

M.J. O'Shea



Unintended

# Unintended

M.J. O'Shea

**Republica Press**

[www.republicapress.com](http://www.republicapress.com)

Unintended  
M.J. O'Shea

Published by  
Republica Press  
1008 North Talbot  
Windsor, Ontario  
N9G 2S3  
[www.republicapress.com](http://www.republicapress.com)

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2010 by M.J. O'Shea

No part of this e-book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including emailing, printing, photocopying, or faxing without prior written permission from Republica Press

ISBN 978-1-926830-11-7

Available in Adobe PDF, MobiPocket and ePUB

Printed in Canada

Editor: Emma Holt

Cover Artist: Aaron David

## **Dedication**

*To Cat, Jeana, and Nat, thanks for reading my stories a million times and giving me great advice and support. To my readers, thank you for making me believe I could do this!*

## **Prologue**

Usually life moves in a line, a fairly even course, like a stable inexorable ride on the belt of an assembly line. Parts are added, maybe removed, but it still continues, ever onward until the end. Every so often, though, something happens to upset that even line, to alter it permanently. It might be a person, an event. It doesn't matter. Those people, those times that shake us to our very bones—they're what's important. They make us who we are. Funny thing about them, though, those core shaking life changers... We rarely, if ever, see them coming.

## Chapter One

*Thanksgiving 2009*

“Baby, have you seen my blue striped shirt?”

Taylor heard his husband Alex’s frustrated voice from the bedroom where he had been rooting around in the boxes that were piled from floor to ceiling. He chuckled quietly, knowing there was no way in hell his gorgeous and slightly obsessive man was going to find any specific item of clothing in that mess. They had bought their first house back in June and had spent long months renovating the turn of the century craftsman that had come with tons of charm and even more problems. It was finally finished just the week before and they’d been living out of boxes ever since.

“I haven’t seen it,” Taylor called. “Why do you have to wear the blue stripes?”

“Your mom got it for me for my birthday. I just wanted to look nice.”

“You always look amazing, and my mom will love you no matter what you’re wearing.” He came around the corner to see Alex sitting in a huge pile of both of their clothes that he had obviously just pulled from one of the newly packed boxes. Taylor would have been annoyed if Alex didn’t look so adorably frustrated.

“Here, wear this shirt. It looks great with your eyes.” Taylor picked an emerald green button up from the pile. Alex looked up at him; the just mentioned beautiful eyes completely overwhelmed.

*For someone who used to move all the time he’s sure having trouble with this!* Taylor thought.

He laughed again and held out his hand to pull Alex up to his feet. “Have I told you that I love you yet today?”

“Yeah.” Alex grinned sheepishly. “But you can tell me as many times as you want. Sorry I made a mess with the clothes. I’ll re-pack them all when we get home.” He circled his arms around Taylor’s waist and dropped little kisses all over his neck.

Taylor tugged on Alex until they fell backwards onto their bed, Alex draped on top of him “That’s better,” he whispered, loving the thrill he still got when Alex was so close. Alex lowered his head, brushing more kisses along Taylor’s neck and jaw. The familiar chills raced up and down his spine and he moaned lightly. “It’s official. I definitely love you.”

Alex grinned and claimed his mouth in a kiss. Taylor claimed Alex right back, loving his taste and the feel of his lips, the comfortable warmth of his touch.

“Baby?” Alex’s breathless voice was muffled by enthusiastic lips.

“Yeah?”

“If you don’t stop kissing me, I’m going to end up taking all of your clothes off and then we’ll never make it to your parents’ in time for dinner.”

Taylor laughed. “Who needs dinner? We have the pie. And the whipped cream.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “That’s the best part.”

Taylor could see the lust flash across Alex’s face even through his joking smile and realized they would never make it out the door if one of them didn’t get up in about ten seconds. He decided to be the noble one.

“Okay, okay. C’mon, love. You get changed and I’ll get the food ready to go.”

Alex gave him one more lingering kiss then hopped out of bed and headed for the teetering pile of clothes. Taylor swatted him lightly on the rear and ambled happily to the kitchen to wrap up the pies and the whipped cream.

He smiled to himself as he worked, listening to the small sounds of Alex getting ready. He loved that after ten years it was still nearly impossible for them to keep their hands off of each

other, that they knew what the other person was thinking with just one look and could laugh at jokes that were told with a single word. It was so obvious that they belonged together. They had known it since the night they met.



## **Chapter Two**

*December 1999*

Taylor hummed as he built himself a huge after-school sandwich. It had been one of those rare awesome days where everything just seemed to go his way. That morning he received his early acceptance letter to the University of Puget Sound and then he had gotten every class he wanted for second semester. It felt like his birthday, only it was better. His eighteenth birthday had passed back in September with little fanfare. Taylor grinned around pastrami and pickles, thinking of earlier. The best part of his amazing day had come just a few hours before, when an unforecasted snow had started to fall after fifth period.

All the kids had gone nuts, running around in the courtyard and pelting each other with wet slush balls. Everyone knew it would be gone by the morning when the snow inevitably turned back to typical Washington rain. It had to be enjoyed while there was still a chance. Taylor had laughed and screamed with the rest of them throwing piles of soppy snow at the others until the bell rang signaling the final class.

He remembered feeling an odd prickle and looking up. Through the window, just for a second, he'd noticed someone watching and smiling at the general hilarity.

It was the new kid.

Their school was large, but not big enough for someone new to slip in unnoticed. Especially someone like him. Every girl Taylor knew was totally obsessed with the guy already. As annoying as it was to have all your well-planned game snatched away from you at the drop of a registration slip, Taylor had to admit he understood all the fuss.

The new kid was the ultimate compelling man of mystery. New in town, annoyingly gorgeous, rich, and effortlessly cool; he was, according to Taylor's best friend Beth, the kind of

guy you'd definitely want to take for a ride. At least that's what she said all the girls had been talking about for the past month. He doubted any of them had gotten up the nerve to actually do anything about it. He especially didn't want to hear about Beth riding anyone because she was like a sister to him. Taylor did have to admit that he was intrigued by the guy...and envious.

Coincidentally, Taylor had found out on the way home that there was going to be a huge party at, of all people, Alex Stewart's house that night. That was his name—Alex Stewart. Of course it was. Was there anything about him that was unattractive?

Taylor was a little surprised that Alex had decided to invite everyone over. No one even knew him yet since he kept to himself. It didn't matter. If anything, his mysterious quietness only added to the interest. Every kid in school was going to show up unless they were dying of pneumonia.

Beth had shrieked the news about the party at Taylor when he met after school. She had been jumping up and down giggling like Alex Stewart was a celebrity or something. He'd wanted to roll his eyes at her but was excited at the same time. Beth and his other best friend Jason were picking him up in four hours and they were all going to carpool up to the exclusive neighborhood where the mysterious new guy lived. Jason was just as giddy about the whole Alex Stewart thing as the girls.

Taylor was dreading the car ride with the two shrieking fans and their x-rated mouths. Between the two of them you could easily script an entire porn film in one conversation. He was excited for the party, though. Mostly because he was glad to be going to a place where everyone he knew would be having fun and relaxing—there weren't going to be too many opportunities for that left. No matter what anyone promised, things were going to be different after high school.

## **Chapter Three**

Alex Stewart, mysterious new guy and the hottest thing in school was nervous, terrified actually. He yanked off the button-up that he'd been considering and went back to a fitted t-shirt and a pair of low-slung jeans. It didn't seem to matter what he put on. No shirt was going to cover up how uncomfortable he was going to feel the entire night trying to make conversation with people he didn't know.

"We're going to be here for a while Alex, you should meet some of the other kids," he said to the mirror in an almost perfect falsetto imitation of his mother.

Taking her advice, he'd invited a few of the people he'd talked to in English class over to play pool and hang out. He had no idea how the invitation had blown up to include the fifty or so kids who'd walked by him at school and said 'See you tonight.' Alex didn't want to consider who else had heard about it. If he thought about it too much, he may just throw up.

Fully dressed but not ready to face the inquisition, Alex lay down on his bed with his headphones and tried not to worry. It would be fine, he promised himself. He'd get through this one night of 'normal teenage behavior' and then go back to being the quiet guy who would rather watch science fiction movies, read books and draw than hang out at a party. Maybe if the kids got drunk enough they wouldn't notice when he disappeared.

In the back of his head he wondered if the cute guy that he saw playing in the snow earlier would be there. He remembered watching him laugh in the courtyard between classes. The boy had an infectious smile and gorgeous warm eyes that Alex could see even from a distance. Just the thought of that friendly smile made Alex's skin get tingly at the base of his spine. He sighed. Who cared if the cutie from the courtyard was there? It wasn't like he was ever going to work up the nerve to talk to him.

Sometimes it really sucked to be shy.

Alex heard the front door open and close a number of times through his softly playing music before he got the courage together to go down the stairs and join his own party.

He sat up and slipped his shoes on.

It was show time.

## **Chapter Four**

It was warm and muggy inside of Beth's brand new birthday present Volkswagen. The snow had in fact turned to slushy rain, and the drops plunked heavily on the windshield as they drove slowly up Capitol Hill towards Volunteer Park. Beth and Jason were eagerly discussing the upcoming night...well mainly they were talking about their host. They went on and on about what he might be wearing, his shiny perfect black hair, how gorgeous those big blue eyes of his were. Soon they moved on to who would get to kiss him at the party, how good of a kisser he would probably be, and other things Taylor didn't want to think about let alone repeat. He wondered if it was like this at the kid's last school and had to suppress the instinct to be annoyed. After all he didn't even know the guy, and it wasn't his fault that he looked like a damn model.

"Isn't Alex like the hottest guy name ever, T?"

Taylor made a face. Why was she asking him that kind of crap?

"Yeah. Alex is such a hot name. It makes me want to strip his clothes off and...what did you say? Oh yeah, ride him like a bronco." Taylor tried to make his voice sound as sarcastic and flat as possible. He may have to listen to their lustful babbling but he was not going to be forced into participating.

Beth swatted him on the arm. "Be nice."

"I am being nice. I just don't want to get involved in talking about some dude like I want to jump his bones. It's just—"

"It's just what?" Jason's eyebrows were raised like he was challenging Taylor to say something judgmental.

“It’s just not me. That’s all I was going to say. I wouldn’t talk about a girl like that either. It’s not my style. Have you two ever heard me go on about how I want to dive into some chick’s crotch?”

Beth and Jason looked at him silently for a moment then they both broke out in laughter.

“I can’t believe you just said that!” Beth shrieked, giggling.

Taylor rolled his eyes. He just couldn’t win with those two. He really hoped they got to the party soon.

Taylor was more excited about Alex Stewart’s house than about the boy himself. As they got closer his smile grew. He couldn’t believe that they were going to be inside one of the insanely ornate old mansions that had lined the broad tree-lined streets at the top of the hill. Most people only ever got to gawk and point at them as they drove past. He’d always had an interest in architecture so he’d spent hours driving around and looking at all the details. To him the houses looked like museums or some Stephen King movie set. Taylor couldn’t imagine what it would be like to actually live there.

The neighborhood was clogged with cars by the time they pulled up to the house. It took them nearly fifteen minutes of weaving around the different streets before they finally found a spot to park. They were going to have to make a mad dash of it if they planned on staying dry. Taylor, Beth, and Jason piled out of the car and ran like crazy for the house on the corner that was brightly lit with cheery Christmas lights.

