’re just some random people I like to impress. They are my parents.”

His brow furrowed, and he chewed on his lip. “Look at it this way – you are extremely attractive, and if I saw you on the side of the road, I would personally donate. I mean, I’m sure you’d drop a few numbers sans washing and trimming your hair, but still… I think you’re attractive enough.”

The thought made me laugh, and for a second, it was appealing. I could almost stop being afraid of what would happen to me. “Well, I appreciate the gesture. I’m glad you think I’m attractive enough to make it as a hobo.”

“Absolutely,” he said.

I smiled, and it felt like the first time in the past few days. “No, I mean, I know it is good for my career, and I do want to be a good lawyer.”

“You’ll be a good lawyer, no matter if you take the opportunity or not. I’ve never seen you fail at anything.”

The thought made me laugh. He didn’t seem to understand, though the memory of him walking out my front door played in my mind a thousand times again. “Trust me, I have failed at things before, and I can do it again.”

“You deserve to be happy.” He shook his head. “You spend so much of your time worrying what they think that it seems like you don’t even know what would make you happy.”

The waitress took our order, and Taylor moved the straw around in his water. I didn’t feel like I deserved to be happy, but when he looked at me, I forgot that for a second. “Well, if I’m letting myself get pushed along like this, then maybe I don’t deserve to be happy.”

He moved forward like he might grab me, but his hands never came towards me. “Calis, you’re nervous. No one has an easy time letting their parents down, and it certainly doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to be happy. You’re an amazing person.”

“Taylor…” My jaw clenched, and I could feel the burn of tears behind my eyes. “Thank you.”

He brightened, and I thought back to that day outside the mall. I had thought about it several times in spite of what had happened, though he seemed like an entirely different person than the one trembling and crying in the parking lot. “What about you?” I asked. “You seemed so upset the other day.”

He shook his head, vehemently. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I was just having a really bad morning. I get like that sometimes.”

“I’ve never seen you get like that,” I said.

His dismissal made me uncomfortable, and he took a drink of the water in front of him. “I also find it hilarious that your professor is the guy that always comes into the diner. We all marvel at how he’s still alive, but he seems to really like the food there.”

“Yeah, I was trying to find out if it was the California news, or the one bite I had of that chicken wrap that made me feel so nauseated. I finally decided it must have been a little of both.”

He bounced in his chair a little. He was trying so hard to be in a good mood, and I smiled in spite of everything. “So, did you and Tamara talk about you moving? You think you can survive long distance?”

I sighed. “She… wants to try.”

“Do you?”

I stared at him for a long moment, and my throat knotted. “I… yeah, I mean… I told her that it was worth a shot. I don’t know if we’ll make it, but she said there was no reason to break up right now – that it’s just borrowing trouble.”

“You two make a good couple,” he said. “I think trying makes sense.”

Trying didn’t make sense because I didn’t like her, though. I knew that, and I’d thought she knew that. Somehow, we’d agreed that we would stay together over the long distance, and he’d mentioned applying for colleges out in California. I didn’t want to try, though. I knew that – I did. “I, uh… I guess so.”

Our eyes met in what felt like a heated moment. I wanted to correct him and say that I didn’t think Tamara and I were a good couple. I wanted to ask him about the dance – to tell him I wanted to kiss him. “Calis! Taylor!”

The voice made both of us jump a little. My eyes widened to find Katt and Lee standing a few feet away. Lee looked away from me with a sheepish expression, but Katt bounded towards the two of us entirely oblivious. “Katherine,” Taylor said. “And, Lee Redacted Kelsin.”

“You can totally call me Katt, you know,” she said. “The Katherine thing is just something that I feel obliged to say because… it feels like a lie.”

Taylor laughed once. “Okay, Katt.”

Lee smiled, and he looked at me for a moment. He looked a little apologetic, and then he looked a little angry. “What are you two doing here?” he asked.

“Getting a late lunch, I guess,” Taylor answered. “I take it you two didn’t have quite as late of a lunch?”

Katt shook her head, and then she smiled upwards to Lee. “No, we were a little earlier, though Lee spent an extra hour in the lab trying to help me get one of my projects up and running before the end of the semester.” Her voice said annoyance, but her face said admiration.

“And it continues to fail,” Lee said.

Taylor’s brow furrowed, but his smile gave him a very empathetic expression. “Aw. Well, points for trying, Lee. What’s the experiment?”

“Remote control car. The first time I tried to do it, before Lee offered to help, which was super nice… but the first time, the car moved backwards about six inches before it was literally engulfed in flames. It was terrifying. I’m glad my professor didn’t see because he may have kicked me out.”

That made Taylor laugh, and hearing the laughter made me smile. “That is mildly terrifying. I’m glad you got help.”

“Yeah, the other people in my class all have their groups, and I’m just not very sociable, and so I had no one to help me, so I was trying to do it all on my own. Which isn’t a big deal, don’t think I’m feeling sorry for myself, but… like… there was a lot to do, and um… uh… it was really nice of Lee to help me.”

Lee shook his head. “You did a surprisingly decent job, given that you did it all on your own. Most of your classmates didn’t even have cars built. The fire was a… minor setback.”

“Fire does tend to do that,” Taylor said.

“So, Taylor, did Calis tell you that he got pseudo-accepted to UCLA?” Lee’s voice seemed harsh, as though he was annoyed with me for not having spoken for the entire conversation. “For this spring.”

Taylor glanced across to me with a sympathetic smile. “Yes, he mentioned it. It’s really impressive. I think he forgets that, since he does all his assignments at 4AM and assumes they’ll be bad.”

“I did some of them at 5AM, thank you very much, and a few of them were actually closer to three, so if you will just stop pretending to know me – that would be great.” My voice came out happier than it had all week, and the three of them laughed.

“It is impressive, but some might say that he lets himself be carried along more easily than he should.”

“Maybe,” Taylor said. “His parents are really pushy, though, and to his credit, I really think he’s just trying to please everyone.”

“I guess you have a higher opinion of him than me,” Lee said.

I glared at both of them. “I am sitting right here, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

The ability Taylor had to find the best in me, despite the fact that even I wasn’t sure about myself, floored me.

Lee was staring hard at him, as if he’d expected some sort of emotional response to the fact that I was leaving. Taylor looked nothing but cheerful, though. I wondered if that was because he really didn’t mind me leaving again. “Well, we should probably get back, and I think I see the waitress. I’ll see you later, Calis?” Lee asked.

“Yeah, see you, Lee.” I look at him, and I tried to decipher what was going on in his mind, but he just turned and ushered Katt towards the door.

Taylor turned back to me. “You were right. I do like Lee, and Katherine. Katt. Man, she really has some serious needs when it comes to her name. It’s a little nerve-wracking.” He peered at me thoughtfully, waiting until the waitress had set the food down before he continued. “Did you and Lee have a fight?”

His perceptiveness continued to surprise me. “I… well, he just got mad at me because… well, because… because I’m going to UCLA, even though I don’t really want to. I mean, it’s not that I don’t want to – I just… it’s just complicated.”

“He just wants you to be happy. He’s your friend, and I’m sure he can see you deserve it as well as I can.”

I thought back on what Lee had said. His intent had been to push me towards what I wanted, even if neither of us knew what that was. “Yeah, he’s a good friend,” I said. “I forget that sometimes.”

We ate our food, slowly, though I was considering order four plates of dessert just to keep this moment in time from ending. He talked idly about his work, though I wondered if his demeanor would change if I mentioned Claude. The conversation inevitably drifted to California, however. “The weather is supposedly amazing out there, though, so that’ll be something.”

“Not to discount the importance of a nice temperature, but I would really rather spend time with my friends,” I said.

He frowned, and he pushed at his food. “Calis, you don’t need to go. If you… if you think that you’re not going to be happy, then you shouldn’t go. I know you can make new friends because you’re charismatic and funny and attractive, and all the things necessary to make friends. But… if you want to say, if that’s what you want, then you should stay.”

“No, I can’t stay. I do want to stay, but… I… I can’t stay, Taylor. I literally cannot stay here. I have to go. I do. I have to go. I have to go be the star student at UCLA. I have to go and make better grades than Adrian. I have to go and make sure I don’t embarrass my dad. There isn’t an option.”

He drew back for a moment, and this time, his hand did come to touch mine very gently. “I know it’s scary, Calis, but your own happiness has to be worth something. Even if you make them mad… you can’t live your life doing everything they want you to do.”

I stared down at his hand, and the warmth of it spread through me in a way that brought the burning tears to a simmer. I said nothing, and he continued. “You don’t owe them anything. You deserve to do what you want to do, but… given what you’ve already done. You graduated fourth in your class in high school. You’ve done amazing in college – so good that you’re getting special opportunities, and that should give you enough padding to say no to something every once and a while.”

“I don’t even know what I want,” I said. “I can’t stand up for what I want or pursue my own happiness because I don’t know what it is. The easiest thing for me to do is just… whatever they think is best.”

“Well, maybe it’s okay, then. Maybe when you find something that you really want, then you’ll stand up to them and… I mean… I don’t want to make you be rebellious if you’re just a little nervous about it. I refuse to be that guy.” He gestured with his, and his tongue pressed into the bottom of his mouth.

Some part of me should have understood what he was saying. That gave me the opportunity to tell myself that I wasn’t the massive pansy that I felt like I was. But, he was wrong. He was wrong because I did know, at least in part, what I wanted.

He moved to look at his phone, and then he winced. “Shit – it’s already been two hours. I probably need to head out soon.” He flagged the waitress down to ask for the check, and she turned to retrieve it.

Two hours? I felt like we’d been sitting there for twenty minutes – maybe thirty if I was really generous. How had two hours passed? “Two… what?” I looked at my own phone, which confirmed what he’d said.

“Thanks for hanging out with me today, Calis. I had fun.”

“Yeah, I… me too. I really like hanging out with you.”

He smiled and waved his hand through the air as if I was only saying that to flatter him, though that couldn’t have been further from the truth. The check arrived, and we both realized that she hadn’t split it.

The two of us reached for it, and our hands ran into one another. He didn’t fight me for it, and instead he drew his wrist back to his body and hissed through his teeth. “Are you okay?”

He took a deep breath, winced, and then he nodded. I withdrew the check from the table and slid my card into the leather case. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he said. “Hey, no… you’ve bought breakfast all those times. Let me get it today.”

“I told you why I was buying breakfast. What’s wrong with your wrist?”

“Nothing. I just jammed it weird against the door last night. You’ve done enough with breakfast, and I don’t think one lunch is going to make up for all of them.”

I shook my head, and he didn’t reach for me, likely because he knew that I would try to inspect his wrist. “Do you need to see a doctor about it?”

“No, Calis, it’s totally fine.”

I gave the check to the waitress when she returned for it, and then I moved towards him. He was trying to keep from touching his wrist, but our brief collision had left him in a lot of pain. “Let me look at it, at least.”

“Calis, really, there’s nothing there. It’s fine. Don’t be such a spaz!” He smiled at me, and I felt uneasy for a moment as I shook my head.

The waitress returned, and we left the restaurant. He turned to me with another smile that made my knees feel weak. “This was fun. I’m glad we did this. Even if you were a sulky little baby…” He reached up and pushed my forehead back.

I laughed and wrapped my arms around his waist with the result of paralyzing him just a moment before I tickled either of his sides. “Calis – no, don’t! Oh my god, Calis, people are going to think you are attacking me!”

He finally wriggled free, and his arms crossed as an adorable pout formed across his lips. The light caught his cheek bone, though, and the purple along it seemed like more than a shadow. “Taylor…”

“Uh-huh?”

My hand moved so that it rested above his cheek for a moment before I touched the spot along his face. The feel of his face made me shiver a little, though the knowledge of the discoloration sobered me. “Is that a bruise?” I asked.

“What?” He grabbed my hand and pulled it away. He was still smiling, though there was a strain in his blue eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. Probably. I fall into stuff a lot. Thank you for paying, and try to keep yourself in mind from now on when making decisions, okay?”

The kid that I’d let walk right out of my life. The kid with the lung condition. The kid with the bruise on his cheek. The kid that would tuck everything about himself away in order to help his selfish bastard of a friend when he was sad. The kid with the flawless blue eyes and the unforgettable kiss.

I did know what I want. He was wrong. There was nothing I would ever want more. I was a pansy. I knew what I wanted. I’d always known. He’d moved towards his car, and I moved after him to spin him around. “Taylor. I want to do this again.”

His eyes widened, and then he looked at the sidewalk. “Again? Well… I’m not sure when I’d have time to do it again.”

“I have to see you again.”

The urgency in my voice made him nervous, and he clenched his teeth. “You can see me at the mall… if you really want to talk.”

“I mean for more than fifteen or thirty minutes. I want to see you again, like this. Please.” I moved closer to him, and there was his breath on my lips, and my heart was trying to leap out of my chest and consume him.

I was in love with him. It wasn’t an exaggeration. I was in love with him, and I had been since the day we’d kissed on the soccer field. He was my first love, my only love, my better half, my best friend, my everything. Him. I wanted him. Even if I couldn’t have him, my breathing got easier when I said it in my own mind. I wanted him. I wanted Taylor. And that was a step in the right direction…

“You’re so dramatic. You have a girlfriend, you know.” His voice was teasing, but I could see the seriousness in his eyes.

“Tamara and I aren’t a good couple. We’re not. We suck. I don’t even like her. I don’t think she likes me. We couldn’t survive long distance. We wouldn’t even survive the rest of college if I stayed.”

He blinked several times, rapidly. “Wow, um, okay… that’s probably something that you should talk to her about.”

I held onto his hands, and I moved closer to him. Our lips were hovering around one another again, and I could feel my own body coming to life like I’d wanted it to since that day on the soccer field. One more inch. “Please? Can we? At least one more time, Taylor?”