They slowed to a stop when they reached the massive oak door. The house was crazy huge and its dark Tudor styling made it look scary. They looked at each other, no one wanting to be the one to make a move. Beth finally reached out a tentative hand to knock. A well-dressed and efficient looking man opened the door before she could even touch it.

*A Butler?* Taylor nearly groaned. *You have got to be freaking kidding me!*

“May I take your coats?” he asked.

They took their coats off while giving each other ‘can you believe this?’ looks. Then the butler pointed them down the wide set of stairs which led to a downstairs lounge. The house must have been built of ten-foot thick stone. Judging from the number of cars outside, half the school was already there, and you could barely hear a thing.

“Wonder which skank is going to be sinking her claws into Mr. Beautiful,” Beth whispered. Taylor shook his head. Of course she would bring the popular girls into this.

Beth had made a career out of hating the cheerleader types while at the same time being fascinated with their foreign ways. He thought she was wasting her time caring. Beth was adorable, in a bookish sort of way. In a few years guys were going to be drooling all over her. He hoped, for her sake (and his since he’d have to hear about it), that she at least got to talk to Alex Stewart International Man of Mystery that night.

## Chapter Five

Downstairs the party was in full swing. The new boy was indeed surrounded by a full entourage of simpering swoony girls. Taylor noticed it wasn't just the girls who were drawn to him, though. It was everybody: jocks were trying to get him to play pool and ping-pong; the theater kids were entertaining him with jokes and tricks. It was like he was a beautiful prince holding court with a crowd of adoring subjects. He was smiling graciously and laughing at their jokes, but seemed to be fending them off more than inviting them closer.

Taylor didn't get it. If he were the center of attention like that, he wouldn't just be standing there! He shook his head and nudged Beth towards the growing cluster of Alex fans. Since he was there to hang with his friends than to obsess over the new guy, he left Beth to her game and grabbed a beer so he could make the rounds.

A few hours later, Taylor finished the game of pool he was playing with a guy from the lacrosse team and looked up at the general crowd. The room was, if anything, more packed. His head swam a little and he had to use the bathroom.

*Wow, maybe it's time to go home.*

When he couldn't see either one of his two friends and couldn't stand to wait in the bathroom line any longer, he set off to look through the rest of the house for either Beth, Jason, or another bathroom, whichever came first. A thorough search of the main room didn't produce any of the above, so he headed up the wide stairs towards the huge entrance way.

It didn't take ten minutes for him to get totally lost.

The old house had a ton of hallways, lined with heavy white painted doors. He wandered up and down, climbing little back staircases and hoping to make it out to the entranceway by luck. Never happened. After a while all the halls started to look exactly the same and Taylor couldn't



say which direction he'd come from. He really wanted to sit down but was afraid if he did then no one would ever find him again and he'd die of starvation in some back section of the huge mansion. He finally made the intoxicated decision to start opening doors. He hoped that if nothing else he would at least find a bathroom soon.

The first two rooms were obviously unused bedrooms. He could see neatly made beds and empty dressers by the pale glow of the streetlights. The third door he tried, opened into a bedroom as well—but this one was occupied. Clothes and books were scattered all over different surfaces, and posters covered the walls. The TV was on, volume turned low.

It had to be Alex's room.

Taylor's face turned red. He hated the feeling of being in someone's room when they weren't there.

He turned and was about to leave when he heard a voice coming from the massive bed perched in the corner.

"Hey, wait. Don't go."

Taylor turned again, and saw Alex Stewart himself sit up sleepily. His inky black hair was mussed from lying down and his pale skin glowed alabaster in the flickering light coming from the screen. He beckoned with the TV remote for Taylor to come closer.

Even swimming in his buzz, Taylor felt awkward.

"Uh, hi," he stammered. "Um, I was looking for a bathroom and I got lost." Alex laughed.

It was the first time Taylor had seen him looking normal and not like a movie star. It was way better.

"You can use mine, it's right there." He pointed at a door in the corner.

"Thanks," Taylor mumbled, feeling like an idiot.

When he came out, Alex was sitting cross-legged on the bed flipping through channels.

“How come you’re up here, instead of down at your party?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t really know any of those kids so it’s kind of like work. I figured no one would notice if I disappeared.”

“I bet more than a few of those girls wish they could have disappeared with you.” Taylor craned his neck to make sure none of them had.

Alex laughed again. “I’m alone.”

Some little twinge inside of Taylor told him he was glad.

“How come you had a party if you don’t really want to hang out with everyone?”

“My parents wanted me to make friends. They don’t understand that I’m basically pretty shy and meeting people isn’t exactly easy for me.”

Taylor realized at that moment that they hadn’t even met, not actually. Not unless stumbling into someone’s room was an introduction.

“Well, I’m Taylor. Strange way to meet someone I guess, but it works, right?” He stuck out his hand with a smile.

Alex reached out and shook it, smiling back.

His smile was sweet and friendly. It changed his face totally and made Taylor’s breath catch in his throat for a second. He was just so beautiful. Taylor gave himself a mental kick. Since when did he start thinking of guys as 'beautiful'?

“I’m Alex, but I’m sure you know that.”

It was Taylor's turn to smile. “Yeah, I did. Hey you mind if I sit up here for a minute? It’s really loud down there, and I lost my friends. I think they may have ditched me.”

“Not very friendly of them. Have a seat. I was watching one of the vampire shows.”

“*Buffy. Angel?*”

“You know, I’m not sure. They kind of blend together for me. It’s the one with the blue guy. I think it’s a re-run anyway.” Alex patted the spot next to him on the huge bed. Taylor tried to vault onto it, but failed miserably and ended up on the floor, head spinning.

Alex’s soft laugh echoed from above. He crawled down and held out his hand. “Here, grab my hand. No more drinking for you tonight!”

Taylor was surprised by the immediate sensation of being pulled up smoothly and quickly. Then Alex helped him up onto his huge bed before vaulting back up himself.

“Thanks. I don’t even remember having that much. I just feel all dizzy.”

“Long day?” He looked sympathetic.

Taylor kept being surprised by how nice Alex was.

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Well just relax. I’m sure your friends will turn up eventually.”

## Chapter Six

They sat in companionable silence, watching TV. Every few minutes, one of them would offer a remark about the show, mainly about the special effects or the somewhat ridiculous plot.

It was a bit surreal for Taylor to be casually sitting with the guy he'd been hearing so much about. It was like hanging out with a celebrity. He found himself looking over, smiling at Alex's quick grin, and feeling a little bit special because he was the one getting his attention.

*God, I'm worse than the girls!*

It took him a little while to realize that he was having a lot of fun with Alex; after he forgot that it was the 'new guy' who was totally unapproachable, rich and gorgeous and lived in this palace of a house, he really liked talking to him. Alex was funny and sarcastic, surprisingly normal, and seemed to be happy to have someone to hang out with who wasn't a fawning girl.

After a half an hour or so, though, Taylor felt his eyes starting to get heavy. It had been a pretty long day after all. He didn't want to go but he knew if he didn't get up soon he was going to end up passing out in Alex Stewart's bed. He sat up straight and shook his head, trying to wake it up. Instead his brain lurched sickeningly. He slid to the edge of the massive bed, hoping he didn't fall again and make an ass out of himself.

"Hey, Alex, I'm falling asleep. I better go check for my friends so we can head home." He could have sworn he saw an instant flash of disappointment.

"Okay. Want me to go with you so you don't get lost?" Alex smirked a little.

"Ha ha," Taylor replied, returning the sarcastic smile. *He liked this guy.* "Actually I wouldn't mind a little help."

They searched all over, but there was no sign of Beth or Jason. The party had cleared out for the most part, left with only a few stragglers waving drunkenly at Alex.

“Shit. They must have left already. Hey, can I use a phone to call her?” Beth was one of the first kids Taylor knew to get a cell phone. *Spoiled brat*. He dialed her number after Alex handed him a phone. She picked up on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Beth, it’s T. Where the hell are you?”

“Almost home. Where are you?”

“Uh, still at the house. You guys ditched me. Thanks.” There was a surprised silence.

“Oh my god I’m so sorry. We looked all over for you. Thought you must have snagged a ride with someone else.”

“No, I laid down for a minute. I felt kinda sick.” He hadn’t really, but why not lay it on thick?

“You want me to come back?” Beth sounded suitably guilty. Alex must have heard her through the phone because he gestured for Taylor to say no. He told Beth to hold on, and put his hand over the phone.

“I’ll give you a ride in the morning. Just crash here. She doesn’t have to drive all the way back.”

Taylor nodded. “I’m good. Alex is going to give me a ride.”

Beth giggled and harrumphed jealously at the same time. “Oh, *Alex* is going to give you a ride.” She giggled again. “You suck. I wish I was stranded there. I’d drag him to bed and strip all his clothes off. Come to think of it, Jason probably would too. It’s such a waste of opportunity that you of all people are in this situation.” After that she said something that included the word ride but had nothing to do with a car. Taylor’s face turned red.

*Oh Jesus, Beth..* He hoped Alex didn’t hear that part. He’d been trying not to hear it himself.

“Talk to you tomorrow,” he muttered and hung up the phone quickly.

Taylor could see from the look on Alex's face that he obviously had heard the comments about dragging and stripping and whatever god-awful thing Beth had said there at the end.

His cheeks burst into flames. "Sorry bout her," he mumbled at his toes.

Alex just laughed. "Don't worry about it. At the risk of sounding full of myself, it happens at every school. I guess the girls can't resist a new flavor."

"Yeah, it's called 'hot,'" he murmured again without thinking.

"What?" Alex asked, smirking a little.

Taylor was pretty sure he'd heard. *Idiot!*

"Uh, nothing," he answered quickly. "You didn't seem to be going for any of them. The girls, I mean."

Alex made a face. "I don't see a point in making any real effort. We move so much that as soon as I make friends or let anything else happen, it's time to go again. It used to kill me when I was younger so I just stopped trying to fit in."

"That's sad," Taylor replied, alcohol continuing to unlock his usual verbal filters. "Shit. I'm sorry. I seem to have a big mouth when I've been drinking. I should probably go to sleep before I say anything else."

Alex smiled again like he had earlier and Taylor decided he had to be imagining the little flurries in his stomach.

"Don't worry about it. Come hang for a little longer," Alex said.

"Sure." He smiled and followed Alex back to his room.

A few minutes after arriving back in Alex's room there was a polite knock on the door. When the door opened it was a lovely woman dressed in a casual pair of pants and a sweater. She had Alex's black hair and fair skin, but big brown almond shaped eyes instead of Alex's startling blue.

“Hey, Mom, this is Taylor. His ride left so he’s sleeping here.”

Taylor was surprised again by a warm and gracious smile.

“Hello, Taylor. It’s nice to meet you. Alex dear, there is a young lady downstairs who would like to say goodnight to you personally.” He could see Alex’s mother was trying not to laugh. It obviously did happen all the time.

*Poor guy*, Taylor thought sarcastically.

“I’ll be back in a minute, Taylor. Just have a seat.” He gave Taylor a rueful grin and turned to follow his mother out the door.

Taylor sat in Alex’s computer chair. He felt awkward just flopping down on the bed, invited or not. He swiveled around in the chair, looking at the colorfully decorated walls. Alex had a ton of cool stuff: concert posters from cities all over the world hanging next to art prints from the Metropolitan Museum and The Louvre. There was a towering CD rack that Taylor’s hands itched to start sorting through and the bookshelf was just flat out amazing. It was every sci-fi nerd’s dream—David Eddings, Terry Brooks, Neil Gaiman, Orson Scott Card—all of Taylor’s favorites, were there mixed with classics, contemporary fiction, and poetry and just...wow. That was the only word for it. He could have happily buried himself in that bookshelf for hours.

He was flipping through a poetry book filled with darkly beautiful poems about love and lust and loss when Alex opened the door quietly and came back in.

“Sorry about that,” he said with a shy smile.

“Hey, I understand. You’ve got fans,” Taylor teased.

Alex rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

“Hey, I love your books.” He held up the poetry volume. “I’m jealous.”

“I read a lot,” Alex answered, turning pink and looking at the floor.

“So do I.” Taylor nudged him with his shoulder and smiled when he looked up. “I can’t believe you have the whole David Eddings collection. I must have read them a million times in middle school.”

“Me too.” Alex relaxed visibly.

Taylor understood why Alex had been uncomfortable. The books and the art and the dark music didn’t match his cool pretty boy image. It didn’t bother Taylor that Alex wasn’t what he seemed to be at first. In fact, he thought he was much more interesting.

Taylor couldn’t believe how much they had in common. They liked the same books and the same bands; they even had the exact same *Star Wars* poster.

“You, uh, want to play Ninetendo or something?” Alex asked.

“Sure,” he answered, taking a closer look at the band posters. “Were you really at all those concerts?”

Alex nodded.

“That’s so amazing. I can’t believe you’ve been to all these places. You’re so lucky.” Alex shrugged. “Sometimes. Other times it would’ve been nice to have had the same best friend since kindergarten.”

Taylor felt a twinge when he realized Alex had probably gone to a lot of the concerts on his own.

“Well you’ve got a friend now if you want one.”

Alex’s grin was sweet and endearing. He nodded wordlessly and handed Taylor the game controller.

Taylor smiled back. “Hey, you want to sit with me and my other friends at lunch? I’ll make sure Beth keeps her claws out of you.”

Alex looked a little nervous but smiled even wider as he nodded.



*He must be so sick of being alone*, Taylor thought sympathetically.

They attempted to play video games for a while but eventually gave up because they were both so busy cracking jokes that their characters kept dying. Alex couldn't believe how much fun he was having. He thought of earlier that night when he was getting dressed and hoping that the cute boy might show up. It was amazing how quickly things had changed.

They sat cross-legged on his bed and talked for hours, something that Alex had little experience with. The shyness that always made it so hard for him to connect to anyone had disappeared. It was surprisingly easy to talk to Taylor, to laugh with him and not even worry about feeling awkward. Alex usually had to work at finding things to talk about with people. Not even close with Taylor. They both had so much to say that they kept stumbling over each other's words and laughing when they both said the same thing. He was amazed at how much they had in common. They could go on and on about books they both loved, music they were both obsessed with, movies they'd seen a million times. There wasn't any of that weird 'getting to know a new person' awkwardness at all, just easy laughter and total understanding.

In the early hours of morning, the conversation turned more personal. Taylor told Alex how he'd always battled with his parents who wanted him to be a lawyer or something practical when all he'd ever really wanted was to be a writer. Alex told Taylor about how painful it always was for him to walk into new school after new school, having everyone stare at his face and his obviously expensive clothes but wonder if a single one of them actually wanted to get to know him for who he was.

Alex couldn't get over how impressed he was with a guy who had merely been a cute face a few short hours before. Taylor was smart and funny and he couldn't wait to get to know him better. Even though they'd been together all night, it seemed like they'd barely scratched the surface.

Of course Alex was still attracted to him. That side of it had definitely not gone away. The tingles he'd felt in his spine when he'd seen Taylor playing in the snow got stronger every time they accidentally touched, every time Taylor laughed or smiled. Alex could feel himself leaning closer, wanting to touch him and kiss him. He had to force himself back. He didn't want to lose the comfortable feeling they had by doing something stupid.

Taylor never made it to a guest room that night. They finally just sprawled out sideways on the big bed falling asleep as the first rays of wintry morning light filtered through Alex's curtains. Every few minutes one of them would say something, and the other would laugh or agree. It was like they couldn't stand to let go of the night. They both knew how special and unusual it was.

Finally, they were silent, too tired to even say one more word. Alex could swear he still had a smile on his face as he drifted to sleep.

When they woke around noon, Alex drove Taylor home in his sleek new Lexus. Taylor couldn't believe it when he found out the lavish car had been Alex's eighteenth birthday present earlier in the fall. It sure as hell beat the Seahawks tickets he had been so thrilled with! He stopped teasing Alex about the car when he saw the look on his face. He seemed a little embarrassed by the wealth that constantly surrounded him but to Taylor it had become unimportant.

They stopped in front of Taylor's house and he turned to Alex and promised to save a spot for him at the lunch table on Monday. A few moments later, he watched him drive off, waving enthusiastically the whole time.

Taylor greeted his mother when he walked in and shuffled up the stairs to his room where he flopped down on his bed with a big goofy smile on his face. He couldn't seem to stop smiling. He tried to remember what he thought of Alex the day before. How he viewed him when he was still a stranger, when he was that perfect unreal guy that had a cloud of mystery floating around

him. Taylor remembered the feeling, remembered the slight twinge of envy and the vague interest in their school's resident celebrity. It was nothing like that anymore.

Over the course of the night Alex had become...well, just Alex. He wasn't the gorgeous black haired model look-alike that all the girls were dying over anymore. He wasn't someone to be envied and talked about. He was a friend, a real friend. Taylor felt like he knew him so well already. It had been one of those crazy nights, rare in anyone's life, when you meet someone who feels important. A night when you feel like, no matter what, you can tell that you met a person who will change you forever and you'll never, ever forget them.

## Chapter Seven

November 2009

“You know, sometimes I still can’t believe I ended up with the hottest guy in high school.”

Alex had to crane his neck to look at Taylor. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“You. You were such a babe. Every single girl in the school wanted you,” Taylor teased as they lounged on the couch watching one of the movies they’d unearthed earlier.

Their new house was still piled high with boxes but they had given up a few hours before and ordered pizza. Even though it was still a huge mess Alex had to admit it felt great to be snuggled up with his man in a place that was actually theirs. It felt permanent. Since he’d spent his entire childhood moving around, permanent was something that was very important to him. He’d been so relaxed he had to concentrate for a second before he realized what Taylor had said.

*Not this again...*

“Every single girl did not want me. Don’t be ridiculous.” Alex laid his head on Taylor’s lap and looked up at him with mock annoyance. He always got embarrassed when he was teased about his looks.

Taylor laced their fingers together and grinned wickedly. “I guess there were probably a few lesbians who weren’t interested, but the rest of them did. You were the out of town rich boy—fabulous car, pale skin, and *toooooo*tally mysterious and dreamy. That’s like straight out of a movie.” Taylor chuckled. “Remind me again. How many girls asked you to the prom?”

Alex felt his face turn red. *Shit.*

“I don’t know. Five or six.”

Eight actually. It had taken him years to confess that little fact. He realized he should have kept it to himself since it immediately turned into one of Taylor’s favorite things to flip him shit

about. Other than the newness factor he had never understood what the girls had all gone nuts over. He'd been so painfully shy. But his shyness hadn't kept him from wanting to get to know Taylor.

The second Taylor walked into his bedroom in the middle of that party Alex had wanted more. He'd nearly choked on the licorice he had been eating when he realized it was the guy from the courtyard standing there looking awkward and cute as hell. He'd noticed him earlier in the crowd and wanted to kick himself because he was too nervous to go up to him and say hi. Alex knew he couldn't let him walk away when he'd finally managed to get him alone, accident or not. The skater boy with the big eyes and adorable embarrassed grin had attracted him instantly.

"Hey," he teased back tugging on the collar of Taylor's shirt and bringing him close for a kiss. What if I was the one who ended up with the hottest guy in high school?"

"Yeah, right!" Taylor laughed but kissed Alex anyway.

"I thought you were hot. You already know I had a thing for you before we even met. Your smile made my stomach flip."

"That's cause you knew somehow that we were meant to be together." Taylor fluttered his eyelashes dramatically.

Alex chuckled. "It's not just me, you know. Women check you out all the time."

"They're looking at both of us and you know exactly what they're thinking."

Alex made a groaning noise and buried his face in Taylor's stomach. "I'd rather not think about that. The last time Beth made some remark about us looking hot together and wanting to watch us kiss or whatever...oh lord. I just about died."

Kiss wasn't exactly the word she'd used. He wasn't going to repeat what she'd actually said.

He hoped someday that he'd get used to Beth's mouth but it hadn't happened yet. Just when he thought he'd heard it all she would come out with something that made him turn red and start

stuttering. Taylor laughed. He'd had many more years with their closest friend's highly exotic vocabulary. Alex hoped she didn't pass too much of her vocal habits on to her two daughters. He could only imagine the trouble they'd get in at school if they repeated even a quarter of the things their mother said.

"So hottest guy at Garfield High, you wanna find the box with our sheets in it so we can go to bed?" Alex lifted Taylor's t-shirt so he could blow a huge raspberry on his stomach.

Taylor laughed and squirmed like he always did when someone touched his super ticklish abdomen.

*That's what he gets for teasing me,* Alex thought. He lifted his head and smiled.

"Yeah, I'll go look. I think I saw that box outside of the bathroom." He gave Taylor one more sleepy kiss than he reluctantly dragged his sore body from the couch and shuffled off in search of the box with their bedding.

## **Chapter Eight**

*December 1999*

Alex could feel his stomach gurgle as he ambled as casually as possible towards the beckoning Taylor. Taylor and a few other kids were seated at one of the large round tables that were crowded into the big cafeteria. Alex felt the eyes of the other students on him as he walked through the room. A few waved, and he smiled back since his hands were full. It was a little scary just how much he wanted to fit in at this newest in a long line of schools. He didn't have to wonder why.

He approached Taylor's table with more than a little trepidation. Alex hoped everything was as cool between them as it had been the day before when he'd dropped Taylor off at his house.

Taylor looked up and grinned at him, scooting over and patting the seat next to him. Alex breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed like everything was going to be fine.

"Okay, so Alex, this is Beth, Jason, and the twins Courtland and Carissa." Taylor pointed to each person as he introduced them.

Courtland and Carissa were fraternal twins, one boy and one girl, but so nearly identical that it was still hard to tell them apart. Alex felt the appraising look of Beth and interestingly enough, Jason as well. He shrugged internally, not really minding, and took the seat next to Taylor.

The near blinding shock of attraction that zapped him the second his arm brushed against Taylor's would have reduced him to a twitching pile on the floor if he hadn't been expecting it. He had felt it about a million times that wonderful insane night that they'd spent bonding in his room. He knew Taylor felt it too, could see it in his eyes. He also knew Taylor hadn't realized what was happening between them and was still calling it friendship in his mind.

Alex didn't care. He just wanted to be near him. He wasn't even worried about shielding his heart for that inevitable day when he would have to pack his bags and go. The hurt would be worth it to feel such a intense feeling.