“Um… I… uh, yeah… yeah, I guess so. It’ll have to be after Thanksgiving, though. I’ve got a busy schedule until then. Can you wait that long?”

I shook my head. “No, but it’ll work. I’ll see you at the mall.” My hand moved to his cheek, and I stared at his lips openly and unabashedly. He was trying to form words, but he couldn’t quite make them. “You’re wonderful,” I said.

I turned away from him, then, and I started towards my own car. I had to take this one step at a time, and I knew what had to come first.

~

Tamara’s surprise was immediate when she saw me standing outside of her door. “Can I come in?” I asked.

That took her off guard, as I’d possibly asked to come into her apartment three times in the seven months we’d been together. She stepped aside, though, and I walked the entryway of her apartment. “Calis, what’s the matter? You kind of look like a man possessed.”

I felt like one. I turned to face her, and I could still feel the heat of his breath whispering against my lips. I could still see the sparks that raged behind his eyes. I could still see the bruise across his cheek. “Tamara. I… why did we agree to do long distance? Do you really think we’re a good fit?”

She seemed taken aback. Her mouth dropped, and she actually stepped away from me. “I… I wouldn’t be dating you, if I… I mean, yes.”

“Do you? I mean, I know when I asked you out… it was romantic. And you’re beautiful, you really are, and smart, and funny. That day beside the lake – that kiss was great, but… I think we might have peaked right then.”

This brought her eyes to saucer level, and she choked on the words I was saying. “Are you… are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I’m asking you, in all honesty, to tell me that you think I’m the person that you belong with. I’m asking you to tell me that you’ve never had doubts about me.”

She shook her head. “Everyone has doubts, Calis. That’s part of a relationship. What we have is real, so there’s going to be doubts.”

“Okay, maybe so, maybe doubts are normal, but do I really make you feel… do you want me more than anything else in the world? When I’m not around, do you feel empty? Does your day instantly brighten when you see me? Am I the one thing that could pull you out of your darkest moment? Do you see me when you close your eyes – replay memories of me when you’re sad to make yourself smile?” I took a step towards her. “Do you love me, Tamara?”

He jaw worked slowly, and her eyes blinked a hundred times. She stared at the floor, and then she looked back up towards me. “I… Calis, if you’re freaking out about this California thing. I don’t see…”

“No, Tamara, tell me. Answer me.”

She turned away from me, and her arms moved to her face. “You’re amazing, Calis. You’re so much nicer than any other guy I’ve dated. You’re handsome and funny and clever, even if you’re not the most thoughtful guy I’ve ever met… I like you. I like being around you.”

My pursuit didn’t stop, and she moved away from me when I approached her. “I like being around you too, but I also like being around Lee and Katt. I like being around a lot of people, but is that the basis for a relationship?”

“Calis…”

“You only cling to me when you’re drunk. You need someone that makes you feel like that without alcohol.”

She laughed a little. “Wow, how poetic of you…” Tears had brimmed along the fronts of her eyes, and the sight made me a little sick. “Too bad you’re doing this when you’re trying to break up with me.”

“Tamara…”

“I know why. I know you like him. I know you like Taylor. I knew that first night when I walked outside and saw you two on the balcony. You just stared at him like he was ethereal.” She shook her head. “You asshole. You sit there and insult my bisexual cousin, and then you…”

My cheeks flushed, though there was no way I was going to deny what she said when Taylor was the basis for everything I’d just said to her. “I do care about you, Tamara.”

“I know.” She brushed some of the hair away from her face. “That’s why you asked that. Because you know I don’t look at you like that, just like you don’t look at me like that. You knew you weren’t going to hurt me.” She laughed. “I love that about you. You know me. You don’t treat me like a princess… like you’re everything to me. We’ve both always known…”

“Then, why did you say you wanted to try long distance?”

She shook her head. “Because we’re not that different. Because I’m as scared of letting everyone down as you are. If I let go of you, of this smart, talented, amazing boyfriend, then how would I ever find someone better?”

I moved forward and grabbed her by the arms. “Because you are smart, and talented, and amazing. You are funnier and better than I’ll ever be, Tamara. Where is my confident girlfriend? You know that.”

Her laugh was quiet, and it got louder when she drew a breath. “I am pretty awesome, honestly. I forget it sometimes, but I am.”

She put her hands on my face, and then she moved her mouth so that it caught mine again. She bit her lip when she pulled away. “You’re probably right. I think we peaked that night by the lake. But, it was a pretty high peak, at least.”

“A very high peak.”

She shook her head and wiped some of the tears from her eyes. “What are you going to do, Tsrali? Taylor is still dating my asshole cousin, and you’re moving to California in two months.”

“I… am still working on that.”

~

I saw Taylor in the mornings, at the mall, though I was painfully aware of the careful way he handled me. He made me feel like a glass toy, or a child he didn’t want to startle. There weren’t more bruises, though I couldn’t get the image of the one out of my head. I couldn’t think the thought – I couldn’t, or I would likely stalk Taylor back to his apartment and commit murder. I wanted to say it aloud to someone, anyone, but there was no way for me to say it without coming undone. I couldn’t even allow myself to think it.

Thanksgiving came like a speeding train reminding me that I had only a couple weeks to complete the assignments I’d been given. Some of my professors had given me class periods off so that I could focus on them, and Dr. Ingram hadn’t quite made them challenging enough to be take too long.

I spent a few days at the courthouse, and I was miserable, but aside from that, the assignments came easy to me. I was nearly done with the final one as I stood outside my car to head home for Thanksgiving. The twelve minutes I’d spent with Taylor that morning seemed mockingly short, as I wouldn’t see him for three days.

“So, are you going home for Thanksgiving?” I’d finally asked him when all my subtle attempts to for him to bring it up had failed. “You could ride with me down there, if… if you were actually going. You don’t have to, but…”

He had been writing notes on the counter of the department store when he looked at me. “Unfortunately not. You get extra for working the holidays at the store, so Mom will have to be content with a text message. It just sucks because she… Raleigh can’t cook, and she really struggles in the kitchen, and just…” He pressed his lips inwards. “It’s fine. I’ll see her at Christmas, though.”

Disappointment stung like an angry bee, as I’d let myself entertain the notion of three hundred miles in a car with him for a second too long. “But, that means you’ll be alone on Thanksgiving.”

He looked at me again, and he shook his head. “Claude will be here.” The thought made my insides twist.

“Oh, right, Claude.”

I hadn’t told him about the breakup, mostly because it had felt like a plea for sympathy in all the times that we’d seen each other, and partly because we never had time to talk properly. So, the words spilled from my mouth in a sort of panic. “I… well, my Thanksgiving is going to suck. Tamara and I broke up… and… they are going to be pissed, mostly because I still haven’t even told them.”

His eyes had widened, and he’d stopped writing to stare into space for a long second. “Y-you… you and Tamara broke up?” He swallowed. “Was it about the long distance thing?”

“I told you I didn’t think we were a good couple.” I laughed. “I can’t make some kind of confession like the one I made to you and then stay in the relationship, now can I?”

He was impressed, and his eyes reflected that towards me. He’d never thought I’d act on what I’d said, and it had affected him. “I… no, I guess you can’t. Well, are you alright? You didn’t say anything! Is she okay?”

“I’m fine. You’re such a worrier. No, I told her how I felt, and she actually agreed with me. We just… I think we were both with each other out of convenience.” I took a breath, and his eyes were shimmering in a way that made my knees shake a little.

The moment lasted a long time, and then he’d looked back at the counter. “Well, I’m proud of you. I’m glad you had the courage to do that.”

That had been this morning, though he’d made no further mention of Claude. I sighed as I stared at my car and considered my parents disapproving faces. “They can’t be that mad at me,” I said. “I’ve almost finished these assignments. I’m graduating early. I mean – you can’t tear me apart over a girlfriend that didn’t work out.”

Lee put his hand on my shoulder. “If they do, then they are complete assholes, and you don’t need to worry about them.” I moved to look at him. “I take it Taylor isn’t going back home for Thanksgiving?”

I shook my head. “No… I did surprise him with the news that Tamara and I were done.” I rolled my eyes. “He just said he was proud of me.”

“I take it he and Claude are still together?”

I nodded. “Tamara said Claude will be around for Thanksgiving, and she’d tell me if she saw Taylor. She is a surprisingly amazing ex. I guess… not that surprising. It works out, since I can’t very well ask Taylor if he and Claude are a good couple without seeming incredibly obnoxious.”

Lee rocked back on his heels. “I might possibly there, too, so I’ll keep you posted.”

Shock and pain shot through me as I realized that I would be the only one that wasn’t at any Thanksgiving parties for Tamara’s family. “Well, make sure no one hassles Tamara. Does this mean you and Katt are official now, or…?”

His eyes narrowed, and he shoved me towards my car. “It just means I have nowhere else to go for Thanksgiving, since I didn’t want to buy the plane tickets home. I… we’re not official. I don’t think. Maybe we are.”

I grabbed his collar seriously. “Lee, you have to DTR.”

“DTR?”

“Define the relationship. Come on, everyone knows that one. Even nerds like you.” He shoved my head backwards, and I released him. He was smiling, though.

He looked at his feet. “Well, I’ll work on DTR, and you work on IYP.”

“Say what now?”

“Ignoring your parents.” The smile on his face was so entirely ridiculous that I Burst out laughing in the middle of the parking lot.

I nodded. “Now, let’s wait for that to catch on.”

I slid into my car, and he waved at me as he headed back towards our dorm. It would only be our dorm for a few more weeks, and that thought still left me feeling incredibly hollow. Almost as hollow as the day Taylor had walked out of my front door that final time.

~

My house was enormous. We’d lived in the house since I’d first started high school. I pulled my car into the driveway beside Adrian’s already-parked, over-the-top Mustang. He’d bought it himself, I’d been told forty-two times, in regards to my car, which I had not bought myself, because I’d gotten it when I was seventeen.

I slammed my door and grabbed the bag that had a few of my clothes in it. Tamara’s family affairs had always disgusted me, but nothing made me feel like walking up the front steps of my own house. I was nervous and disgusted, like the way you feel the second before a car crash.

Knocking seemed like a perfect invitation to get hassled immediately about Tamara, so I used my key and walked through the door. I could hear Adrian and his wife conversing with my parents in the other room, and I looked up the stairs.

“Calis, is that you?” My father.

I considered saying nothing, running back out to the car, and driving back to school under the guise of a car accident. “Yeah, it’s me,” I answered.

That led to the movement of the crowd from the kitchen into the entryway. My mother wrapped her arms around my neck before I’d even set the bags down, and I returned the hug awkwardly. “You look like you’ve lost weight,” she said. “Are you eating okay?”

I glanced down at myself, and my face twisted into a grimace. “Yeah, I’ve just been busy.” They ought to know that since they forced it on me.

Adrian took a step towards me. “So, Mom and Dad tell me you have completely surpassed the star pupil mark. When are you ever going to let one of my achievements lie without crushing them?”

I laughed at him and shook my head. “Well, there’s still law school. I doubt they will be as easily impressed.”

“You’re right. They won’t be, which means that you need to stop half-assing your work. Professor Ingram tells me that you’re talented, but you aren’t applying yourself.”

I bit back the remark that whether or not I was applying myself didn’t seem to matter to Professor Ingram or UCLA. “I know, Dad. I’ll apply myself when it gets challenging, I really will.”

“It’s a good habit to form when things aren’t challenging. What happens when you don’t know how to handle having to study for two nights in a row, Calis? You need to take this more seriously.”

My mom swatted at my father’s shoulder. “Leave him alone, Ken. He just got home.” She was one to talk, since she’d been hassling me on the phone for weeks over the exact same thing.

Adrian’s expression was sympathetic, but I didn’t trust it, and so I looked upstairs. “I’m going to go put my bags in my room. I’ll be back down in a second.”

I started up the stairs to the sound of the question that I’d been hoping wouldn’t come. “Where’s Tamara?”

I froze, and my teeth grinded against one another for a few moments. I took a long breath and turned back to face my father again. “Not here,” I said.

“Don’t be smart, Calis. Why isn’t she here? I thought you were going to bring her?”

My hand clenched over the railing on the stairway. “We broke up,” I said. I turned to keep going up the stairs, though I could just imagine his expression of abhorrence glaring into my back.

“Aw – I liked her. She was sweet.” My mother was never as harsh as my father, though she could nag just as well.

“Why did you break up with her, Calis? Why do you keep spending months and months with these girls only to break up with them at the point where you ought to be considering a future?”

My exasperation was hard to mask when I turned to look at him. “I don’t know, Dad. It just didn’t work out. I’m not doing it on purpose.”

“Your screwing up your life. You need to find a girlfriend. You might be able to find one in law school, but the amount of competition between you and a girl in law school might completely destroy a relationship.” He hissed his disapproval. “Why is everything such a process with you, Calis? Adrian was engaged by the time he was your age.”

Adrian had been able to marry his high school sweetheart, and there had never been any objections when he’d declared his intentions. “I don’t know. Maybe I missed the boat in high school.”

“No, you didn’t, sweetie. Don’t talk like that.” My mother’s eyes were all shimmery and frustrating. I wanted to finish walking to my room without leaping down the stairs and jamming my fingers into their eye sockets.

“Dad, relationships are hard. Take it easy.”

Dad wasn’t going to take it easy, and he stormed away from the stairwell as though I’d just told him I had failed out of school. I sighed and walked to my room to set the bags down on my old bed. I could still see Taylor leaned back against the headrest, chewing his lip over the controller linked to the gaming console.