"So, Alex, where did you live before Seattle?" Beth asked. She seemed to be on her best behavior.

"Before here, New York and before that Sydney, but only for a month or two. Most of last year we were in England." He couldn't help but notice the looks of awe and envy on most of their faces. Alex wished he could tell them that it was better to have a home than a glamorous jet set life, but he knew they wouldn't believe him.

"Why do you move so much?" The question had come from Taylor.

"Uh, my dad does consulting for a bunch of big companies. We go where the job is. They're always temporary. Sometimes I don't even go to school if we're not staying very long. I'll just get a tutor. The longest I've been anywhere was a year. It's usually only a few months."

"But you're in school here. Does that mean you'll be staying a while?" Taylor looked at him hopefully. That little look made Alex's stomach flutter.

"Yeah, I think we're going to be here at least until June."

When Taylor had turned to look at him, the sun from the windows glinted off of his coppery hair. Alex loved how it fell in a fringy curtain in front of his eyes.

It had blown him completely sideways on Saturday night when he'd realized how totally perfect Taylor was for him. He wished at that moment, like he had a thousand times before, that he were like the other kids. That he could stay somewhere and make friends, fall in love. He was so lonely and this small taste of what could be only made him want more. He couldn't wait for college to start in the fall. It was still up in the air where he was going to school, but wherever it was would be permanent, his first real home.



“Where’s your dad working right now?”

Alex had been thinking and barely heard Beth’s question.

“Oh, Microsoft,” he answered.

“What kind of consulting does he do?” One of the twins asked.

He smiled. It was so nice of Taylor’s friends to try and include him.

“This is going to sound horrible but I’m not exactly sure. I’ve never been that interested in my dad’s work. I think he does efficiency training and reassigns people to better suited jobs.” He shrugged and gave them a sheepish smile.

“How come you aren’t living in Bellevue? That’s where Microsoft is, right?”

“Yeah it is but my mother likes old houses and that one was available. We’ve lived in some pretty weird places. You should’ve seen the house in England. It was about four hundred years old. I spent the whole time we lived there sprinting up and down the stairs and the hallways cause the place freaked me out so much.”

Everyone at the table laughed.

Alex grinned at Taylor who bumped him gently with his shoulder. His eyes seemed to be saying ‘*See, it’s not so hard.*’

*Wait till I have to leave*, Alex couldn’t help thinking, but tried to push the thought away. He was happy for once and didn’t want to ruin it.

## **Chapter Nine**

Taylor and Alex didn't end up waiting for the weekend to hang out again. Taylor came to his house nearly every day. Most days Beth, Jason, and the twins tagged along, but Alex didn't even care that he couldn't have Taylor to himself. He was just content to have him at all. His nearness was addictive.

Every day Taylor would ask what the plan was, what Alex felt like doing, like he assumed whatever it was they would both be included. Alex couldn't help smiling every time they ended up together for yet another afternoon, knowing that Taylor could feel the chemistry between them and was drawn to him even if he couldn't put a name to it other than new friendship.

He could see Beth watching them every once in a while, eyes appraising. She wasn't stupid, that one. A few times he would catch her eye and smile. She would only raise her eyebrows, like she was daring him to do something about it. He wanted to do something about it so bad he could barely stand it but he needed to be sure that Taylor wanted it too. This wasn't a friendship he was willing to ruin for a few stolen kisses.

On Friday, they planned for Taylor to sleep over so they could play video games, listen to music, talk, and not have to worry about what time he needed to get home. Alex could tell that the others were a little jealous not to be included in the plans. Even though he liked them, they felt like four third wheels on a date. He couldn't wait to be alone with Taylor.

Every class seemed to take a million years that day. He may as well have not been in any of them. All he could think about was Taylor: his smile, the way his eyes crinkled up when he laughed, how he got all excited when he talked about his favorite books or music he liked. The more time Alex spent with him, the more impossible it was not to obsess over him. He'd never been so attracted to anyone in his life.

They waved goodbye to each other in the parking lot after school and agreed that Taylor would come over at five so they could order pizza for dinner. Alex tried to act casual as he got into his car and shut the door, but sometimes when Taylor smiled at him he had a hard time breathing.

## Chapter Ten

Alex let out a sigh of relief when he saw Taylor's beat up Scout pulling into his driveway three hours later. A part of him had been afraid that Taylor had figured out how he felt about him and wasn't going to show up. Alex smiled as the Scout shuddered to a stop. He loved the big old car. It was quirky and unique and it fit Taylor's personality. He chuckled to himself when he realized how confidently he felt like he could say that something "fit" Taylor. Alex knew it was rare how quickly they had bonded in the past few days.

Alex bounded down the stairs to greet Taylor at the front door. They grinned at each other for a few seconds before he reached out to grab his backpack.

"Hey, ready to travel to a galaxy far, far away?"

Taylor laughed and nodded.

They had decided earlier that day on a classic *Star Wars* marathon. Happily they settled down in Alex's room with trays full of snacks and the pizzas that had just been delivered. They turned the lights off and got ready to be sucked in to George Lucas's universe.

Alex leaned back in his bed a few hours later, groaning as Luke Skywalker's severed arm plummeted from the sky city.

"Ugh, I so didn't need that image on a full stomach." They had already eaten most of a large pepperoni pizza, popcorn, soda, candy, and some ice cream. Alex felt like he was about to explode.

"What, eat too much?" Taylor teased, and poked Alex hard in the stomach.

"Ouch," he groaned again, trying not to laugh.

"Sorry," Taylor said, reaching over to rub Alex's Buddha belly to make it feel better. Alex lay back, reveling in the not so casual touch. He couldn't believe what Taylor was doing.

“Hey Alex?”

“Yeah?” Alex finally answered, surfacing from his pleasure coma.

“This is probably gonna sound weird, but I’m really glad that I met you last weekend. I mean it would suck if we hadn’t gotten to be friends.”

Alex turned into a happy pile of mush.

“It doesn’t sound weird at all. I’m really glad we’re friends too. I haven’t had one in a long time.”

Taylor propped himself up on his elbows, his curtain of golden brown hair swinging in front of his eyes. Alex wanted to kiss him so bad it was ridiculous. They stared at each other for a tense minute before Taylor broke the silence with a slightly nervous chuckle. *He totally feels it*, Alex thought, smiling to himself.

“Ready for *Return of the Jedi*?” Taylor asked, jumping up to change the tape.

Alex nodded, biding his time.

They lay on their stomachs, sideways across the bed, facing Alex’s big TV. They were way closer than they had been for the first two movies. He could feel the spots where they almost touched, tingling and warm. It was his version of paradise. He barely heard a thing that was said in the movie, he was so aware of Taylor’s warmth, his nearness. The TV may have well been in another galaxy rather than a few feet away.

Alex’s body was throbbing, every pulse pounding in his face. He tried to act like it was nothing but it was hard when the sensation of Taylor lying so close made him want to purr out loud. Taylor shuffled and Alex held his breath afraid that he was going to move away. Instead he moved closer. Every cell in Alex’s skin screamed out loud, unable to process what was happening.

First it was just the brush of an arm, a shoulder butting up against his. Alex knew the thumping hammer in his chest would break through at any second. That's when something completely unbelievable happened—Taylor's fingers, tentative and shy, brushed against his hand.

*Was it an accident?*

He held his breath for the second time in just minutes. Slowly, oh so slowly, those same tentative fingers found his, entwined their hands together, and squeezed.

Alex was afraid to move but he wanted—no needed—to see Taylor's face. Needed to see what he was thinking. The smile that greeted him was concerned and confused, but hopeful at the same time.

Alex's heart nearly stopped. Finally, when he could breathe without choking, he smiled too and squeezed Taylor's hand gently in return.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor didn't have a clue what he was doing. All he knew was that it felt totally right to reach over and hold Alex's hand. He had wanted to all night. It was kind of like that weird impulse that had made him happy Alex didn't have a girl in his bed the first night they met, the one that told him he really liked him.

*What the hell is going on here? I'm not...* But Taylor couldn't finish the thought. He didn't know what he was. What he did know was that he had never felt anything so strong in his life.

The need to be near Alex was palpable and it had grown by leaps and bounds every day of the past week until he had no choice but to admit it to himself. It wasn't just a new and intense friendship that he felt. It was attraction. Nuclear strength attraction. That coupled with their insane connection and the way they saw eye-to-eye about basically everything was just more than one guy could withstand. So here he was holding Alex's hand, cuddled up close to him, and loving every second of it. He guessed he'd worry about what it meant later.

When the credits rolled after the rebel fighters saved the day, Taylor's stomach did a nervous little jig. It was one thing to hold hands during a movie, but now he was going to have to say something about what just happened. The problem was what was he going to say?

Alex turned to face him, his smile lighting his face up and making Taylor want to trace Alex's lips with his tongue. He caught himself fantasizing and his cheeks burst into flames.

*Oh my god, did I really just think that?*

Alex took his hand and ran it gently through Taylor's hair before softly testing the rim of his ear with a fingertip. Taylor's insides turned to jello.

"Are you okay with this?" Alex asked.

Even though Taylor had been the one to start it he wasn't sure if he was okay with this yet, or even sure of what this was. He just knew he couldn't stop. He reached out and laced his fingers through Alex's again.

"I don't know. I've never, uh, been like this with a guy. But it feels so good to be near you. I don't think I've ever liked anyone this much." He couldn't believe he had just admitted that.

"Me neither," Alex replied.

The fact that Alex was feeling the crazy high too made Taylor happy.

"Have you been with a guy before?" Taylor asked.

"Yeah." He seemed embarrassed. Like he didn't want to admit it. Other than a small surge of jealousy, Taylor wasn't really bothered by the idea. He needed Alex to know that.

"Hey, it's okay," he joked. "That just means you'll be a good kisser, right?"

"You wanna find out?" Alex teased back with a grin.

Taylor did. So much.

He nodded.

As first kisses go, there's the good, the bad, the completely horrendous...and then there's amazing. Totally, completely, blood pounding, juice flowing, knock you on your ass, scare the shit out of you, amazing. Taylor had never felt one of those kisses before but he had a feeling this was going to be one of them.

He was right.

The second Alex's lips touched his it felt like a bonfire. Like everything he had been waiting to feel with the girls that he had made out with in the past. This kiss wasn't even in the same solar system as those other ones. Taylor groaned and sank his tongue into Alex's mouth, exploring the heat, loving his taste. Alex threaded his fingers through his hair and tugged encouragingly. Taylor had always wondered what the big thing was with kissing. It had never seemed like much before. He was glad to be proven wrong.

This was everything he had been looking for. It was so perfect that Taylor didn't realize he had slipped his hand under Alex's shirt, feeling the skin that he all of a sudden desperately needed to feel. Or that he groaned out loud against Alex's mouth when his hand made contact. Taylor just stopped thinking altogether and existed in a place that was pure sensation. He knew he didn't want to think, couldn't think, cause if he did he might freak out about the fact that it was Alex's tongue that was rubbing against his and making his blood boil. Or that it was Alex's hand on his ass pulling him closer and closer and making him so hard. He probably would have freaked out anyway if he wasn't so turned on. But he was.

*Oh god*, he was.

Taylor groaned and rubbed his entire body against Alex's. He shuddered and finally just gave up the fight in his mind. He admitted to himself that it was Alex, a guy, who was making him feel this insane and there was probably no one else who could.



The kiss eventually ended, having not lasted nearly long enough in Taylor's opinion. He could have kissed Alex forever. It turned into little wet caresses, lip against lip, neither one of them ready to let go of the contact.

"Wow," Alex finally whispered.

"You too?" Taylor asked as he went back for another small kiss. He just couldn't get enough.

"Definitely me too." He reached up and pushed Taylor's bangs from his forehead tucking them behind his ear. Even that small touch made Taylor hot. They lay quietly for a few minutes touching each other's faces, rubbing gentle hands on each other's backs.

"Alex?" Taylor hated to break the comfortable silence, but it had always been hard for him to leave things hanging in the air.

"Yeah?"

Alex's sleepy voice was enough to make his stomach tighten. As soon as he admitted to himself how attracted to Alex he was it seemed like every little thing made him want to jump on top of him.

Alex kissed him again then dragged his lips along Taylor's jaw, inhaling. "Mmmm, your skin is so soft. I just can't seem to stop touching you."

A shot of pure lust careened through Taylor, making his toes curl. "What are we going to do about this?"

"What? This?" Alex leaned in and gave Taylor another thorough kiss. By the time it was over, Taylor was breathless and grinning.

"Yeah, that."

"Why don't we deal with the questions in the morning? For now can't we just...be?"

Taylor nodded, and leaned forward to kiss Alex again.

Tonight was perfect the way it was.

Save the questions for morning.

## **Chapter Eleven**

*December 2009*

Alex groaned as their alarm started making what had to be the most annoying noise in the world. He rolled over and slammed his hand into it blindly, trying to get rid of the offending loud beep. It had been a long few days of unpacking and putting things away. They were happy to finally be completely settled in their house but the past week had worn them out thoroughly.

And now they had to go back to work. Yuk. It was the last thing on earth either one of them wanted to do. All Alex wanted to do was lay in bed all day with Taylor cuddling and watching movies...or, uh, something else. As long as it included him and his sexy naked man not leaving their bedroom he didn't really care. Alex smiled when he heard Taylor grumble and made a feeble attempt to sit up only to be pulled back down by his sleepy husband.

"I don't want to get up. Let's just stay here all day," Taylor mumbled, his gravelly morning voice sending little shivers up Alex's spine as he was enveloped in temptingly warm arms.

He laughed and pushed against Taylor with his hands, trying half-heartedly to wiggle out of his grasp. As usual Taylor had read his mind.

"I don't want to get up either, baby, but I gotta get ready for work," Alex murmured into Taylor's neck. "It would be bad if either of us got fired since we have a brand new mortgage."

Taylor wasn't listening to him at all. If anything, he tightened his arms. "I got some work you could do." He wiggled his eyebrows theatrically.

Alex groaned at the lame joke, but couldn't help slipping his hand into the waist of Taylor's boxers to fondle him.

*Only for a second, he promised himself. Then I'll get up.*

Taylor's breath hitched in his throat. "Mmmm. Not fair."

Alex stroked him more firmly, feeling him harden. He loved Taylor's reaction to his touch.

"Awww, poor baby," he teased as he leaned over to kiss Taylor.

He was about to crawl out of bed but was surprised when he was suddenly flipped onto his back with an amazing mouth kissing its way down his chest. Before he even had a chance to react, he was naked and Taylor's lips were surrounding his growing erection in a damp embrace.

"Wait, I have to—"

Completely futile.

It wasn't hard for Taylor to make him give in. It never was. All it took was a few caresses with that very talented tongue and Alex capitulated.

"God, I want you," he breathed and looked over at the clock. "Shit! I'm going to be late! Come here." He pulled Taylor close and wrapped his thighs around hips that had long since learned their way home.

It was going to be a good day...

## **Chapter Twelve**

*December 1999*

The first thing Alex noticed when he woke up early the next morning was a shifting curtain of white flurrying outside of his window. He smiled at the snow, which was probably one of his favorite things, before he looked down at his bed. Any joy he got from the beautiful winter weather paled compared to the happiness he felt just from the fact that Taylor was there, in his bed. Not just cause they accidentally fell asleep, but because he wanted to be there.

They had kissed for hours the night before. Tingling heart pounding kisses that made him ache for more. In a way though, he was glad the ‘more’ hadn’t happened yet. He wanted to take this slow, wanted to make sure they were more than ready before they took the next step.

Taylor was lying on his stomach, his head on Alex’s pillow exactly where it had been all night. He had a gentle smile on his face. Alex could have watched him sleep for hours. He looked at the clock and was surprised that it was only eight in the morning. They had gone to sleep so late the night before; he couldn’t believe he was awake. He figured he must have been woken up by the brightness from the snow.

Scooting gingerly to the edge of his bed, Alex slid out and walked towards the window. He meant to close his curtains and crawl back under the covers, but as usual the magic of the snow hypnotized him. For long minutes, Alex stayed still watching white flurries blanket the ground and decorate the leafless trees. Eventually he moved when he heard a shuffling coming from his bed. Turning around, Alex saw Taylor opening his eyes.

“What time is it?”

He looked so adorably sleepy that Alex wanted to kiss him all over. He hoped Taylor didn’t have second thoughts in the light of morning.

“Eight,” Alex answered as he closed the curtains blocking out the bright white light.

“Is it snowing?”

Alex nodded.

“That’s cool,” he mumbled, then lifted the covers. “It’s early. Come back to bed.” Alex wondered if Taylor had a clue how sexy he looked at that moment with his eyes all half-lidded and welcoming.

*So much for second thoughts!* He catapulted himself back into bed and crawled under the covers next to Taylor.

Taylor’s eyes grew wide. “Oooh, you’re cold! You need me to warm you up.” He wrapped his arms and his top leg around Alex and pulled him close. Taylor rubbed noses with him and brushed his lips with warm kisses.

Alex felt his body hum with happiness.

He couldn’t believe how perfectly they fit together in every way. He had dated a few guys before (and girls too when he was still trying to make that work), but it had never felt this right, this easy. After only a week, he felt like he had known Taylor all of his life. And he couldn’t wait to get to know him better. Alex knew it was cheesy, even when he thought it to himself, but it felt like he was meant to meet Taylor. Like this was supposed to happen.

He thought about all the things that had to happen to bring Taylor into his life: His dad taking the job here instead of the higher paying one in Tokyo so Alex could finish high school in America, him agreeing with his parents for the first time ever to host a party and meet friends, Taylor stumbling into his room, Taylor’s friends leaving without him. All the coincidences and small events that led to this perfect morning just couldn’t be random.

Alex reached around to his back for Taylor’s hand, wanting to hold it. He brought it up to his mouth, whispering his lips across the knuckles. Taylor smiled, his eyes closed again. His lips

sought out Alex's mouth for another kiss. This kiss was a new kind. Not intense and needy like the ones they shared the night before, but gentle and exploring. He tested Alex's lips with his teeth, and tasted with his tongue. Alex opened his mouth eagerly to let him inside. Taylor sighed happily and sank his tongue into Alex's warmth. Alex loved that Taylor was barely awake, that it was almost instinctual for him to want to touch and kiss, to get as close as possible.

The kiss slowed to a gradual stop. Alex could feel Taylor relaxing as sleep slowly took him once again. He smiled when he felt the enchanting warmth of Taylor's body surround him, and fingers curl possessively into his hair. Alex closed his eyes too, reveling in the luxury of falling asleep in the arms of the boy he was so...so what?

In *like* with? Alex didn't dare call it love. Not at such an early stage. But he knew it wouldn't be too much time before that was the case.

The next time he woke it was nearly eleven, and he was awakened by the soft nuzzling feeling of kisses being trailed along his jaw. Delicious goose bumps exploded all over his skin when Taylor's teeth connected with a most sensitive part of his ear. He moaned and laughed softly.

"Good morning," he breathed, reaching up to clutch at Taylor's shiny brown hair.

"Morning, yourself." Taylor grinned and planted a sweet kiss on his lips.

Alex inhaled deeply. "Mmmm. You always smell like oranges."

Taylor smiled. "It's this shampoo my mom's obsessed with."

"I like it."

"Yeah?"

Alex was rewarded for his compliment with a long breathless kiss. Then Taylor nipped at his nose and smiled. "Happy winter break."

"Here's to two weeks with no classes," Alex answered giving a mock cheer.

*More like two weeks of almost uninterrupted Taylor.*

Other than the obligatory family time and the New Year's party they planned with the gang, they were basically on their own. Even before last night's events, they had planned to spend most of the break hanging out together. Alex was especially glad now. He hoped the two weeks would give him time to solidify things with Taylor before the weirdness and the pressures of school. He didn't expect Taylor to go running into school in January, rainbow flag flying, but he hoped by then they would at least be together.

"Hey, Alex?" Taylor kissed him again to get his attention.

"Yeah?"

"Remember what I asked last night?" He looked a little nervous. "What are we going to do about this?"

Alex chuckled. "You're going to have to answer that question too, you know. For yourself. I already know what I want to do about it."

"What?"

"I want to hold you, and kiss you, and spend as much time as possible getting to know you better. I want as many nights as I can have with you in my arms, just like last night." Taylor grinned at that. "Yeah, I want all those things too. But, uh, what are we? What does this make us?" Taylor made a gesturing motion with his hand, indicating them together.

Alex gave him a long look. "I think you know the answer to that already."

Taylor hesitated and then nodded. Alex waited for him to speak. He needed to hear him say it.

"It makes you my boyfriend," Taylor mumbled shyly.

Alex tipped Taylor's chin up so he had to look at him. "Is that what you want? For sure?"

"Yeah, it is. Definitely. I mean I never thought something like this would happen, but I do want to be with you. A lot." He squeezed Alex's hand and kissed him.



They grinned big dopey smiles at each other for a second before Taylor's faded. Alex's stomach dropped.

"What is it?"

"It's just...well I'm not quite ready to tell anyone yet. I mean, it's a big change for me. I need to get used to it first."

Alex understood. He had never broadcasted his interests either. High school could be a total shark tank.

"I know. I'm not expecting you to take out an ad in the school paper or anything. Let's take the whole 'official' thing slowly, okay." Alex kissed Taylor, wanting to assure him. "We'll tell only the people who need to know, and not even them right away."

"Okay," Taylor answered, and curled up as close as he could into Alex's arms.

## Chapter Thirteen

Taylor was terrified. Happier than hell, and filled with so much admiration, attraction, and downright lust, that he couldn't believe it was all focused on one person—but terrified all the same.

*He had a boyfriend!*

He had an honest-to-god-boyfriend who he wanted to hold and kiss and touch and spend hours talking to; a boyfriend who shattered all the preconceived notions of who Taylor thought he was.

Was he straight? Was he gay? The answer that would have been so clear just weeks before was now a huge 'I don't know.'

What he did know was that he felt ten—no a hundred times—more for Alex than he had ever felt for anyone else he had dated. He knew that it was going to be very easy for him to fall in love. And that might have been what scared him the most.

\* \* \* \*

Christmas Break was the two best weeks of Taylor's life. At least as far back as he remembered. He spent every moment possible with Alex. They watched movies (well not really watched exactly), played pool and video games, froze their butts off walking around downtown and looking at all the Christmas displays. And of course they kissed. A lot. Taylor could officially say he had spent more time kissing Alex than all the other people he had ever kissed combined. He couldn't get enough of the feel of Alex's lips, gentle and sweet, his taste, the warmth of his body cuddled up close. It was great.