Some of the pictures in the room still had him in it. I’d taken him with us on a few family vacations to the beach, and those were the most prominent. Some I’d taken with me and kept stored in my drawers at school, but I couldn’t take them all. I screamed my frustration and flung one of my bags against the wall.

I didn’t go back down until my mother very pointedly called me. I walked down the steps to the image of Adrian and his wife cuddling on the couch like hormonal teenagers. My mother was in the kitchen, and Dad was absent. “Hey, Calis, don’t worry about your father, okay? He just wants you to have someone.” She gestured to the potatoes. “You mind helping?”

I moved towards the stack of them and started with the peeler. “Yeah, I wouldn’t want the Siamese twins in there to do it. Who knows what might happen?” I peeled them and tried to get the scowl off my face.

“So, you haven’t met any other nice girls, have you? I know you’re going to be leaving in a month, but… you never know.”

The words made my throat knot, and I slid the blade down the potatoes with a hard thrust. “No, Mom, I haven’t met any girls.”

“Well, the opportunity with UCLA is great. I’m glad you’re doing it, and I’m sure you’ll be able to find someone out there. Law school girls aren’t the only ones available. It’s California for crying out loud.”

“Yep.” I kept the motion, and I put aside the potatoes as I finished them.

I could feel her looking at me, and some part of me expected some remark about how I was being rude. She said nothing, though. I finished with the potatoes, and dinner was a relatively painless ordeal.

Dad spent the majority of the time talking about Adrian’s job and comparing the two of them to my mother and father when they were young. He ignored me for the most part, and I ate in contentment with that fact.

The terrible thought I had didn’t occur to me until the next morning, and I hurried down the steps and grabbed the sweater I’d hung up yesterday. “Hey, Mom. I’m going out. I’ll be back later.” I grabbed some of the leftovers and put the wrapped Tupperware into a basket. “Taking some of the leftovers.”

“Before dinner, I hope?” Mom asked.

I nodded, but Dad glared at me. “Are you not even going to tell your mother happy Thanksgiving before you rush off?”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Mom, Happy Thanksgiving, Dad. I’ll get Adrian when I get back.” I left the house without waiting for his displeased remark or his question about where I was taking the leftovers.

I knew the route a little too well, and I hoped they hadn’t moved in the time between the last time I’d taken it. I’d driven by his house a thousand times during my senior year – curious what he was doing.

The same cars sat in the driveway, and so I didn’t hesitate when I parked the car on the curb and walked up to the quaint house tucked into the trees. I did hesitate, however, as my hand hung over the door. I knocked twice, as the doorbell had been broken since before I could remember.

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door three times. No one answered for a moment, and I considered running away. Then, I heard shuffling behind the door, and the door behind the glass one swung open.

Raleigh was taller than Taylor – nowhere near as attractive, but he still had the olive skin and long lashes. He looked confused for a moment, and then his mouth fell open, and he laughed. “Holy shit – Calis Tsrali. Did I just go back in time?”

I smiled. “No, still the present.”

“Wow, dude, what are you doing here?” His smile reminded me of Taylor’s. He had the same dimples, and he gestured for me to come in.

I took a breath. “I was here for Thanksgiving, and…”

“Raleigh, who is it?”

“A blast from the past,” Raleigh said. He gestured for me to come into the small living room, and I turned the corner to Taylor’s mother.

She had always been small, but her legs were terrifying to look at now. Her eyes were just as bright, though, and she smiled at me. “Oh, my word. Calis Tsrali. Look at you. You turned out even more handsome than I thought you would. What on earth are you doing here?”

“Hey, Miss Lassau.” The words made me blush, and I put the basket of food on the coffee table. “Actually, Taylor mentioned that Raleigh sucked at cooking, so I thought I’d bring you guys some of the four thousand pounds of food my mother made last night.”

They turned to look at each other in a moment with widened eyes. “You talked to Taylor?” Raleigh asked.

“Uh, yeah… yeah, I actually go to school in the town he’s working in. We’ve, uh… we’ve been hanging out… a little.”

His mother covered her mouth, and Raleigh’s eyebrows looked a mix between offended and shocked. I winced, and then his mother laughed. “Well, that was very thoughtful of you, Calis. Raleigh does his best, but… and please, just call me Amber.”

“Can we just not go there? Can we not? I’m about to call Taylor and ask him to stop shit-talking me to his friends.”

I grinned. “Well, Raleigh, if I remember correctly, the grilled cheese sandwiches you used to make were borderline murderous.”

“I did forbid him from making those, didn’t I?” Amber said. She looked at me for a long moment. “I’m glad you and Taylor are talking again. I know he really loved talking to you, and you two drifted towards the end of high school.”

Drifted. She was being nice, but that was probably because Taylor would never have told anyone what happened. “I… yeah, I missed talking to him. A lot. I, uh… how is he? He never… you know, he’s…”

She smiled, and Raleigh elected to dig through the basket of food I’d brought. “I know, Calis. He’s okay. He struggled a little through high school, and he hated having to quit soccer, but we got him on some better medicine.” Her eyes were teary, and I looked away. “And then, he just decided that… he was going to work to help me pay off the medical bills after my surgery. That’s all he does.”

“Yeah, he… works a lot. I made him start eating breakfast in the mornings, though, so that’s a start.”

“If anyone can make Taylor take care of himself, it’s you, Tsrali,” Raleigh said. His eyes were alight with happiness as he looked through the assortment of food and placed it on the table.

I flushed. “So, uh… have you met Claude?”

They exchanged another glance, and I looked away and pretended not to notice. I considered screaming ‘yes, I love your brother/son, please stop looking so scandalized.’

“Claude,” Raleigh said. “I met Claude.”

Amber chuckled under her breath, and she glanced at the food. “Oh, Calis, you didn’t need to bring so much.” She shook her head. “Raleigh wasn’t a big fan of Claude. Taylor and he fought about it for a solid three days. That was the most Taylor called the whole time he’s been there!”

“No, seriously… I walked in to their apartment. And, okay… first off, Claude’s clothes, and you know Taylor’s clothes because they’re all size 0 – so, I know these are Claude’s, are literally everywhere. This asshole is sitting on the couch, while Taylor is in the kitchen, cooking dinner. Doesn’t say hi. Doesn’t say anything. I said hi. He just looks at me and barely musters up the strength to reply.”

“Yeah, he’s an asshole. We aren’t fans of one another, either,” I said. I felt validated that Raleigh hated this bastard as much as I did, though the scene he’d described worried me.

“Taylor cooked the meal, and I… you can just tell that he cooks all the meals. Claude never said thank you. Just… he sucks.”

“Don’t be mean, Raleigh. Taylor likes him.”

“I just don’t understand how that’s possible!”

My mouth went to agree, but that felt out of place given the things I’d done to Taylor. I lowered my head. “Also, I’m pretty sure I saw Claude take one of Taylor’s valium.”

Interest seized me, and my head snapped towards Raleigh at the words. I’d heard the name before. “Valium?”

“It’s an anti-anxiety medicine,” Amber said. Her eyes were chastising Raleigh, but she explained it to me gently. “Taylor had anxiety attacks when his lung condition got really bad. He would get them while they tried to figure out what was wrong with me. He tried to pretend they weren’t anything, but when you have a lung condition, and you’re short of breath… it’s dangerous. I made him go see someone.”

That must have been the second medicine, and Taylor had told me that he didn’t need it, anymore. My heart pounded in my chest. “Does he still get them?”

“Not as often, but he does, I think.”

Nausea circled in my stomach, and I closed my eyes. He’d acknowledged that Claude was taking them, so Raleigh wasn’t wrong. “Well, I should get back home. It was good to see you both. I hope you like the food.”

“Oh, okay, Calis. Well, it was very good to see you, and I am really glad that you are talking to Taylor again. You were one of the best things that ever happened to him.”

“Yeah, he was the same for me,” I said.

I turned and left the house, feeling a mix of panic and sadness. Taylor liked Claude, and his mother had made sure that Raleigh knew that. Maybe she’d been trying to tell me the same thing.

I sat in my car in the driveway, and I pulled up his number and typed the words ‘Happy Thanksgiving.’ I put my phone across the seat, but I wasn’t about to let the holiday pass without speaking to him.

His family might tell him I’d brought food, and I’d rather be the one who had told him Happy Thanksgiving, so some part of him had to know that it was all for him. I cared about his family, but I cared about him more.

I didn’t get my response until we were about to start Thanksgiving dinner, and even then, it made me smile. “Happy Thanksgiving, Calis.”

My father made some remark about my phone being on at the table, and I set it aside, wondering if I should try to say more to Taylor. The conversation was once again everything to do with Adrian’s wife, and how wonderful she was, and I had to work not to roll my eyes.

She was embarrassed under all the attention, and she didn’t seem like a bad sort at all. I’d always liked her when Adrian and I had lived in the same house, but I wanted to throw her out the window.

Dinner ended, though Friday wasn’t any better. Lee and Tamara both told me that Taylor had been at dinner, but that they hadn’t gotten a chance to talk to him. He was quiet, and that was all they had to say about it.

I was relieved to have the excuse of returning to the school on Sunday for one of my assignments. Dad made some light-hearted threat regarding making sure I got it done, and I was happy to be heading back to school.

~

I met Taylor at the mall, and his mouth fell open when he saw me. I’d spent the morning at the courthouse, and I’d told him that, so I assumed he thought I wasn’t going to see him at all. Instead, I decided to crash his lunch break.

“Calis? I… didn’t think you were coming by today.”

“Surprise,” I said.

He shifted a little, and then he smiled at me. “You took my mom and Raleigh food.” He laughed, breathlessly. “They were really excited to see you. I couldn’t even get off the phone with my mother.” He looked away from me. “Thank you. It, uh… it means a lot. You didn’t have to do it, but… you already knew that.”

“I was under the impression that you were going to stalk and kill me if I didn’t bring them food, but okay, whatever you say, Taylor.” I walked with him as he headed towards the food court to get his food.

He laughed, and he shook his head at me. “Was everything okay with your parents? Were they upset about Tamara?”

“My dad was an asshole, but what else is new? What about you, did you have a good time? Lee mentioned he saw you.”

He paused, and then he nodded his head. “It was good,” he said.

My mind told me that I shouldn’t rush it, but I went for it, anyway. “So, it’s after Thanksgiving, do you think you’ll have time to hang out sometime soon? I’ve got that stupid commencement in… wow, what, two weeks?”

A breath left him, and he hesitated for a moment. “Well, uh, I should be able to… it might be a week or so, but I do have some time off next week. I can probably work something out.”

“I’d really like that,” I said.

He ordered his food, and he leaned back against the counter. “Why do you need to spend two hours with me, anyway?”

This seemed like a loaded question, and I knew how easily I could get him to absolutely refuse to hang out with me at all. I shrugged. “I don’t know, Taylor, we just never get much time together, and I really do like being around you. I lost four years because I was an idiot.”

“You know, you’re about to go to California, and I have a feeling that you’ll get wrapped up in law school and everything that is California… I… just seems pointless when in a few months we won’t be talking again.”

“We can still talk,” I said. “You just have to actually answer my emails, and not change your phone number.”

He looked at me inquisitively for a moment, and then he looked away. “Yeah, I guess that could work. Well, I’m sure I’ll find the time to hang out with you. I actually don’t mind you, either, as weird as that sounds.”

I laughed, and he grabbed his food from the man behind the counter. I sat with him at the table as he ate. “That does sound weird. I’m glad, though. I worried for a while there that you just… didn’t want anything to do with me.”

His laughter was quick, and he nearly choked on the food in his mouth. “Yeah, I guess I gave that impression with what happened. But, I mean… it’s not like… well, whatever, it’s over now, and no, I don’t want nothing to do with you.” He looked thoughtful. “Double negative. This not being in school is starting to get to me.”

The expression made me smile, but I had to bite back the question of why he’d never answered my emails. “I really didn’t… mean to pry, but your mother… she mentioned that you had anxiety attacks. I…”

He shook his head, and there was a flash of anger in his eyes. “No, no, do not go there, Calis. Don’t talk about it. Just, don’t.”

“Why not? It’s nothing to be ashamed of, and people get them all the time! You just have to make sure that you are taking care of yourself.”

“They are under control,” he said. I thought back to his expression outside the mall that day after the Halloween party. They weren’t under control.

There was no reason for me to push him, though, as we wouldn’t have much more time together since the food he’d bought was disappearing quickly. “I don’t… mean to upset you. I just… you never talk about things that… I just want to know that you’re not… ignoring your own needs.”

“I’m not,” he said. His blue eyes flickered when they examined me, and he took the final bite of his food. “I need to head back to work. I… enjoyed seeing you. Even if you are nosy. Glad you’re back in town, even if it’s only for a few weeks. I’ll text you next week when I can hang out.”

~

Katt hung out in the dorm a lot, and Tamara had stopped by a few times. Our exchanges hadn’t been awkward, which made me somehow proud of the woman I’d chosen to spend six months with. There weren’t many of them that would never miss a beat. I finished my assignments and got the confirmation that I could graduate.

I didn’t bother telling my parents since I assumed that Professor Ingram had called them and already told them. My mother sent a congratulations text a few days after I got the confirmation.

Lee had just stared at me when I’d told him. The good job that he managed was so forced that I thought he might just call me an asshole again. We’d gotten past the fight, but he still didn’t seem happy with the fact that I wasn’t changing my plans.

I could break up with Tamara, but it didn’t make sense to turn down a career-helping opportunity. There was just no reason to cling to a place that would be gone in another few months, anyway. I just had to convince Taylor that I liked him enough to make long distance work.

So, I was overjoyed when I got the text message that indicated he was free that afternoon. I had exactly a week before commencement, and I’d taken all my finals, save one. I was in the clear to enjoy being with him and make some kind of case for why Claude sucked, and I didn’t.