Better than great.

The only not so great times were the days he had to spend with his family. It's not that he didn't love them, or like seeing them but those days away from Alex were excruciating. The panic grew in his chest, larger and larger every hour they were apart. He even met Alex for an hour or so on Christmas Eve, when he slipped out to go to the grocery store for more ginger ale. They both laughed at the ridiculousness of meeting at the Safeway parking lot to make out, but they couldn't stand an entire twenty-four hours without each other. They sat in his Scout with the heater blasting in the nearly deserted parking lot touching and kissing. Taylor ran his fingers over and over through Alex's silky black hair, smoothed his lips over pale cheeks. Even though they had just seen each other the day before it felt like weeks had gone by.

By the time Taylor absolutely had to go home before his mom called the cops, his lips were pink and well loved, his cheeks were flushed, and his hair was all tangled from Alex's fingers.

Alex took one good look at him and laughed. Taylor laughed too. He knew what he must look like because Alex looked the same. They tried to fix each other, so at least on the outside they looked normal, but Taylor knew he would never feel just plain normal again.

## Chapter Fourteen

*December 2009*

“Mmmm. What is that amazing smell?” Alex’s voice wafted in from the front hallway. He’d had to work overtime all week to get a huge account ready. That combined with the all the work they’d been doing setting up the house had worn Alex out to the point of total exhaustion. Taylor felt awful for him so he’d decided to make him his favorite dinner to celebrate Friday night.

“Grilled chicken with fettuccine alfredo and garlic bread of course,” he called with a smile. Taylor had been looking forward to using their new kitchen all week. Since they’d just gotten everything put away the day before, he was finally getting his first chance. It was so much better than the one they’d had in their apartment.

Alex came up behind him and pulled him close, nuzzling gentle lips into his neck. Taylor closed his eyes for a second, enjoying the caress, then he dipped a finger into the alfredo sauce and held it up to Alex’s lips.

“Here, taste.” Alex sucked the sauce off of Taylor’s finger and groaned, a deep appreciative sound.

“That’s fantastic. Even better than last time. You put rosemary in it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Beth gave us a big bunch from her garden. I thought it would go well with the chicken.”

“You were right. I think it might be your best yet.” Alex had told him time and again that he couldn’t believe his luck in landing a guy that loved to cook almost as much as he loved to eat.

“Really?” He turned in Alex’s arms and planted a soft kiss on his lips.

“Definitely. Hey, isn’t Beth coming over for dinner tomorrow with the twins?”

“Yes. I can’t wait. I bought them new jump ropes and that card game they’ve been begging for.”

Alex grinned at him and Taylor smiled back looking slightly guilty. “You know you spoil those girls rotten.” Alex got a big time eyebrow raise for that one.

“That’s pretty bold, coming from you. Who got them the Wii for their birthday?”

Alex laughed. “Okay, so I guess we both spoil them. But it’s our job right?”

“Of course! And we do it well.” He tested a noodle from the pot of boiling water. “These are done. Are you ready to eat?”

“Uh, always,” Alex answered with a joking eye roll.

Taylor pinched him on the side. “Get the plates and silverware out then. I’ll meet you at the table.”

Taylor set out the pasta and sauce on their newly purchased dining room table. He knew they probably wouldn’t eat out there every night, but their apartment hadn’t had room for anything other than a small card table and they’d usually just eaten at the breakfast bar. It felt good to have a real dining room.

He was excited for Beth and her girls to come see the new place. She had been to the house when they first bought it, but after the remodeling and setting everything up it looked completely different. It was important to both of them that she approved. Her and her daughters were a major part of the little family that he and Alex had made together. Taylor laughed quietly to himself. He guessed it made sense that Beth was so important to him and Alex. She was the first one who found out about them after all, and the reason they’d ended up together after he had done his best to screw everything up. He owed her so much.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

*December 31, 1999*

New Year's Eve came too quickly for both of them. First, because that meant school would be starting again in a few days but also because it meant they had to take their new romance public. To hang out with a room full of their clueless friends and hope that nothing would be weird or awkward. Taylor still wasn't sure what he wanted to do about telling people. It was just that everything was so perfect between them. The stress of dealing with what others thought would ruin everything, wouldn't it?

Essentially, he knew he was being a big chicken shit and he wasn't sure about the feasibility of keeping his hands off of Alex for an entire night anyway. After agonizing about it for a few hours, he finally came to the conclusion that he wouldn't make any decisions and he'd just see what happened.

Alex came and picked him up at seven. The party was in Beth's basement. Her parents had gone on a cruise the day after Christmas leaving Beth with her twenty-two-year-old brother and very strict instructions not to have anyone over. Yeah right. Like either one of them were going to listen to that. By New Year's Eve, the party had grown from the expected twenty or so to close to fifty, a fun but possibly combustible combination of Beth's friends and her brother's college buddies.

Alex held Taylor's hand the whole way over there, resting it on his lap with his thumb brushing little circles on his wrist and driving him crazy. He had to have known exactly what he was doing. By the time they got to the party Taylor was just about ready to say fuck it and jump on him in front of whoever might be looking. If that was any indication of how the night was going to go, then their little secret wasn't going to be a secret for very long.

Alex kept teasing Taylor all night; never in view of anyone, obviously designed to drive him to distraction. Little touches on his hands, his back, the edge of his ear. Most times the casual caresses wouldn't be a big deal; they would be reciprocated and forgotten about. The boys touched constantly. It was the fact that Taylor couldn't just crawl on top of him and start kissing him like he wanted to, like he usually would. Not in front of everyone. That was what was making him insane.

Eventually Taylor decided that if Alex was going to do his level best to make him want to strip him naked and lick him all over, then he could play too. So he started retaliating; cupping Alex's butt with his hands when they accidentally collided while everyone was dancing, biting his neck and blowing on it when no one was looking. As the night wore on and Taylor had a few more beers, his touches became less subtle, more about driving Alex nuts than really being secretive.

By the time midnight rolled around, Taylor had been at least half-hard for three hours and he was pretty sure Alex was too. He wanted nothing more than to leave the party, take Alex home, and spend hours in bed with them all tangled together...clothing optional.

When the countdown started, Taylor grabbed Alex's hand. He was obviously surprised, not expecting any overt affection. Taylor was just drunk enough not to care. He backed Alex into the darkest corner he could find, and as the clock struck midnight and the new millennium hit, he kissed him. For all he was worth, he kissed him. He poured all the lust and frustration he had felt all night into the kiss.

Alex's response made all those hours of waiting worth it. He pressed himself up against Taylor, pulling on his belt loops and moaning low in his throat. Taylor had never heard anything sexier. He grabbed Alex by the hips and hauled him as close as possible, breathing hard and sucking on his lower lip. He had no idea how long they were in that corner pressed against each

other but he figured they probably would still be there if the loud clearing of someone's throat hadn't interrupted the fun.

They both looked up, shocked, to find a very inquisitive looking brunette with her hands on her hips.

"Do you boys have something you'd like to share with the class?" Beth asked.

Taylor could see the laughter threatening to burst out of her. His face turned beet red. Alex looked pretty embarrassed too.

"Umm..." Taylor started, hoping to hell that Alex would rescue him. To his surprise Beth turned and addressed Alex.

"You know, I thought you'd have to tie him down and ravish him before he would finally admit how attracted to you he was."

Taylor's mouth dropped open. *Had they talked about him?*

"No, T. He didn't tell me. I'm not blind, you know. If it makes you feel any better, I don't think any of the others have noticed. Jason would've, but then his fantasy of Alex sweeping him off his feet would be dashed so I think he's ignoring the pretty damn obvious." Beth snickered.

"Hey, Beth? Do you mind keeping this to yourself for a while. We're new, and well, you know..." Alex said.

Taylor wanted to kiss Alex for being so amazing. Hell, he wanted to kiss him anyway. Repeatedly.

"Hey, don't worry," Beth answered. "It's not my business to tell. I promise." She smiled at both of them "Word to the wise though, T. If you don't want people to know the second they see you two together, then you might want to stop looking at Alex like he's your favorite flavor of Popsicle." She made a little licking gesture on her finger, then laughing at her own joke, she walked away.



## **Chapter Sixteen**

Alex thought he was going to die. By the time Taylor had kissed him at midnight, he'd been so turned on from the touching game they had been playing that he almost dragged Taylor into the nearest broom closet so he could have his wicked way. He had been terrified when Beth caught them, thinking it would freak Taylor out to have been outed to his closest friend, even if it was an accident. But it didn't seem to bother him, not nearly as much as Alex thought it would anyway.

They had said their goodbyes as soon after midnight as possible and stumbled out to Alex's car holding hands and kissing every few feet. Alex knew that Taylor really did care if any of the other kids happened to see them, but he was sure as hell acting like he didn't. As soon as they got in the car, Taylor had pulled him into a kiss that made his bones liquefy. He knew his boy was a little tipsy, but that wasn't it. He could almost feel the lust radiating from Taylor's body.

"Let's go home," he breathed, his teeth grazing the suddenly throbbing vein on Alex's neck.

Alex started the engine, his mouth dry.

*Oh my god.*

It took more concentration than he thought he had to find his way back through the still unfamiliar neighborhoods while Taylor licked and nibbled and breathed up and down his neck. He couldn't think with his whole body reacting to Taylor's feasting. He could barely concentrate on breathing let alone the—

*Shit!*

"Taylor?" No response other than a less than gentle bite that made blood shoot to his groin.

"Taylor...baby? You gotta stop. I almost hit a dog back there. We're gonna be home soon.

Okay?"

Taylor leaned back against the seat and smiled, apparently prepared to behave for a few minutes. "Okay, but only cause you called me baby. I liked that."

*How much beer did he have?* Alex smiled as Taylor kept talking.

"Yeah, I'm your baby, and you're mine." Taylor's head lolled on the seat as he spoke halfway to himself in a singsong voice.

Alex couldn't help chuckling. *He should get Taylor drunk more often!*

"Baby?" Taylor mumbled a minute or two later.

Alex decided to play along. "Yes, honey?"

"I want you."

Alex choked and nearly slammed his foot on the brake by accident. He had to concentrate on breathing for a second before he could answer.

"Uh, don't you want to wait until you're more sober?" He had a hard time talking. It nearly killed him to suggest they wait when he wanted Taylor so bad but he knew he had to do this right.

"I can barely stand to wait until we get home," Taylor murmured.

The heat that scorched through his body should have set him on fire.

*Damn alcohol!* How could he tell if Taylor really meant it or if it was the buzz talking?

Taylor turned and looked at him.

Suddenly Alex could see the obvious clarity in his eyes. Wait a second. Who was messing with who here?

*Oh, he was good.*

Taylor gave him a wicked grin.

For the second time, Alex's mouth went dry. "You're not drunk?"

“No, not really.” Taylor laughed softly. “Getting walked in on by Beth pretty much sobered me up.”

“And what you said just now?”

Taylor’s smile turned from wicked to pure heat. “I meant every word.”

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Alex barely remembered the last few minutes of the drive home, or the frantic race up the stairs. The next thing he knew, he was pulling Taylor into his room, and locking the door. He had no idea how far the night was really going to go, but he didn't care. He just wanted to experience as much of Taylor's body as he could.