We met at a smaller café, and he was a little earlier than he had been the time before. I, on the other hand, was just as early. He glared at me. “I’m doubting that you had just gotten here last time, if you’re already here this time.”

I shrugged. “I like to be fashionably early.”

His grin was happy, and I gestured for him to go into the café in front of me. “Blue looks good on you,” I said.

His eyes flickered when he glanced up at me before we sat down at the table. He glanced down at the button-down blue shirt that he’d worn. I spoke before he could answer. “But, you probably already knew that.”

“No, I…” His breath hitched, and he played with the menu. “No, um… well, thanks.” He leaned back, and I could see the effort he was putting into the conversation in his eyes. “So, did you hear back on your assignments? Are you good to graduate in December?”

I nodded, though a bitter taste rose in my mouth when I considered it. “Yeah, they said my assignments looked good. I have one more final tomorrow, but it shouldn’t be difficult, and then I’ll be finished.”

His nod was distracted, and he continued looking over the menu. I didn’t know how to approach the topic, and so I decided not to hesitate. “So, your brother doesn’t seem to be a big fan of Claude.”

The expression was frigid when he glanced up at me, daring me to claim anything other than Claude was a great boyfriend. “They didn’t get along when Raleigh came up here, once, it was when we first started dating.”

“Raleigh said that he was taking your pills, then.”

His teeth snapped together. “I thought you wanted to spend time with me, not inform me why my relationship isn’t worthy of your standards, Calis. Yes, he took some of my Valium, after I wasn’t using it anymore. Who cares?”

It was my turn to glance down at the menu as if it held the answers to how I wanted to do this. “I’m sorry. I’m not meaning to upset you. I didn’t say anything was wrong with your relationship. I just want to be sure that Claude isn’t taking your pills when you need them, and that he isn’t pressuring you to pick more up, and… getting you into trouble.”

“Pressuring me? Come on, don’t be ridiculous.”

My voice cracked, but the words came out despite my misgivings. “You had a bruise on your face the other day, Taylor. If he’s hurting you…”

His reaction was immediate, and his face contorted with frustration and anger, and I could see the beginnings of tears. “What? What are you even implying? No. I had a bruise on my face from something random. A-what are you implying?”

“I don’t know what I’m implying, but I… you’re my friend, and I want to be sure…”

He shook his head. “Well, you can stop implying it, because it’s completely wrong. Completely.” The waiter came to halt the conversation, and I could tell he was relieved for the interruption.

My hands moved to ease the tension between us. “Okay, fine, we can talk about something else. Like the fact that you still appear to have an obsession with chicken tenders – seriously, this is a fancy café type thing, and last time it was a bistro. Live a little, Taylor!”

The relief at my change in topic showed on his face, and he laughed. “I can get chicken tenders if I want them. If I see them on the menu, I’m going to order them, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“I could scream over you next time you try. I bet I could make you back down.”

“Oh, I’d love to see you try, because I wouldn’t, and you’d be the one making a fool of yourself.” His smile was tight, though the spark in his eyes proved that he was getting more comfortable. “And we know how you feel about making a fool of yourself.”

I put my hands in front of me again. “I feel like that was a biting remark, and I do not appreciate it one bit. I don’t mind making a fool of myself.”

“Oh, really?” I nodded. “Really?”

“Really.”

“So, if I tell our waiter when he comes back that you are madly in love with him, and that you are sorry but you’ve been struggling with admitting your bisexuality, and he has finally just cracked the code… that’s totally fine?”

My cheeks were red, and my mouth fell open. “Wh—yep, totally fine. Completely fine with that if you want to ruin his life. I’m sure he’s already in love with me.”

“Right… because… how could anyone not be in love with you?”

I nodded. “It’s impossible, so I mean, if you’re okay with breaking his heart later when I come clean, then be my guest.”

He seemed to think about it for a moment, and as the waiter returned to our table, he nodded his head. The usual question about what we wanted to order was interrupted by Taylor. “Actually, Jeff… I wanted to talk to you for a second. Do you have a second?”

My eyebrows raised, and I immediately grabbed Jeff’s arm in an attempt to stop this from happening. “Yeah, uh, can you turn up the heat? It’s… kind of cold in here.”

Jeff nodded his compliance, and Taylor stared at me with arched eyebrows and his tongue pressed to one side of his mouth. “Okay, well, I really didn’t want to upset Jeff,” I said. “Surely, you understand.”

“Yeah, uh-huh, I totally understand.” He smiled, and then he shook his head at me. “Now he’s going to turn up the heat, at least it was kind of cold in here.”

Our food arrived a little while later, and I couldn’t force myself to talk to him about any of the other issues. He got so angry, as though I had no right, though he soothed and assured me about California and my parents one hundred times.

“Taylor…” I finally spoke his name with the meaning that I’d been trying for the entire meal. “Taylor, I… I’m not insulting your relationship with Claude, but… I…” I took a breath. “I do… care about you. I mean, I care about you as… more than a friend. That’s… why I broke up with Tamara.”

His eyes were wide, and his fork fell onto his place. “Calis, don’t be ridiculous.” The notion was erased from his mind the moment I said it, and he laughed as though I’d punctuated it with a ‘just kidding.’

My hand reached across the table to grab his. “I’m not being ridiculous. I want to be with you, and I know that you’re in a relationship… but…”

“Yeah, you do know I’m in a relationship.” He yanked his hand away from me. “And this is so typical of you… you want the things that you can’t have. You don’t want me, Calis, you’ve never wanted me.”

My own hand clenched around my fork as I stared at him. “That isn’t true. It’s not, Taylor… please, at least tell me whether or not you feel the same way.”

“I… Calis… I…” The anger had begun to recede, and he looked gentle when he looked at me. There was sadness in his eyes, and then they flickered towards the glass. “Oh… oh, shit. Oh, shit.” His face changed from strained to panicked, and the paleness worried me. “Claude.”

I’d been halfway through asking him what was wrong when he said the name, and I turned to find Claude standing at the entrance to the café. “What the fuck is going on right now?” The entire restaurant turned to look at him, and he was glaring at us.

We’d both stood in Taylor’s panic, and his voice was one that answered. “I… Claude, we were just getting lunch. He’s leaving next month. Don’t…”

“No, just shut the fuck up. Shut the fuck up, you lying, fucking tramp.”

Taylor’s mouth fell open, and I moved forward to shove Claude back a full five steps as I moved between them. “Don’t talk to him like that, you asshole. We were literally just getting lunch. We’ve been friends since high school. What the hell is your problem?”

“Oh, you son of a bitch, do not fucking touch me.” He moved forward, and his hands pushed my chest. I stumbled, though I made sure not to stumble as far as he did. “You break up with your slut girlfriend, and then decide to give it a shot with a guy?”

“Claude!” Taylor’s voice was quivering, and I glanced across to him for a second to see his wide-eyed expression.

My teeth gritted. “I was having lunch with my friend, you fucking bastard. Are you really that fucking insecure?”

He advanced towards me again, and Taylor moved in between us, and his voice was hoarse when he spoke. “Stop, Claude. Leave him alone! We were just hanging out as friends. That’s all it was!”

He pushed Taylor aside, and he advanced on me, but he didn’t have to come far, because I grabbed him by his collar. “Don’t fucking shove him, you piece of shit!” I wanted to use my fist, but instead, I pushed him away from me again. “Maybe if you weren’t such a shit boyfriend, you wouldn’t have to worry about everyone that looked at Taylor sideways.”

“Don’t you dare tell me how to treat him. You need to keep your fucking hands and mind off him. He is mine, and you need to back the fuck off!”

The entire restaurant was staring at us, but I couldn’t be embarrassed. I was shivering with the rage this man was putting into me. “I am his friend!”

“No, you’re not. You aren’t his friend unless it’s okay with me, and it’s not. He’s mine, and you don’t get to fucking be his friend if I say you don’t!”

He tried to advance on me, and I shoved him back before he could get close enough. Taylor was screaming through gritted teeth. “No, no, he isn’t yours. He isn’t anybody’s. He’s his own person, and he gets to make his own decisions and friends, but if you keep talking about him like that, then you’re going to know what it feels like to have something that does belong to you broken.”

“Are you threatening me?”

My eyebrows lifted, and that was enough of a challenge for him. He advanced on me, but I caught his fist and threw him backwards into a table. The table fell over, but it didn’t break. He glared up at me, and then he looked at Taylor.

The store owner appeared, then. “Stop. If you two are going to fight, then you need to get the hell out of here before I charge you with property damage.”

Claude glared at me with eyes that looked absolutely insane. He stood, and he looked towards Taylor before he whirled and stormed out of the restaurant without another word. Taylor shoved money at the store owner, and he walked out to follow Claude.

I didn’t bother with the money and followed him. “Claude!” He was trying to catch his damn boyfriend, and that hurt. “Claude, wait!”

He managed to catch him, and I exited the restaurant to see Claude throw him backwards and point his finger before he turned. Taylor tried to follow, but Claude whirled and pointed again. “Fuck off right now, or I will fucking kill you.”

Taylor was crying, but he didn’t follow Claude any further. He started walking towards his car, and I caught him by the wrist. “Taylor, please wait.”

“I’m sorry, Calis. I need to… I need to go.” He was breathing hard, and he kept wiping the tears from his face. “I’m sorry that happened. I shouldn’t have done this. I’m such an idiot. I’m sorry.”

I grab both of his hands and advanced on him. “Hey, no, no this is not your fault. Don’t act like this is your fault. He’s an asshole. Please, don’t cry, Taylor. He doesn’t deserve that.”

“It’s not…” He gasped to take in another breath. “It’s not him. It’s just… I need to go home right now, okay?”

He tried to wriggle away from me, and I let him go, but I pursued him when he started towards his car. “Taylor, you’re wrong. It was never about what I couldn’t have. It was about you. I want to be with you. I always have.”

He whirled on me, and the way his fist clenched, I thought he wanted to shove me. He didn’t, though, and he shook his head. “Stop! Stop saying that! You never wanted me. I was never enough for you.” He took another gasping breath. “And you’re leaving – you’re leaving in like three weeks, and you’re going to pull this? Now? Really?”

The tears on his face were breaking my heart, and I stepped towards him. “Taylor, we can make it work. You would be worth long distance.”

His laughter was cold, and he turned away from me. “Oh, fuck you, Calis. I don’t want to have a long distance relationship with you, okay? No. Thanks for the offer, but no. I’m not going to date you and fall in love with you all over again, just so you can… no. No, fuck off. Leave me alone.”

His words made my ears ring, and I bit my lip as I could feel my own chin starting to quiver. I didn’t cry in front of people – I didn’t. I swallowed the tears as best as I could. “Taylor, I am sorry about letting you leave that day. I have regretted it for four years. I was a stupid, idiot teenager.”

He turned towards me, and his eyes broke with pain. “Oh, god… don’t cry, please… please, don’t cry. I’ll… please…” He had reached his car, and his head fell against the top of it as though he couldn’t support himself.

“I want to be with you. I care about you. I care about you more than I’ve ever cared about anyone!”

“Yeah, but… it’s not enough. It’s never been enough.” His breath seemed easier to catch, despite that he was still crying, and it was still tearing me apart.

I slammed my fist into his car. “It is enough. Why are you saying it isn’t?”

“Because it’s not. Because you show up after four years, and you see me with another guy, and so you decide to start being sweet and nice and bringing me breakfast, and being your usual charming self…”

“You think… you think… you think because I saw Claude, because you were with someone, that… I totally changed my mind? Are you out of your mind?”

He rolled his eyes and growled. “I’m going home.”

“No, I thought about you every day. I worried about you every day. You never stopped being important to me. Fuck Claude.”

“If you cared so much, then you could tried years ago! Where have you been for the past four years if you were so fucking concerned? You had four years, and you… you didn’t do a damn thing until I was standing in front of you! Stop lying.”

My eyes widened, and I shook my head. “Wh-what? Where was I? What? Are you kidding me? I called you, and you’d changed your damn number. I emailed you every day for almost a year! I’m not lying!”

He started, and the tears stopped for a moment. There was a break in his eyes, as though the conviction that he’d felt a moment ago shook a little. “Emailed me? No, you didn’t. I didn’t get emails from you.”

“I sent them, I assure you! To the same email address we used to use while I was at camp!”

“What? The outlook account, no, I deactivated that one because it r…” He blinked several times, as though a car with headlights was approaching him. My breath caught upon realizing that he’d never read them. “I stopped checking that one halfway through freshmen year.”

“That was the only one I had,” I said.

He stared at me, and his mouth trembled. He nodded, once, twice, three times, and then he moved towards his car. “I’m going home. I’m sorry this happened, but… I can’t… I just… okay?”

“Yeah, it’s… it’s okay. Can I still come see you?”

“Give me a break tomorrow, and then…” He swallowed. “It should be okay. I’ll… see you around, Calis.”

I felt like someone kicked me in the stomach as he drove away, and I could feel the rising need to be with him. He didn’t want me like that anymore. I’d hurt him more than he was willing to let go, but I had to hope he’d read the emails and change his mind.

~

I respected his wishes, and I took my final the next day with very little problems. I replayed Claude’s reaction in my head, and I had to keep reaffirming that he hadn’t hit Taylor. His threat had been frightening, but he’d been angry – at me. He’d referred to Taylor has property, which wasn’t okay, but if Taylor liked him, then there wasn’t anything I can do. If he wasn’t hurting Taylor, then I couldn’t do anything.

But he was hurting him. I’d seen the tears on his face. And yet he’d said that it wasn’t Claude – so did that mean it was me?