They had seen each other shirtless, so that was nothing new. Alex impatiently stripped off his own shirt then pulled Taylor's over his head. They collided in a kiss; chests pressed together, needy touches roaming over exposed skin. Alex felt Taylor's hand at his belt. His stomach exploded with butterflies. That was new.

They had cuddled and kissed, explored the whole making out thing thoroughly. Sometimes he thought he might scream from the buildup of pleasure and frustration that all those hours of kissing and innocent touching had produced. Tonight felt different. They had never gone even close to where Taylor seemed to be heading with his hands. Alex wanted to give him one last chance to back out. After that, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to.

"Taylor?" He gulped as seeking fingers slipped underneath the waistband of his khakis. Taylor fastened his lips to his neck and sucked hard. Alex barely had the strength to hold his head up anymore.

"Yeah?" Taylor answered when he came up for air. He gave Alex a seductive half smile then he went back to the havoc he was wreaking on Alex's willpower.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" he asked, groaning as Taylor's hand snuck into his loosened pants and grabbed his ass.

Taylor didn't say anything at first. Then he took Alex's hand by the wrist and pushed it into the waist of his baggy jeans, not stopping until he wrapped Alex's fingers around his throbbing

erection. He leaned in as close as he could, nipped at Alex's ear lobe, and whispered it one more time.

"I want you."

Alex wasn't going to ask again.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor had no idea what had gotten into him, but it felt so damn good that he didn't want it to stop. He wasn't drunk, just a little buzzed, but he understood why Alex might think he was. It was like every concern, every inhibition, everything that had been holding him back from being with Alex completely had disappeared. In their place was a desire that was so strong he could feel his body vibrating from it.

He wanted to feel it all. Not just the kisses and the sweet touches, but everything. He wanted everything that Alex had to give. He planned to return it tenfold. Sure, it scared the hell out of him when he thought about what he was about to do, but that fear was so overwhelmed by his need to be as close to Alex as he could get that he barely felt it.

Maybe it was too soon, maybe they should wait until they were together for a little longer, but he didn't want to. No, it was more than that. Whatever switch had been turned on in him earlier that night made waiting even another second almost impossible. The way he felt about Alex was so different, so much more, than he had ever felt before. He knew Alex's feelings were just as strong. Why should they have to follow the rules?

Taylor let go of Alex's neck, and followed his lips into uncharted territory. Bending over, he flicked at pebbled nipples with his tongue, used his teeth to make little loving marks on Alex's moon pale skin.

*Jesus, he was so gorgeous.*

Like someone from another time, all white skin and lanky muscles contrasting with his night black hair, pouty lips, and slanty blue eyes. Sometimes it seemed like he couldn't be real.

Taylor laughed quietly to himself, as he had a flash of memory from a few weeks before. How he had been jealous that Alex was stealing all the girls from him. Now it appeared that he was stealing Alex from all the girls. He sucked a pale pink nipple into his mouth and bit gently.

Alex moaned and clutched at his hair. "What...*oh, god...*were you laughing at?"

"About how all the girls at school would hate me if they knew I'd stolen you from them." He switched to the other nipple, rubbing the first one tenderly with his thumb to soothe it. Taylor loved that his boyfriend's nipples were so sensitive. He wanted to play with them and watch Alex squirm for hours.

Alex made a sexy little mewling sound that went straight to Taylor's cock. He moved away from Alex's nipple, kissing across his taut abdomen, slowly pushing his unbuttoned pants down to the ground.

Taylor moaned deep in his throat when he saw Alex completely naked for the first time. He had been a little worried about whether or not he could actually do this or if he would freak out and not be able to touch Alex like he should. But the sight of his pale beauty, his face soft and full of lust, and the thick arousal showing Taylor just how much he wanted him erased all doubts.

*Hell yeah, he could do this.*

Taylor's first taste was tentative, excited and nervous. Now that he knew he not only could do it but really wanted to, he needed it to be perfect. Watching Alex's face to gauge his reaction, Taylor licked his way around the thick length, feeling smooth texture and subtle ridges. He loved that Alex had to grab the bedpost because his knees were buckling. He loved that he could do that to him. Slowly Taylor worked his mouth around the head of Alex's erection and pushed,

letting him slip inside. He used his hand to add to the pressure and was rewarded by a sharp intake of breath that ended with a blissful sigh.

“Taylor, come here,” Alex breathed, tugging on his hair.

He complied, standing and pulling Alex into his arms. They stumbled towards Alex’s bed, pushing off shoes, and stepping out of pant legs. It probably wasn’t graceful, definitely not well rehearsed, but it didn’t matter.

By the time they managed to crawl under the covers, they were kissing and laughing and clutching at each other’s hair. Taylor couldn’t believe how good, how right the whole thing felt. He had no idea how he could have ever doubted that this was what he wanted. Wrapping his legs around Alex’s waist, he pulled him in so he could get to that perfect white neck he couldn’t stay away from. Alex whimpered when he felt the gentle suction.

“Damn...” Alex arched his neck back to give Taylor more room. Then he broke away and began his own odyssey down Taylor’s chest, stopping at all the places that were sure to drive him so insane he would want to crawl out of his skin.

The first touch of Alex’s mouth on his hard aching flesh nearly made him scream. A few girls had done this to him before, but it felt so different. It was like the kissing, so much better with Alex that it was something completely new. The heat of his mouth, the soft wet tongue lapping at the sensitive skin on the underside of his head, nothing in his life had ever felt so damn good. He took one glance down at the pink lips surrounding him and nearly came.

*No no no. Not like this.*

“Babe, ohhh, wait. I’m so close.” He could barely squeeze out the words.

“You don’t want to come?”

“Not alone. I want to wait for you.” He grabbed Alex, pulling up his body and shivering at the texture of supple skin brushing against him.

They kissed and touched, tasting each other for what could have been hours. He loved every single second of it. But Taylor wasn't kidding earlier. He wanted Alex. And he figured it was time he had him. Time they had each other. Unfortunately, that's where his confidence faltered.

How did he make it good for both of them?

Alex was busy licking his ear and circling his hips in a sexy little dance that would drive a saint to sin.

"Alex?" Taylor whispered, not even knowing how to ask.

"Mmmmmph?" A distracted mumble came from the vicinity of his ear. The gentle vibration made him arch his back.

"Alex, how do we do this?"

That got his attention.

Taylor continued. "I'm ready. I want to be as close to you as I can. I just don't know what to do."

"Have you ever done this before? I mean with a girl."

Taylor reddened and shook his head. "No. Almost, but not actually. You?"

"Only once. With a guy." He looked like he was considering what to say next. "Listen, um, that one time, we used a condom, and I got tested like three times afterwards because I was so paranoid." He looked nervous, flustered "I just, well..."

"I know. Me too. I just want to feel you."

Alex looked relieved that the conversation was over.

"So what next?" Taylor asked.

Alex kissed him, then got up to get something out of his drawer. He laid back onto the bed, spreading his legs, and handed the bottle to Taylor, whose stomach was filled with butterflies.



He was excited and more turned on than he could've ever imagined but he was so scared of hurting Alex.

"Use your fingers. You have to get me ready for you." Gulping, Taylor poured some lube onto his fingers and reached between Alex's legs. He bent over and started to kiss him as he massaged slick lube all around his soft little hole. Alex started moaning and arching into his fingers.

"That feels so good. If you're ready, go inside with one finger." He shuddered when Taylor gently pushed one of his slippery fingers inside. Taylor couldn't believe how good Alex felt. Warm, velvety soft, and tight. He moaned against Alex's mouth, and was rewarded with a soft whimper.

He kept working Alex with his hand, instinctively knowing when he could add another finger, and another. Alternating kisses between hungry lips and little pebbly pink nipples, he did his best to drive his man insane. Hell, he was driving himself insane too.

Alex started breathing hard and rolling his hips. Finally he cried out and arched high off the bed.

Taylor froze. "Are you okay?"

"Way better than okay. Can you do it again?"

Taylor wasn't sure quite what he had done, but aimed for the same area rubbing gently with his fingers.

Alex lifted off the bed again, his back a graceful bow. "Oh god, Taylor, now. I want you inside of me."

Taylor's hands shook as he poured more lube out and slicked himself up. Trembling, he crawled between Alex's legs and guided himself to the warm place his fingers had just

abandoned. Pushing gently, hands wrapped around Alex's bent thighs, he entered in one long slow slide, watching pain and pleasure move across the beautiful face below him.

The warmth and the tightness were intense, surrounding him and making him see stars. He withdrew a little and sank back in, then waited to see if everything was okay.

"Don't stop!"

The frantic cry was the only answer he needed.

Alex wrapped his legs around Taylor's waist and lifted his hips into each stroke. There really were no words to describe how good it was, how close he felt to Alex, how unexpectedly emotional the whole experience was. They kissed and breathed hard and moaned encouragement into each other's ears. He fondled Alex's erection with his hand, not wanting to be ready to explode if Alex wasn't there yet. They came, finally, quaking in each other's arms. Taylor collapsed on top of Alex, covering his face with kisses, still wanting to breathe in his scent.

A few minutes later, he raised his head and looked down, not quite sure what to say. He was still a little stunned by the intense feelings that he was encountering for the first time in his life. Pulling out gently and rolling to the side, Taylor gathered Alex into a soft embrace.

"That was incredible," Alex said softly, lifting Taylor's bangs and tucking them behind an ear.

"I can't even begin to say..." Taylor replied, leaning over to kiss the sweet bee-stung lips he didn't think he'd ever get enough of.

Alex sighed contentedly. "Happy New Year." Taylor chuckled and slipped his leg between Alex's pulling him as close as he could.

"You too," he whispered.

They fell asleep like that, twined together so tightly Taylor could barely tell which parts belonged to who. In the moonlit warmth of Alex's bedroom, their breath mingled and their hands

somehow found each other, fingers like magnets in the dark. The last conscious thought that Taylor had echoed in his head as he slipped into oblivion.

*I think I'm falling in love with him...*

## **Chapter Eighteen**

They had been back in school for two weeks and Taylor officially hated it. He had never really minded his schoolwork all that much before but over break he'd gotten used to having Alex near him almost constantly. If they weren't in bed wrapped up together, then they were watching movies and cuddling or giving each other long slow backrubs. Now he had hour after hour where it felt like he didn't even know what to do with his hands anymore. He tried to pay attention and take notes but it was close to impossible. All he could think about was Alex. He could hear his voice, taste his skin, feel the warmth of his touch. It was painful to be away from him for even an hour and they didn't have one single class together.

He knew it was the same for Alex. It had to be because they practically attacked each other every day after school, pulling off clothes and kissing like they were going to die if their lips weren't attached.

Take that afternoon for example. Taylor had promised his mother he was going to go to the library and work on his final paper for English. First semester was over in just two weeks and he needed to keep his A.

He had gone to the library. Well, he was there for a few minutes at least. He checked out some books and told himself he was going to do research at Alex's house. There was always a huge line for the Internet terminals at the library anyway, right? It was probably some the best rationalizing he'd ever done...and complete crap.

The second he crossed the line into Alex's room, clothes had come off and his book bag was dropped in the corner, totally forgotten. He'd catapulted onto the bed where Alex was waiting for him with laughing eyes.