Lee, Katt, and I had sprawled out their books on one of the outside tables near the cafeteria. The weather was warmer than typical December, and Katt had insisted she and Lee study for their final tests outside.

I watched the two of them as they went back and forth on an introductory problem, and I leaned across the table as though I could offer input. I needed the distraction from what had been going on. I had mentioned it to Lee, but there was no advice he could offer that I hadn’t already considered.

I pointed with my pen to one of the problems that extended half the page. “Is this a problem? Or is this some kind of ancient language, because I’m pretty sure there’s a prophecy in here, somewhere?”

Katt giggled, and I smiled up towards Lee. He shooed my hand away from the book with his hand. “That’s the problem, Calis, we’re trying to determine what the prophecy says. So, if you’ll stop interrupting us, maybe we can find the bearer of the mark of three before the world explodes.”

“Oh, well, then, carry on.” I brought my head down on the table, and I tried not to be overcome with the amount of garbage that ran through my brain.

They worked, and I listened to them, despite not understanding a word of it. The verbal nonsense helped me in forgetting everything else. I kept seeing Taylor’s tear-streaked face, though, and a voice in my head kept calling me an ass.

“So, Calis, you excited about your speech?” Katt asked.

My face pulled into a grimace. I’d finished my assignments, but then, Professor Ingram had decided that due to the nature of my situation – I needed to give a speech at graduation. I felt like it was just the final slap in my face. “Yeah, my rough draft is the biggest bunch of bullshit… I’m curious how many idiots will buy it?”

Lee said nothing, and I could tell that the topic had soured his mood. Katt smiled, though. “I think you should be proud of it.”

“He would be, if he wanted to go, and he wasn’t just being dragged along…” His voice was annoyed, though he was trying to play it off as sarcasm.

I sighed, heavily. There wasn’t anything I could change about the situation, and there wasn’t a person alive less happy about it than I was. I lowered my head and looked away.

I was still listening to them, though the lull in conversation made me look up. Lee had his eyebrows raised, and he was looking at me. He gestured with his pen, and I followed his nod to find Taylor standing on one of the hills several paces away. His arms were crossed, and he was looking at me.

I leapt away from the seat, and Lee tried to hide his laughter. Katt leaned forward, and she whispered as I started around the table towards Taylor. “Kiss him dramatically. It always works! Do it!”

My mind told me that her suggestion was a bad one, but my heart was quite fond of it. I crossed the distance between us, and walked further away so that Katt and Lee couldn’t stare at us during the length of the conversation. “I read your emails.”

“Oh, yeah… all of them? Some of them were pretty boring.”

He laughed, and I could make out the tearstains on his face. “I was wrong. I was wrong to… I was wrong to say that you didn’t care. I had no idea you’d sent those, and if I had, well… well, things would probably be different. I…”

My heart raced at what he was saying, and I brought my hands to my sides so that I didn’t grab him and force him to tell me what this meant. “I thought about you all the time,” I said. “I kept your soccer ball that you left at my house. I drove by your house a thousand times, and I checked my email constantly, hoping that you’d decide you wanted to talk to me again.”

His smile, but he nodded his head, and his eyes looked like they believed me this time. “I was wrong. You’re a good friend, I never should have doubted that. You are my best friend, and you always cared about me. Maybe I was wrong to walk away like I did…”

I shook my head. “You had every right to do that.”

“You’re right,” he said. “I did have every right to do that, but… more than that, you had no obligation to tell your parents… you had no obligation to tell anyone about your feelings, whatever they were. I should have supported you. You were scared and unsure, and I shouldn’t have forced a decision.”

Taylor had a horrible tendency to be unfair to himself, and even if he was right about my parents, I couldn’t let him blame himself. “Taylor, you never pushed me for anything until I kissed you,” I said.

“Because I never thought that someone like you… I never thought…” He closed his eyes. “I was selfish, though. Even once I was able to see how I felt about you, I should have supported you. You didn’t have to come out to anyone, and you still don’t have to.”

His eyes were pained, and I knew that this wasn’t going anywhere that I wanted it to go. “Taylor… I do want to be with you.”

His smile was woeful. “I’m sure you do, Calis, I don’t doubt that. You want to be with me, but…” He looked out towards the bluff. “I… I just… one day, one day you’re going to find someone… you’re going to find someone that… someone that can make you so happy, and so fulfilled, that you want to scream how much you love them. No matter who they are, no matter what other’s think, you’re going to look at them, and you’re going to love them so much that you want to make them happy, and you are happy enough with just them.”

I opened my mouth, but he moved to grab my face. “That’s what love is, and you have no obligation to do that until you want to. You don’t owe it to me, or Tamara, or your parents… no one. Just like I didn’t owe you my friendship when it was hurting me, but… I… I want to be there for you, now, and I will be your friend.”

My friend. I wanted him as a friend, I did. I wanted him in my life in some form, but I didn’t just want a friend. I shook my head. “Taylor, I just…”

He closed his eyes. “Because I do love you, Calis… I would do anything for you. You… are amazing. You’re funny and smart and talented. I… I want to be there for you, even if we’re just friends, but… but… we have to be just friends.”

“Why?” My voice sounded as though he’d punched me.

“Because… I… I am… I do… want… because, one day, you’re going to find that person. You’re going to look at someone and realize that they mean more than anything else, and… I… I couldn’t handle that. I’m… not that… strong, I guess.” He looked down, and I grabbed his face, but there weren’t tears in his eyes. He just smiled at me.

I didn’t know how to argue with him. I stared at him. His beautiful blue eyes, long lashes, and perfect expression that I’d dreamt about a million times. “Taylor, it’s not…”

“But… I also know… that Claude and I… are not supposed to be together, either. I don’t love him, and I’m pretty sure that he doesn’t love me. I don’t know what I’m going to do about a roommate, but I am going to break up with him. You’ve shown me enough to know that’s my only option.”

The news relieved me, as the idea of Taylor going home to Claude every night had been plaguing my nightmares. “I think that’s a good idea, but… but, are you sure that he’s going to take that okay?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, but I have to do it. He hasn’t spoken to me since yesterday. He just came home yesterday and locked the bedroom door. Hopefully, he’ll let me talk today.” There was a flicker of emotion in his eyes, and I wanted to know what it meant, but it faded as fast as it had appeared.

“Well, you need to be careful. He’s a jerk. Are you doing that tonight?”

His hesitation was brief, but he nodded his head. “Yes, I just need to get it over with.” His hand wrapped around two of his fingers, and he seemed to be rehearsing what he intended to say as he looked at his shoes.

“When does he get home? Can you… can you text me… like, when are you going to do this? I just want to know that he… hasn’t… I just want to know that everything’s okay? Please?”

A quiet laugh pulled from his lips, but he sighed. “I can send you a text afterwards. It shouldn’t take more than fifteen or thirty minutes. I’m going to do it around 7, since that’s when we’re both home.” He rolled back on his heels. “There’s nothing to worry about, though, it’ll be… totally fine.”

I didn’t believe him. His eyes were darker than usual, and I didn’t believe him. I couldn’t say that aloud, but the idea of this breakup scared me more than their continued relationship. “Well, make sure you text me… if you don’t… I… I will come over there. I will come over there, and I will kill him.”

“No, Calis, please don’t commit any murders. Jail will seriously put a damper on your career, or that’s what I’ve read.”

“I’m serious, though. Tell me. Tell me when you’re doing it, and tell me that you’re okay afterwards.”

His cheeks flushed, and he nodded his head another time. “Yes, okay, fine. I will let you know that Claude has not turned into the Hulk and thrown me out the window.” The joke would have made me laugh, but images of what might happen were raging rampant. “You’re so serious. Don’t worry about it, Calis. Honestly.”

“And the address?” I asked.

He pulled out his phone and typed into it for a few moments, and then he smiled at me as my phone vibrated with the message in my pocket. “There you go. Briar Avenue, apartment 3B, now you can stalk freely.”

“Sorry… just… okay.” The sadness from what he’d said to me, about being in love with me, about refusing to be with me hung in the back of my mind. First, I had to make sure that he was alright, and then I would worry about the rest.

His smile was gentle, and he wrapped his arms around me. My hands moved about his waist instantly, and the warmth and happiness it provided was instant. I sucked in a breath of air – feeling the weight of the world temporarily lifted from my shoulders. He was life, love, happiness, wrapped in my arms for just one moment, and then he pulled back.

“One day, you are going to make someone extremely happy, Calis. I am so envious of whoever that person happens to be.” He leaned forward, and his lips pressed against my cheek. My heart beat an erratic rhythm, and I fought every muscle in my body to keep from pulling him into a kiss.

He turned to go, and I grabbed him again. “I want to make you extremely happy,” I said. “Please.”

“Calis…”

I leaned forward so that my forehead brushed against his, and he stared up into my eyes, not knowing how to get out of the situation. “I do, Taylor. I know I’m a coward, but… I love you. I do.”

He breathed against my lips. “Calis, everything feels like love until you’ve actually experienced it. I really can’t… I can’t do this. I’ll do anything else for you, but I can’t do this.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you,” I said.

His expression was pained, but he touched my cheek. “I know you don’t think you would, and you have no intention of doing it right now… I just… I can’t… please… please, understand…”

My teeth gritted, and I pushed myself that extra step forward. The kiss was like life, pouring into me like a fountain. My body caught fire, even with the brief contact of our lips. I did nothing more than touch his lips, and he choked when he pulled back. “Calis… please, try to understand.”

“How could I understand you telling me I don’t love you, when I can feel myself in love with you?”

“I’m sorry, Calis,” he said. He pulled away from me, and he took a breath. His hands moved to his lips for a moment, and then he turned. “I’ll text you tonight to let you know everything went okay.”

“Just be careful,” I said. “Promise.”

“You have my word.” A quick smile crossed his features as he spun himself around and started back towards the parking lot with a firm grip on my heart.

~

Lee threw my soccer ball into the air, again and again, and I paced as I stared at the clock. Nearly seven, which meant that in twenty minutes, if I didn’t have a text, I was going to his apartment.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Lee said for the hundredth time.

I didn’t feel like everything was going to be fine. My plan was to drive by, even if he sent the text that promised he was fine. “What is he going to do without a roommate? I know he’s already spending all his money on his mother. He can’t afford an apartment on his own.”

Lee pulled himself upwards. “Why don’t you stay and be his roommate?” he asked.

I glared at him, and then I stared out the window. I could stay – I could stay and make sure he had a roommate. I could stay and show him that I was in love with him, and I would never feel like I did for him for anyone else. I could. “I don’t know,” I said.

“You think he’s right, then?” Lee asked. “Do you think someone else could come along, and they’d give you a reason to stay here or tell your parents?”

“No.” The answer was immediate. I believed myself, and I knew that no one in the world could be more of an influence on me that Taylor Lassau. He was my fantasy, my light, my joy – and no one else would ever compare to him.

I shook my head. “No, he doesn’t get that the fault isn’t with him. He is enough. He is everything. I am the one who isn’t strong enough to stay.”

“You could be.”

I didn’t know what to say. Lee wasn’t wrong. I could stay, but the terror of it kept me from making the choice. “I know,” I said. “I know that.”

He said nothing else because I’d admitted that he was right. I’d admitted that I was going to lose the most important person in the world to me because I didn’t know how to be brave. I stared at the clock. He didn’t send me a text as the clock hit seven, and so I assumed that he intended to do it when he’d said.

“He said he’d text me when he was finished. I’m… I hope nothing happens to him. Claude is an ass.”

“I know, but I doubt he’s that much of an ass.” Lee kept throwing the soccer ball, and the memories it brought with it were painful.

This was the most important matter. I had to make sure that Claude didn’t hurt Taylor, and after that, I could reflect and figure out if I was strong enough to do what I had to do. Taylor hadn’t meant it as a challenge. He would never imply that, and he legitimately had no problem believing that he wasn’t enough for me. He’d never seen himself as enough.

7:15 flashed on the clock, and my throat felt dry, as I walked back and forth across our dorm – again and again. He had five minutes to text me, and I had no intention of hesitating. I grabbed my phone, and I sent the text without worrying with how it would look.

“Taylor, send me something and tell me if you’re still talking.”

Nothing. 7:16, 7:17…

My jaw clenched, and panic splashed around in my stomach like acid. I looked at Lee, and he extended a hand to indicate that I needed to breathe. I couldn’t breathe. I was terrified, and the reality of it bore down on him with every second that my phone didn’t move.

Two more minutes. I sent another text. “Taylor?”

I couldn’t sit there, though. The images that raged in my mind were too powerful to wait on that text. If they were fine, then so be it. I would be more than happy to embarrass myself in this instance. I grabbed my jacket and headed out the dorm room door. “Calis, wait,” Lee said.

He followed me to the door of the suite, but the clock already said 7:20, and I wasn’t about to take chances. I shook my head. “I’m going,” I said. “If they’re fine, they’re fine, but I’m going.”

He stood at the door, and I walked away as he tried to find the right words to say to tell me that I shouldn’t go. He didn’t follow me, but I could feel him staring at me all the way down the hallway until I turned onto the stairs. My heart pounded as I took the stairs down to the parking lot, and I pressed the phone to my ear after I dialed his number.

The second ring sounded when I reached my door and slid into the car. He wasn’t answering, and my heart was starting to hurt. The panic was slowly turning from ‘I’m being crazy’ to ‘what is going on.’ The reality that something could be wrong with him was slowly eclipsing my belief that I was being crazy.

The phone finished ringing, and it went to voicemail. He knew that I would be worried, so it made no sense that he had no read on his phone. My tires skidded against the parking lot as I pulled it out into the road. His apartment was only ten minutes away, and I could make it in six.

I hit the redial button, and as I drove, I could feel my breathing become more labored as the ringing sounded in my ear. Why wasn’t he answering me? I considered the idea that they were wrapped up in a conversation – maybe they were working it out.

It didn’t matter. The fact that it could be something much more terrible made that a nonissue. If they were working it out, then I would worry about smoothing the damage after the fact. The phone kept ringing, and then voicemail again.

I made the first few turns, and I tried his number a third and fourth time. No answer. My heart felt like it was outside of my chest, and when he didn’t answer the fifth time, I slung the phone across the car so that it slammed into the door. “Dammit, Taylor!”

I turned onto the street that he’d listed in his text, and I could feel the sweat that had accumulated on my palms as I started to drive. I didn’t care what was happening between them, anymore, I just had to see Taylor. Something was wrong, and there was not a single doubt in my head.

I slammed my car against the curb, and I leapt out of the car without pausing to try the phone another time. I rounded the spiral staircase to the third floor. 3B. Apartment 3B. I sprinted the stairs, and I turned onto the hallway to find the apartment. 3A… 3B.

I banged on the door with none of my usual courtesy. “Open the door!” I banged on it again, and I waited. One, two, three… there was no movement, and my panic exploded through me. I yanked the handle, and when it didn’t turned, I stepped back. Property damage be damned. I would pay for it. My foot slammed into the bottom of the door, and it gave with what felt like no resistance.

I walked into the small apartment to find every nightmare that I’d had in reality. The coffee table was busted, and Claude was on top of someone – of Taylor. I grabbed the container for umbrellas near the door, and I slung it into the back of his head with unforgiving force.

He staggered away from Taylor body, and I could hear the gasp for air followed by the coughing. I knelt as Taylor wheezed and choked on the air that had reentered his lungs. Claude was staggering back to his feet, and my anger made the entire room red. He spoke, though I couldn’t understand his words.

He moved towards me, and my hand drew back seconds before it slammed perfectly into his nose, and he dropped like a freed puppet. I moved atop him, just like he had Taylor, and I drew my fist back to impact his jaw. I did it, over and over, until blood coated my knuckles, and my anger gave way to worry.

He was unconscious, maybe worse, and I left Claude lying there as I moved over to Taylor’s battered form. “Taylor!” He was still gasping for breath, as though someone was choking him. He couldn’t breathe.

My hands moved over him, and I could see the stab wound that had pierced his side. His hands were sliced along the palms, and slow-forming bruises were along both sides of his jaw. The broken coffee table had been the work of his body because I could see tiny flecks of glass in his shoulders and hair. “Taylor, Taylor, your inhaler, Taylor, where is it?”

His back kept arcing, as he tried desperately to draw air that only came every long few seconds. His hand moved through tears, and I followed his hand. I lifted him from the floor and flipped the couch over with my foot to place him on top of it.

I put a pillow behind his head, and my entire body trembled with pain and terror. “Breathe, just… hold on. Just breathe.” Blood was pouring from his side, and he kept gagging when as he lurched for breath.

I ran towards where he’d pointed and through a door. There were a few books, a bottle of pills, and his inhaler lying on the edge of the bathtub. I grabbed the inhaler and the pills, to be safe, and sprinted back to him.

I put the inhaler to his lips, and he took deep breaths through it. He was still trembling, bleeding, but he was able to breathe better. “Hey, hey, look at me… breathe, breathe with me, slowly.” His eyes were on me, and he kept taking the breaths when I did. “There you go. It’s okay. It’s all going to be okay.” My hands were shaking, and I could feel the tears running down my own cheeks, but everything had to be okay.

His breathing was strained, but the breaths were coming. I tore the white shirt he was wearing away from his body to dress the wound. My breath choked, and I had to work to keep from gasping. He couldn’t see me upset – he needed me to be calm. There was a long bruise on his shoulder, though, and the stab wound was dark and mangled with blood. My lips trembled, and I pressed my jacket against it. It was so deep. “It’s okay,” I kept repeating it as I looked at him. “You’re okay.”

I kept breathing slowly to give him a focal point for his attention, and I felt his eyes watching me as his chest moved up and down to draw his breath. He was hurt, and my hands shook violently at how badly. “It’s fine. You’ll be fine. Stay with me.”

I grabbed the phone off the wall and dialed the three numbers swiftly.

“9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

“There’s… it’s… a domestic incident. I need an ambulance. He’s… he’s hurt. Send an ambulance, please hurry.”

“Okay, calm down, sir, what’s the address?”

I rattled off the address after a moment to think, and the woman promised she’d send someone. She offered to stay on the line, but I told her no, and I turned my eyes back to Taylor, where my hands were still on his face.

There was blood on the couch, on the walls, and there were smears of it along his arms and face. The knife lay beside the kitchen counter, covered in blood. He had a few nicks on his face, smeared with bruises. He looked like he was about to pass out. “Hey, no, look at me… look at me, Taylor. You’re going to be okay. But you’ve got to stay with me, okay?”

“I… I… I didn’t think he’d do that. He… it’s never been like that before…”

I was furious at the statement because it meant that incidents like this had occurred before, but I couldn’t get angry with him. I couldn’t even be angry. I was so terrified at how hurt he was. My voice cracked, despite my efforts. “It’s okay. You’re okay, now. Just focus on breathing, okay, Taylor? Breathe for me.”

He nodded, and tears fell across his cheeks. “I can’t… I can’t believe you came over.”

“I told you I was going to.”

“I… yeah, but…” He put a hand on mine, and he stared at me like there was were flashing strobe lights behind me. “Calis.”

“I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.” I glared across to Claude, and I stroked Taylor’s sweat-soaked cheek. “You’re fine. You’re doing fine.”

I kept talking to him, keeping his eyes on me, in all their amazement, until the police, followed shortly by paramedics, walked through the doorway that I’d already kicked open. I glanced up to them. I couldn’t pull away, even when I saw them. “He has a lung condition. PAH. Pulmonary… pul-pulmonary artery…”

The woman knelt down and observed the inhaler. “Pulmonary arterial hypertension? Okay, that’s good to know. Thank you.”

One of the other medics eased me away from him. I must have looked worse than I thought as tears blurred my vision because they were soothing me. “He has anxiety, too. He stabbed him. Please, please… please, help him. He’s fine – h-he has to be fine.”

They assured me he would be, and they eased me towards a police officer who was checking Claud. “Hey, take it easy. It’s okay. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Th-they… they had a fight. They were… breaking up. I… I told him to tell me afterwards… and he never… he didn’t say anything.”

“Who do you mean? You mean him?” The officer gestured towards Taylor, and I nodded.

I choked. “Yes. He broke up with him…” I pointed to Claude, and my teeth grinded when I noticed a few paramedics tending to him. “I came in… and-and I… I hit him with… with that… and I hit him. I hit him until he was unconscious.” I shook as I rattled off what few details I had to the man.

He patted me on the back and told me to calm down as they pulled Taylor onto a stretcher. I moved to the stretcher once the officer seemed satisfied with what I said. “Is he going to be okay? Is he… is he okay? Is he?”

The woman smiled at me, and she was soothing when she spoke to me. “Yes, everything will be fine. You can ride in the ambulance if it helps. Does he have any family you can call?”

I nodded, and I hurried back into the bathroom to grab the phone that I’d seen. Taylor would have Raleigh and his mother’s number. I walked back out and stood outside the ambulance while they pulled him in on the stretcher. The call was painful, as his mother was the one who answered. She said she’d be down there, and then she hung up.

The woman told me to talk to him, so I did. He was dazed, but his eyes were on me like he knew who I was. They were dressing his main wound, and I was biting back my shouting questions about the situation. Some of the bruises looked old – I hadn’t been wrong. Claude had been abusive, and Taylor had pretended there was no problem.

I had to work to keep my eyes from wandering to Claude on the other stretcher. If I’d let myself look, I was sure I would have plunged some kind of equipment into his chest. “Taylor, are you okay? You have to keep looking at me.”

He blinked a few times, and then he winced. “I know you’re mad at me…” The oxygen mask on his face seemed to be helping more than the inhaler had.

This was not the time to disclose how I felt. I shook my head. “No, no, I’m not mad. I’m not mad at all. It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

He didn’t look like he believed me, but I wasn’t about to reprimand him in his current state. “He… he’s never been like that before… he hadn’t spoken to me since yesterday, and… I knew he’d get physical, but not…”

I could hear erratic beeping to signal his heart rate, and I moved towards him. The paramedic didn’t seem too concerned, as she carried on with her duties. “No big deal. It’s… just don’t think about it. What was that book you were reading?”

“Huh?” He blinked at me for a few seconds. “Oh… oh, uh… it was boring. It was on the summer reading list for one of the classes Notre Dame… so…”

My smile faded for an instant, and then I nodded. “You’ve always been such an overachiever.”

“I was… sort of hoping I could start next Fall, but I… don’t see that happening now.”

I shook my head. “It could still happen, Taylor.”

His breath kept catching as though some wave of pain was trying to drown him any time he spoke. “I doubt it… oh, oh, shit, did you call my mom? Don’t call her. She’ll come down here. Did you?”

I stared at him, and I could hear the beating of the heart monitor. I didn’t want to say anything that upset him, but the paramedic eased her head backwards. I assumed this meant I could let him rest, and so I leaned and kissed his forehead. “Just take it easy, Taylor. Just breathe. You need to rest.”

His eyes fluttered, and he fell asleep before he could press the issue of his mother. The paramedic thanked me, and they told me to wait in the waiting room while they ensured everything was alright. They couldn’t give me a time table, but before I could sit down, my phone rang.

Lee.

“Calis! Where the hell are you? What happened?”

The words wouldn’t leave my mouth as I realized what had nearly happened. Claude had been choking him – if I had taken another ten minutes, even another five, then I might have walked in on entirely different scenario.

“Calis?” Gentleness colored his voice, then. “Calis, are you okay? Is everything okay? What’s the matter? Talk to me, Calis.”

Taylor was okay, though. He had been breathing when I found him – he had been getting better. I thought the bleeding had slowed, and he wouldn’t bleed out in the hospital. But all those bruises… my hands trembled. “I… he was… I don’t know what happened,” I said. “I walked in and Claude was just on top of him…”

“Oh my god,” he said. “Oh my god, is he okay?”

“I… I think so. He… I’m at the hospital right now. There was a knife. I’m sure he’ll be fine. He was talking to me. He was fine.” My words shook, and I could hear Lee’s inhalation of breath.

He took a moment, and then he spoke. “I’m going to come down there, Calis. I’m sure everything’s okay. It’s a good thing you went over there. It’ll be fine. I’ll be there in a second.”

I wanted to remark that there was no way he’d make the thirty minute drive to the hospital in a second, but I just breathed my acceptance and hung up the phone. I didn’t want to be alone, but I didn’t want to be with Lee. I wanted to be with Taylor.

The years that had passed flashed through my head. I’d let him walk out of my house. I’d sent him emails that he hadn’t received, but that didn’t change that I hadn’t gone to find him. If things had been different, then Claude may have killed him. I hadn’t been there to make sure he was alright. I hadn’t been there for four years. It hadn’t just been me that was in pain that whole time.

People were trying not to look at me, and I blinked as tears blurred my vision and fell onto the linoleum of the hospital waiting room floor. The weakness in his eyes had reminded me of when he’d lie on his floor, wheezing and clinging to me harder than his inhaler. He’d gotten stronger, but he was still that person. I did love him, but he loved me too. We needed each other.

I grabbed a magazine, flipping through the pages as if I could possibly see what was on them. I didn’t know what was going on, and every time a nurse called someone else, my heart screamed. Lee walked in exactly thirty minutes later, and he sat down beside me. “You haven’t heard anything?”

My answer was mute as I shook my head. He put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sure it’s fine. If he was talking to you, then it’s fine.”

“He wasn’t fine. He was so scared. I never should have let him do that. I knew, Lee. I knew something was wrong. I’d seen the bruise on his cheek. I saw the way he was after Claude had seen us that night. I was such an asshole. Just like I was in high school… I don’t… I don’t deserve him, at all.”

He kept his hand on my shoulder, and his voice was severe. “No, Calis. You were trying to give him space. You were trying not to screw up a relationship that might have been okay, and then you were there for him when he needed it. You didn’t screw up this time.”

My teeth clenched together, and my face twisted as tears continued to fall. “How the fuck can you say that?” I spoke against my arms as my fists rested against my forehead. “You didn’t see him. He was shivering – he was… I left him alone for four years.”

“Calis, come on… you’re just upset. It’s okay.”

Lee stayed with me, despite my reassuring him that he didn’t need to. His presence was somewhat of a comfort, though the person I wanted to be with was nowhere in sight. I was starting to worry if he ever would be again.

The clock clicked past midnight, and then it was 2AM. Lee played games on his phone, and I stared blankly at the wall. Finally, a nurse stepped out and glanced across to me. “Are you here with Taylor Lassau?”

I nodded, and Lee looked up from his phone. She gestured to me, and Lee remained in his seat as I walked into the hallway with her. “He’s fine,” she said. “We had to get his blood pressure down, and there were some blood clots around his lungs, but we cleared them, and he just needs to take it easy for a few days.”

A broken noise escaped me, and I stared at the ground through blurred vision. “You’re sure? You’re sure he’s fine?”

She nodded. “I promise. I wouldn’t say he was if he wasn’t going to be okay. Are you his friend? Did you contact his family? He did tell us that he didn’t mind us disclosing the information to you, but it would be best if his family was here.”

“They’re on the way. They live about three hundred miles away from here. I called them at eight.”

I must have looked a mess because she smiled at me. “Why don’t you go sit with him? I’ll have the front desk look out for his family. He’s asleep right now. The medicine we gave him for his blood pressure causes drowsiness.”

She led me into a small room where Taeru was lying on the bed, looking incredibly small, and I walked across to grab his hand. His fingers were covered mostly with bandages, and his body was covered with the sheet. My fingers slid up his arm, and my voice caught in my throat when I tried to talk.

I watched his face for several moments. He looked incredibly young, and the part of his lips was minimal. I had the overwhelming sensation to kiss him, and I laughed out loud when I realized it. “I am so absolutely creepy.”

I sat down beside the bed and stared at him. “Why didn’t you say anything? You knew he was going to hurt you. You knew. I could have come with you. I could have stopped him. Why do you always break your back to be there for everyone else, and then refuse to let anyone be there for you? You’re… so kind. I… I used to insist. Do you want me to insist? Or am I just…”

His breathing was slow, and I know he couldn’t hear me, but I raised his hand and touched it to my lips. “I do love you. I really do. I’ll never find anyone…anyone that makes me feel like you do. I’m the one that isn’t enough, Taylor. I don’t deserve you.”

“That’s an excuse. It is. I don’t deserve you, but you deserve me… if you want me, and I saw it in your eyes – I saw how much I hurt you…I just… I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to lose you, but I don’t know how to be everything you need.”

He couldn’t hear me, and I could barely understand the nonsense I was talking. I was leaving in a few weeks – after this? I graduated in three days. I had to give a speech, and I had to look my parents in the face with the knowledge that they’d ruined my life.

How could I sit in front of him and claim that I was in love with him?

I sat there with him. I knew I’d left Lee in the waiting room, but I wanted to be near Taylor. I held his hand, and even that provided me a little bit of comfort that I absolutely didn’t deserve. He didn’t rouse, and I had nearly dozed off when the door swung open.

Raleigh pushed in his mother in a wheel chair, and her face was twisted with pain. I knew I should stand back and let them be with him, but I couldn’t make myself move. “Raleigh, Ms. Lassau…”

His mother stared at me, and she managed a smile before her eyes moved back towards her son. Raleigh pushed her over to the side of Taylor’s bed, and then he glanced at me. “I hope you kicked the shit out of that asshole.”

The words almost made me smile, though I couldn’t quite muster one. “He’s definitely in the hospital. Alive, unfortunately…”

“I should have been firmer with him about Claude,” Amber said. “Raleigh knew, I knew… well, we didn’t know, but we suspected. Taylor just… he wanted to prove he could have a relationship after…”

Her voice trailed, and she pointedly avoided looking at me. My teeth gritted against the onslaught of pain that the trailed voice brought. “Right…” It was my fault – it was more my fault than I could have even fathomed.

She looked at me. “Calis, it wasn’t your responsibility. What happened between you two sucked, but there is nothing either of you could have done. Taylor always felt like he had something to prove.”

My eyes closed. “No… I… he didn’t have anything to prove. He shouldn’t have had to prove anything.”

They didn’t know what to say to me. To them, I was the kid in high school that had made their son fall in love with him and move on. They couldn’t possibly understand that my reasons for leaving were every bit my own failure.

His mother touched my shoulder. “Well, I appreciate you being there for him. You’re a good friend, Calis, and you always have been.”

“No,” I said. “No, I’m… I’m not…” My lips shook as I looked at him. I could have said it to them. I could have made the point that I was in love with him, but they weren’t the ones that needed to know.

His mother looked stern. “Calis, if you hadn’t been there, there is no telling what would have happened to him.”

“Please, don’t say that,” I said.

I wanted to cry, and I wanted to hug him. Instead, I looked at his mother. “Your son is amazing. I know you know that because he put aside his education so Raleigh could stay in school, and he could help you. But, he is. I will never be anywhere near as wonderful as he is.” I glanced across to Raleigh, and then I reached to run my fingers along Taylor’s arm. “I’ll give you guys a minute. I’ll be in the waiting room if you need me.”

~

Lee insisted that I come back to the dorm to sleep, and I slept a few hours before I dragged myself out of bed and back to the hospital. I ignored calls from my mother and the professor regarding the upcoming graduation, and I was admitted back into Taylor’s room in the middle of a conversation.

“Taylor, I want you to come home. I want you to come home and start worrying about getting into school. I won’t have you struggling to send all your money to me and paying rent. Come home. I know you’re smart enough to get in somewhere without being nearby. I shouldn’t have pushed you to come here.”

His face was twisted with distaste that I knew had nothing to do with the bandages on it. “Mom, I have a job here. I can handle the rent by myself. I’ve been looking into a co-op at the university. I can afford it.”

She shook her head. “Taylor, you already got yourself hurt. I just want you home with me. I can take care of you.”

“I don’t need you to take care of me. I can take care of myself. Yes, Claude was a bad idea. I was dumb, but…” His eyes snapped across the room to me. I winced when I realized it probably looked like I was eavesdropping. His brow furrowed, though. “Calis.”

“Hey, sorry… I probably should have knocked.” I wanted to insist that he stay – that I could take care of him, but I realized that I wouldn’t even be here.

Taylor shook his head, and his mother smiled. “Not at all,” she said. “You’re fine. Taylor was asking where you were.”

I stepped to stand at the foot of the bed. “Hey, there. How are you feeling?”

His cheeks flushed, and he looked away from me and his mother. “I’m fine. They said I have to stay for a few days, unfortunately, to monitor my condition.”

“Your lungs need to be monitored,” his mother said. “That is something that you have to understand. You have a condition, and it doesn’t disappear just because you don’t pay attention to it!”

His smile was tight when he glanced at me, and he disregarded her entirely. “Thanks for being there for me, Calis. I… I guess I was stupid to think… I… sorry.” He closed his eyes and chewed his lip.

I took a breath. “I just don’t understand why you didn’t tell me. I know he’d hit you before. Why did you try so hard to pretend it hadn’t happened?”

Taylor looked towards his mother, and then his hands wrung one another. “I… it wasn’t really your problem, Calis. Yes, Claude did get violent, but it was usually only when he drank. I never expected him to go to that extreme. I thought he’d probably shove me against the door and be done with it.”

My hands clenched the sheets between my fingers. “That isn’t okay! Even if he had just shoved you against the door! He was hurting you! I could have come with you! I could have kept you… I could have…”

His eyes shimmered with concern, and then his lips quirked into a smile. “It was not your responsibility. I was the one that got into the relationship – I was the one that had to get out of it.”

“No, you didn’t. Not by yourself!” I leaned towards him. There was a flush on his lips, and I thought back to the moment I’d kissed him, and the satisfaction that had come from it. I wanted to do it again, and I had to step away from him.

His mother looked between us, and she crossed her arms. “Taylor, Calis is exactly right. You try to do everything on your own. I want you home. At least for the next semester.”

His eyelids fell, and he sighed. “Fine. You want me to throw away my jobs here? I will come home and continue to waste resources for another freaking semester.”

“First of all, Taylor, you do plenty for me, and you have never been a waste of resources. Secondly, I talked to Jason, and he said he would be happy to have you back at the restaurant – that he could even give you a raise.”

This changed Taylor’s disposition, and his eyes brightened. “Really?” He seemed relieved. “Okay – fine, then that makes sense. I’ll stay home long enough to get some money. At least with me there, you’ll have someone to make decent meals.”

The door swung open as if Raleigh had heard the insult. “You are insulting me. You thought I wouldn’t hear, but I did.” He had a tray full of hospital food, and he gave his mother one plate and Taylor the other. “And I want you to know that you’re an asshole.”

Taylor threw his hands up and pursed his lips. “I was simply stating facts, Raleigh. I have no idea why you’re taking it personally.”

“My meals are fine. Mom, tell him my meals are fine.”

“Taylor, I need you to come home so we can stop ordering takeout every night.”

The expression on Taylor’s face made me smile in spite of everything. His eyebrows raised, and the coy smile on his face brought out his dimples, and his eyes were sparking with playfulness. Raleigh turned to their mother with an affronted expression. “Mother! This betrayal will not be forgotten.”

Amber rolled her eyes as she looked between the two boys, though I could see the good it did her to have both her sons together. “Raleigh, why do you even try to deny it? You really should just embrace the quirk,” I said.

“No one asked you, Tsrali.”

“Just like no one asks you to cook,” Calis said. Taylor laughed, and Raleigh looked towards the door as if he was considering using it.

This meant that Taylor was going home, and though my parents still lived in the same town, I knew that he would likely choose a different town eventually. I was terrified of never seeing him again, but I couldn’t insist he come to California.

Amber glanced at me, then, and she smiled. “So, Calis, Taylor tells me that you’re graduating in a few days.” Taylor looked at me brightly, and I couldn’t understand how he didn’t know how unexcited I was.

I opened my mouth, and then I nodded. “I, yeah, I am. I’m supposed to go to UCLA for the Spring to audit some classes.”

She clapped her hands together, and she looked as proud as if I was her own son. I wished I was. “That’s amazing, Calis.”

“Yeah, they, uh… I’m supposed to give a speech at the graduation. My rough draft is literally the most lying bunch of BS that I have ever written, and I have written some ridiculous assignments, let me tell you.”

Taylor leaned forward, and I bit my tongue when he winced at the movement. “I’m sure it will be good. Your speeches always are.”

Asking him to come crossed my mind briefly, but that just seemed like the most painful insult to either of us. “I’m not sure I agree, but I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“You always were a disgusting overachiever, Tsrali,” Raleigh said. He rocked back on his heels, but his eyes were burning as he stared at me. He seemed to be the only one who understood what was going on. Raleigh had always assumed the two of us would become a thing, and yet we never had.

And it didn’t appear that we ever would.

~

Taylor was stuck in the hospital until the day of my graduation. I went to see him, and I helped Raleigh pack up his things out of the apartment. They were easy on him in allowing him to break the lease early, though Taylor seemed dismal about quitting his jobs. He’d thanked me for all my help, and Raleigh had done the same.

I hadn’t missed Raleigh’s heated glares as we’d packed, and I hadn’t missed the hopeful glances from Amber. I was going to this graduation, though, and I hadn’t thought of a single way to keep Taylor and my parents affection.

Lee and I sat in the car a few hours before the graduation began, and I drummed my fingers along the steering wheel. “You really don’t have time,” he said.

That sealed it. I put the car in drive and started towards the hospital. My lungs hurt, my heart hurt, and the idea of that ceremony was killing me. “I don’t want to give a speech,” I said. He said nothing else about the fact that I was driving to the hospital.

“Well, you could always… you know, not.” I glared at him, and he looked away from me without apologizing.

We parked outside the hospital after a ride in silence, and his voice finally broke it as I moved towards the handle. “I don’t want you to go.” I was startled at the emotion in his voice, and I looked at him. “You won’t be happy, and you’re the only friend that I… I’ve never really had friends, and I know it doesn’t matter, but I don’t want you to go, either.”

This side of Lee was nothing I’d seen before, and I shook my head. “I can’t stay, Lee. I don’t want to go, you know that. But there’s nothing I can do.”

The words made him growl, and he stared in front of him without looking at me. “Whatever,” he said.

I didn’t know what else to say to him. “I… it means a lot, Lee, it does. You are my best friend,” I said. “But, it doesn’t change that they’re expecting me to do this, and this… I just don’t have the nerve to turn this down. What if things go badly because I do this? How could I live with myself?”

He shrugged, but he didn’t continue the conversation. “So, what do you think you’re going to say to Taylor? It’s been real, but I have parents that I have to appease?”

“I’m going to ask him… I… I just… I want to try one more time, to make him see that I’m in love with him,” I said. “I just… I think maybe if I can just… talk to him, and be honest, then he’ll… maybe he’ll reconsider.”

Lee shook his head, and I doubted he thought I had a chance. My hands shook and I stepped out of the car as I considered what I could say. I’d tried it all, and Taylor had remained steadfastly certain that I could never love him as much as he did me. I couldn’t convince him otherwise, and I had one last chance to do it.

I walked through the doors of the hospital to find Raleigh at the front desk. He turned towards me with a half-smile. “Hey there, Tsrali. What are you doing here?”

I frowned. “I wanted to talk to Taylor.”

His mouth twisted into a grimace, and he shook his head. “You what? Did he not tell you? He left to head back with most of the stuff. We didn’t want it sitting out in the open, and we had two cars, so I’m taking Mom back later today.”

The words felt like a sledgehammer to my chest, and I stared at him. “What? He left? He didn’t… he didn’t even say bye.”

Raleigh shook his head. “I don’t know, Calis. He had a lot going on with the jobs and stuff. He was really dreading quitting, and it probably just… he was probably just ready to get out of town. You can call him.”

Calling him would not have had any chance of changing anything. There were tears in my eyes, and the crushing despair pulled against me like the sledgehammer, again and again. He had every right to leave without saying goodbye to me. I hadn’t earned one. “I… okay, yeah, I’ll call him later.”

Raleigh looked sympathetic, but he turned back to the front desk to continue his conversation. I stared at him, blankly, trying to make him tell me that he was lying – that I hadn’t already missed my chance – my second chance. My millionth chance.

I staggered back to the car and fell into the driver’s seat. Tears were right behind my eyes, and Lee stared at me as I sat back down. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“He left.” My voice broke when I said it, but I held the tears back. “He went home,” I said, and my voice wavered again.

I heard the intake of breath, though it didn’t match the pain that I was feeling. “I… damn, Calis, I’m so sorry. He didn’t say goodbye?”

“No, why would he? I’m just his friend. His friend that was gone for four years. There’s no reason to make a broadway production of saying goodbye. I knew he was leaving. Raleigh said I could call him.”

The encouragement in Lee’s voice made me sick. “You can call him. You can talk to him that way.”

“Calling him isn’t… it’s not the point. He left. He’s over it. I missed my opportunity with him. I did, and of course I did, look at me. Look at what I did with the months that I had him back.”

No words of reassurance followed what I said because Lee wasn’t in the habit of lulling people into false senses of security. He knew very well that I’d squandered my chance, and he said nothing as I turned the car engine back on.

Once again, the drive was in silence, though this time, I took no comfort in Lee’s appearance. I took no comfort in the off chance that I could still have the man I loved. Finally, we parked the car at the dorm, and Lee looked at me. “Hey, look, lesson learned. You’ll know the next time.”

“There won’t be one,” I said.

It was true – there was no alternative. No chance. No learning from the mistake. I knew smart people said love always felt that way, but I also knew myself. I knew how Taylor made me feel. He said nothing, and we got out of the car.

I got my speech from the dorm, and I didn’t bother reading over it. I didn’t care if I stuttered through the entire thing. I had to consciously restrain myself from lunging at my father’s throat when I saw him. “Calis!” My mom was the one that spoke.

I’d put on the white collared shirt and black pants this morning, and I held the cap and gown in my hands. “We wanted to wish you good luck.”

“Don’t mess up the speech. There’s a lot of people here,” my father said.

I stared at him. The reason that I was doing all of this – to avoid disappointing him. No, not to avoid disappointing him. To avoid facing the chance that I would fail and have to look him in the eyes and admit it. Admit that he was right.

I left them, and I peered out to the chairs that they’d lined in front of the stone stage where the graduates would walk. I had never expected graduation from college to be the least happy day of my life – I’d always thought that would be my high school graduation.

Tamara ambushed me. She put her arms around me and grinned. She looked pretty, and Leif was with her. Her blonde hair was curled and on top of her head in a way that complimented her black dress she wore. “I’m so excited for you.”

Leif nodded his head enthusiastically. I looked between the two of them and raised my eyebrow in his direction. He looked away sheepishly, and I laughed. “Of course you two are together,” I said. “I’m devastated, Tamara. I expected at least two years of crying hysterically in your room.”

She laughed, and then she tilted her head. “Calis, what’s the matter?”

I shook my head. There was no sense talking about it. I had helped Tamara find someone that might make her happy, and I’d lost my only chance at the opportunity. “Don’t worry about it, Tamara. Thank you for coming. You should say hello to my parents and tell them how ready you were to marry me, and how I ruined my life by leaving you. You could have a great conversation.”

A laugh bubbled into Leif’s throat, but Tamara winced because she likely knew exactly what I meant. “You’ll do great, Calis,” she said.

I just shrugged. I felt like I was disconnected, even when Lee and Katt came and wished me luck. I sat in my seat as the Dead went over the usual nonsense associated with graduation. I stared up at the sky – it had been my only chance. And for what?

What had I let him go for?

I could hear the introduction, and I nodded to the man in front of me, apparently no longer the dead, as he gave me the podium. I had the sheet of paper with my horrible speech on it in my hands, and I stared blankly at the people in front of me.

“Uh…” I wanted to rip off the gown and hat. “Um…” I could have started the speech. I could have finished it. I could have kept going – I could have kept feeing sorry for myself. I could spend my life missing him. Or I could stop.

“I… I wrote this really bullshit speech, but uh…” I slid it away from the table and looked out to the shocked faces at my use of the word. “I’ve got another one.”

“You know, the speech I wrote was thanking my professors and the school for giving me the opportunity and complimented the great classes I’d taken… but, you know… what it didn’t mention were the things that I actually liked about the school. I mean, yeah, the classes were adequate – not super challenging, but… hey… they got me a nod from UCLA. That’s pretty damn impressive, right? I thought so.”

My eyes found my parents, who both looked like they were about to collapse. “But uh… here’s the thing. I don’t want to go to UCLA. I don’t want to graduate…” I threw the hat from my head, and I pulled the gown off.

I was surprised no one moved to stop me, but I kept going, and my heart raced with freedom that I’d never felt before. “What I want to do… is stay here. I have been at this school for three and a half years, and I want to be here for four. I want to hang out with my friends, I want to slack off my senior year because I can… I want to apply and interview for law schools and feel nervous about it. Most of all, I want to be happy.”

My mouth twitched into a broken smile, and I could feel the tears that I’d been fighting starting to fall. “I want to stop chasing success at the expense of my own happiness. And, for the first time in my life, I know… what that is.” I closed my eyes. “My happiness is a kiss on the soccer field, my happiness is sitting in the Sonic drive thru watching my best friend tear apart Mozzarella sticks before he hate them.” I breathed deeply. “And I have squandered so many *opportunities* at happiness. I squandered it when I stood in the entryway of my house and let the love of my life walk out the door because I didn’t have the courage to tell my parents that I loved him – because I didn’t have the courage to admit I was bisexual…”

The shock on everyone’s face was fueling me at this point, and I kept going. I found my father’s eyes, and my teeth gritted. “But, I am. I am bisexual, and I am in love with Taylor Lassau, and I have spent the past four months – no, six years – making him think he wasn’t enough for me because I was too scared to fight for my own happiness. I don’t care, anymore, though… because I might fail, I might never get into law school… I might amount to nothing, but it’s okay. My parents might never speak to me again. All of that is okay so long as I have him. Because making him happy would be more than everything I could have ever dreamed of, because I am so fucking in love with him.”

I slammed my hands on the podium. “And because of this damn graduation and because of my own cowardice, I just lost my best chance at getting him back. For something I didn’t even want. For something he actually thought I wanted more than him. But, I don’t want anything more than him because I love him, and I am not going to California while he is in some small town in Illinois, working to help his mother and brother because that’s the kind of person he is. Because he will give, and give, and give, to everyone around him without expecting anything in return, and all I want… all I’ve ever wanted, is to be able to give some of that back. I am not going to California, I am not graduating, and fuck you if that’s what you want from me…”

I pushed away from the podium and tried to navigate the steps on the stage through the tears that made it impossible to see. Maybe I could catch him… maybe I could prove it to him, now that I’d realized what it meant to be in love, now that I’d realized what he meant. I could feel the eyes on me, and I ignored them. I didn’t look at my parents, and I didn’t look anywhere but straight ahead as I heard the murmurs.

Then, though, a voice did make me stop. “Calis?”

I froze in place, and my turn was slow. I had to have imagined it – or someone else’s voice had just been too close. I was in love with him – fantasizing made sense. When I turned, though, he stood at the top of stairs, on the stage, as if he’d come from the back of it – beyond the curtain. He had on a blue-collared shirt and black pants – some of the bandages still on his cheek. “Taylor?”

He was crying, and his eyes were huge as he stared at me. Then, he smiled, and he shook his head. I started back towards him. Had he heard that? Why was he on the stage? He walked the steps, and he sprinted towards me. His hands wrung around my neck, and his lips pressed against mine.

I kissed him back before I’d fully registered what had happened. Fireworks exploded in my own mind – happiness and satisfaction and warmth – everything came together in a moment that embodied love. I loved him, and my brain and heart shrieked it as my body caught fire and I wrapped my arms around his waist.

He broke the kiss, and his eyes widened. “Oh, my god, oh my god, I’m so sorry – I’m so sorry. That was so disrespect-!” I kissed him again, tangling my fingers in his hair and reveling in the taste of his lips.

His breath heated my mouth, and the tremors that shook me felt like a heightened awareness. Happiness that had been unfathomable – a sensation that the word happiness paled against. His lips parted slightly, and my tongue slid between them.

I explored the whole of his mouth – the object of so many of my dreams. My fingers ran up his spine as his back arched against me. His arms clung to my neck, and I smiled as I kissed him, biting his lower lip and quivering at the taste and feel of him.

Once again, he was the one who broke the kiss. “Calis, everyone is staring at us!”

“Let them,” I said. I kissed him again, holding his lip with reverence for a single moment before I pulled him away from me. At some point, I’d come to stand over him, holding him in a sort of dip. The smile on his face was the happiest, most genuine smile I’d seen, and I kissed him again because of it.

His eyes searched my face, and he laughed breathlessly. “Some people do want to graduate, you know.”

I pressed my lips against his one more time, and then I realized that there were other people around us. A lot of them. Some of them were clapping, though others looked positively scandalized. I bit my lip, and I grabbed his wrist and dragged him off somewhere that would let me speak to him privately.

We ducked around one of the storage buildings, and there were tears in his eyes to accompany the smile on his face. “Calis…”

“I thought you’d gone home,” I said.

He shook his head. “No, I wasn’t going to miss your graduation!”

The thought made me laugh, almost hysterically, and I pulled him to me and kissed him again. I wasn’t sure I was going to stop doing that, ever. “You’re perfect, god, you’re so fucking wonderful. I love you. I love you, I love you so much.”

“Coming from the man that saved my life,” he said.

I shook my head. “I saved my life,” I said.

“I can’t believe you… I can’t believe you did that in front of all of those people.”

“You were right,” I said. “That’s what love is. It’s realizing that it doesn’t matter what else happens – no matter what, because you know that you’ll have enough so long as you have it. I’ll be fine so long as I have you. You make me a better person – you make me want to be a better person. You are my soulmate, and you always have been. I would fight a thousand wars for you.”

He laughed, and his head fell against my chest as he hugged me. “Man, you really took that making a fool of yourself seriously.” He held onto me like a lifeline. “I told you that your speeches are always good.” I laughed. “I love you, too,” he said. “So much.”

I kissed the top of his forehead. “I do hope my parents didn’t die, though…”

He took a breath, and he nodded his head with widened eyes. I kissed him again, and I shook my head. “That’s just going to keep happening. I’ve been dreaming about it for four years, so… sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he whispered against my mouth. “I usually don’t like to be, but… I’m glad I was wrong.” He took a breath. “What are we going to do, though? Even if you don’t go to California…”

“Stay here,” I said. “Stay here. I’ll get an apartment with you. Maybe Lee and I could even make enough to split a house with you. Just stay in the dorm, fuck, I don’t care… just stay.” My forehead fell against his, and I kissed his lips again.

He nodded. “Yeah, okay… I’ll stay. I… I hadn’t quit the jobs… I guess I was hoping… that something… that… that… that would happen.”

I laughed and wrapped my arms around his waist, burying my head into the side of his neck as I breathed him in. “You wore blue,” I said. “You smell good, you’re gorgeous… it’s not fair. It’s not.”

His smile and blush could have sustained me for a thousand years without food or water. “Come on, we should go… make sure you didn’t screw up graduation.”

He grabbed my hand and led me from behind the building. Lee was standing around the corner, inconspicuously, and he and Katt crossed the distance between us. I could hear the graduation announcements being made in the background. “Wow, when you make a statement, you do it with style, my friend,” Lee said.

“Yes, yes, I do.”

He actually hugged me, and I smiled as I returned it. It was all over another semester that the school might refuse to give me, but I didn’t care. I just grabbed Taylor’s hand again and smiled.

My mother looked at me from the corner, and I stood back as she approached me, looking sheepish. “Sweetie, that speech was… that was quite good. Your father even said so before he stormed away.” She smiled at the man standing at my side. “Taylor. It’s been too long.”

“Yeah, I know, right?” he said. He looked nervous, and I held his hand as I could feel him trying to squirm away.

She turned her attention back to me, and she smiled. “I’m sorry, sweetie. We had no idea that we were pushing you somewhere that you didn’t want to go. All we wanted was for you to be happy – you know your father is going to sulk in his car, but… this is all we wanted. I thought we were pushing you towards something you wanted.”

“I do want to be a lawyer,” I said. “But… I don’t have to be the perfect lawyer. I want…” I looked at Taylor, and then my head ducked a little as I said. “I think I’ve already covered this today.”

She laughed, and I was surprised at the acceptance in her eyes. “Oh, Calis… I… I had no idea. I always knew that Taylor brought out something special in you, but… if I’d known, I would have encouraged you. Your father will have his opinions, but he loves you.” She nodded. “I’m glad you stopped yourself before you... ended up hating us.”

I decided not to mention that I’d already had that thought, and I realized that maybe I’d misjudged them. She put her hands together. “But, since you mentioned that Taylor might have to head home… one of your father’s timeshares is actually nearby, so we could probably get you two a place there so that Taylor didn’t have to go home.” She looked at him. “And your mother mentioned that you might want to look into school – if, and that is entirely up to my son, if Calis does end up going to UCLA, then I think his father could get someone with your work ethic and history in pretty easily.”

Taylor looked like he might choke. “UCLA? Into UCLA? Wh-wh-what? I can’t afford UCLA.”

“Anyone can with the right scholarships.”

I smiled at him and tugged at his arm. I looked back at her. “We’ll think about it, Mom. Thanks, that’s… pretty awesome of you.” I paused. “When… when did you talk to Taylor’s mother?”

“Oh, she called me the day after you took her Thanksgiving food.”

Taylor and I exchanged a glance. “Uh…”

She winked at me, and she put her hands on Taylor’s shoulders. “I am so glad to have you back in my son’s life. You have no idea.” She looked thoughtful, and then she turned towards the parking lot. “Well, I should go deal with your father. I’ll see you two later. You will both be in Illinois for Christmas – that isn’t optional.”

I looked at Taylor as she walked away, and I lowered my head. “I spent years being miserable, when apparently I had… a semi-understanding Mom. I fail. I fail on so many levels.”

Taylor grabbed my face, and he kissed me deeply. “You do,” he said. “But not on this one.”

“Do you want to… go to California, I mean?”

“California is awesome… I’ve always thought that, but… I would go anywhere with you.”

We had a lot of options – decent ones. None of them were official, and none of them were guaranteed to work, but I did have absolute confirmation that we would be together, because he wanted it, and I would do anything to make him happy.

“Likewise,” I said, and I kissed him again.

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