"Today was like the longest day in history," he sighed, happy to be in Alex's bed, in his arms.

“Yeah it was. I didn’t hear a word any of my teachers said. All I could think about was being here with you. I’ve got a calculus test on Friday and I am totally going to fail that thing.”

He chuckled and wiggled himself down so he could suck on Alex’s nipples. Alex drew in a sharp breath. “You’re not going to fail,” Taylor mumbled in between nibbles. “You never fail anything.” He sucked in hard again and Alex started panting and pulling on his hair.

“I love, ohhhh, when you do that.”

Taylor increased the pressure and used his teeth.

Alex groaned. “You know, we’re probably going to have to stop attacking each other like starving hyenas the second we’re alone.”

Taylor laughed and crawled back up to kiss him. “What if I want to attack you like a starving hyena?” He shifted so their erections were rubbing together and ground his hips into Alex’s.

*It felt so good.*

“Well then, maybe we should at least start hanging out with everyone else after school and sorta pretend to be normal.”

“What for?” Taylor put his hands behind Alex’s knees and lifted them. “I want you,” he breathed in Alex’s ear.

“I want you too,” Alex answered, reaching for his nightstand and the lube they kept there.

Taylor poured a little of the lube in his hand and rubbed it on himself and on Alex’s entrance. He pushed inside with two long fingers making everything all slick.

Alex moaned and lifted his hips into the caress. “I’m ready, baby,” he murmured and gasped when Taylor lined himself up and plunged deep.

“Oh god, so good,” Taylor groaned, circling his hips.

Alex strained to get closer, grabbing at Taylor, the blankets, anything in reach. It was frantic and hot, the culmination of entire day of waiting for each other's touch. They came in minutes, one right after the other, and collapsed in a sweaty grinning heap.

"What were you saying again about us not attacking each other?" Taylor asked.

Alex laughed. "Never mind. I have a feeling restraint is something we're never going to be very good at."

"You were probably right about hanging out with our friends, though. Maybe we should invite them over tomorrow?"

Alex gave him a naughty little smile. "How bout Wednesday?"

They both dissolved into laughter.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later Taylor had mustered up the willpower to put some clothes on and at least attempt to start his research paper. Alex was sitting next to him plodding away at his calculus homework. He had his pencil in one hand and two pieces of licorice in the other. Taylor chuckled under his breath and wondered for the hundredth time where Alex put all that food. It seemed like he was constantly munching on something.

Alex had turned some music on in the background when they first started working but Taylor hadn't been paying much attention to it. He got involved in the research he was doing about Vikings settling in the New World. Eventually, though, he noticed the music was something he'd never heard before, a sweet melancholy melody and lyrics about loving someone forever.

"Hey, you've never played this one for me, have you?"

"No, I guess I haven't. I heard these guys perform right before I left England last year. When I saw the CD in a record store downtown I had to buy it. They're not much older than us but I swear they're going to be huge someday."

“What’s the song called?”

Alex picked up the case and looked. “Unintended.’ It’s pretty, huh?”

“Yeah, it is,” Taylor answered absentmindedly, deep in thought.

He was spinning, freaking out, and happier than hell because it had hit him for sure right at that moment. He didn’t know if it was the words in the song or he’d just halfway thought it enough times that it finally sank in, but he knew.

He was in love with Alex.

Taylor wasn’t ready to say it out loud; the feelings were too new, too scary. But they were there for sure and the word that seemed to keep going with them, the one that wouldn’t leave his head:

*Always.*

## Chapter Nineteen

*December 2009*

“Hi, honey,” Beth said as she gave Taylor a hug hello. About two seconds later he was nearly dragged to the floor by two sweet smelling urchins clutching his shins.

“Uncle Tay!”

“What did you make us to eat?”

“Are we playing airplane later?”

“No, I want to play hide and seek!”

Beth rolled her eyes. “Jade, Akoya, give your uncle a second to breathe.”

“Sorry, Uncle Tay,” murmured Akoya, the slightly more reserved of the two.

He bent over and picked both girls up, balancing one on each hip. The girls were beautiful and delicate with pale skin, almond shaped eyes, and shiny black hair. The only part of Beth they seemed to inherit was a light smattering of freckles across their noses and the habit of saying every little thing that came to their minds.

The twins had been a product of a short relationship she’d had her first and only year of grad school with an older businessman from Japan. He’d disappeared faster than you could say *sayonara* when he found out she was pregnant.

Taylor hoped he’d run into the jerk some day. He’d thank him for his two beautiful nieces than knee him in the balls as hard as he could.

He carried his two girls into the kitchen where Alex was chopping tomatoes to go into a salad. Alex grinned and put down his knife to come give hugs. They gave their uncle Alex an equally enthusiastic greeting, smothering his face in kisses. Beth followed them into the kitchen and gave Alex a hug and a kiss as well.



“Hey, beautiful,” she greeted him, making him blush as usual.

“Hi, Beth.”

“The place looks great, you two. I had no idea how much work you’d put into it.” Taylor chuckled and he and Alex exchanged knowing looks. “There were times when we thought we had to have been nuts to buy such an old house but now it feels like it’s been worth it.”

Beth took a long look around the kitchen. It was definitely where the most time and money had gone into renovating. “No kidding. Everyone will be so jealous.” She peered into the pot simmering away on the stove. “So what did my two favorite boys make for dinner?”

“Spaghetti and meatballs of course,” Taylor answered. Squeals of delight from the girls greeted his statement. “With salad,” he added.

Jade gave him a particularly skeptical look. He laughed and ruffled her hair.

“If you get them to eat salad, I’ll die of shock,” Beth drawled.

Alex grinned at Taylor. They’d had many covert operations trying to sneak something healthy into the girls’ food when they were babysitting. Those two seemed to have a sixth sense for sniffing out vegetables.

“All right, my pretties, let’s go wash up while your uncles put the food out, okay?” Beth took her two girls by the hand and led them to the washroom.

Taylor came up behind Alex and enveloped him in his arms.

Alex sighed contentedly and covered Taylor’s hands with his own. He turned his head and brushed a soft kiss across Taylor’s lips. “I’m going to sleep so well tonight,” he murmured, closing his eyes for a second.

“Mmmm, and we get to sleep in tomorrow. I think we need to cash in that day of cuddling in bed. It feels like we haven’t done that in forever.” Taylor slipped his hand under Alex’s shirt and rubbed the smooth skin of his belly.

“No arguments here.” He moved to turn in Taylor’s arms and kiss him more thoroughly but they heard little footsteps coming towards them. Taylor gave him one last squeeze and reluctantly let go. “Love you,” Alex whispered.

“Love you too,” Taylor answered. “Can’t wait for tomorrow.”

Alex flashed him a naughty grin then picked up the salad bowl to carry it to the dining room table.

## **Chapter Twenty**

*March 2000*

Alex lay reading in bed late on a Saturday morning. A watery wedge of early spring sunlight peeked in through almost closed curtains. He was absorbed in the book, but smiling absentmindedly. His boyfriend was still asleep, curled around him possessively, warm naked skin a silky blanket against Alex's back and thighs. He inhaled the fresh citrusy scent of Taylor's hair and smiled. These mornings cuddled together were probably one of his favorite things in the world. He loved sleepy-sexy Taylor, not even awake and still wanting to touch him and hold him.

He wished there was some way they could do it all the time instead of only when there was no school.

*Maybe someday we will be able to wake up with each other every day.* He didn't want to get ahead of himself, didn't dare think in 'somedays' instead of taking it one day at a time. But he really wanted to. He knew that the way he felt about Taylor was rare. He also knew it would be with him for a long time, if not forever.

Taylor shifted and stretched, his morning erection inadvertently pressing up against the entrance of Alex's body. Alex groaned, dropping his book, and reached up behind him to wrap his arm around Taylor's neck.

*God, he loved weekends.*

\* \* \* \*

They had been together a little over three months, and as far as Alex was concerned, it was nearly perfect. He and Taylor had spent those months getting to know each other in every way, talking for hours, learning each other's bodies. He couldn't remember ever being happier. The one little bitter seed that marred his total happiness was that Taylor still hadn't told anyone about

them. Of course Beth knew, and he understood why Taylor wanted to keep it from his conservative parents, but what was wrong with telling Jason or the twins? He hated having to act platonic when the other friends were around. All he ever wanted to do was be near him. He had asked Taylor a few times why they couldn't know, but the only answer he ever got was 'I'm not ready.'

Alex pushed that thought from his mind when he felt arms tighten, pulling him closer.

"Morning, gorgeous," Taylor whispered in his ear before licking the rim and breathing on it gently. He had figured out weeks ago exactly how much that drove Alex to distraction.

"Morning, baby," Alex replied, shivering. He knew Taylor loved when he called him that.

He moaned and arched his back, grinding against the hard shaft that was just inches from pushing into him. He pulled at Taylor's sleep-tousled hair and moved his hips faster. They continued like that for a few minutes, teasing each other until they were both groaning. In the end, Alex couldn't take it anymore. He unclenched his fingers from Taylor's hair, and moved to pull forcefully on his hip.

"You want me inside of you?" Taylor growled the question softly, his mouth still against Alex's ear. His words caused a wave of hot chills to sweep down Alex's spine.

"Yes. Now."

Taylor reached to his nightstand and grabbed the lube.

He heard the lid pop open and felt the slick cool sensation of lube being spread around his entrance. Then Taylor was sliding home, pushing past the tight muscles and pulling Alex's top leg up to drape over his thighs. He moaned against his neck, licking and kissing as he pulled out then sank all the way back in to the hilt.

"God, you feel unbelievable. I love you so much."

As soon as he said it, Taylor froze.

They both did.

Alex was in shock. The joy from those simple words exploded through him.

Taylor started mumbling a mile a minute. “Oh no, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say it out loud.

You don’t have to—”

Alex turned his head and kissed him with new intensity. “Taylor, baby...it’s okay. I love you too.” He kissed him again, and moved his hips, letting Taylor know just how much he needed him.

It was official.

Alex had never been so happy in his entire life.

## **Chapter Twenty-one**

The words changed everything. Alex couldn't believe the difference. He would have told him weeks ago how he felt if he knew the result would be that wonderful. The line between their public relationship and their private relationship blurred overnight. What used to be completely platonic outside of closed doors was now noticeably something else. Taylor didn't actually say anything out loud to their friends, but the way he acted caused little room for doubt.

When their group of friends was hanging out watching movies or doing whatever after school, Taylor was totally affectionate. Where before, he'd only smile and laugh with Alex just like everyone else, now he touched him constantly. He'd put his head on Alex's shoulder, ruffle his hair, sometimes even come up behind him and wrap him in those sexy strong arms of his. The first time he did it, Alex nearly had a heart attack, but after a while he got used to it. He actually loved it. It was such a relief not to always have to concentrate on keeping his hands off Taylor in public.

Even at school things were different. The differences were smaller, more hidden. Cute notes slipped in his locker, cookies waiting for him at lunch. Small things that reminded him every day that Taylor loved him. He would reciprocate with pictures he had drawn or by bringing Taylor his favorite hazelnut mocha in the morning. It got to the point where they were both walking around with permanent smiles on their faces. The other kids must have thought they were on drugs or something.

Although in the back of his mind he had wanted this, wished for it, he would have never guessed how unbelievable it really felt to fall in love. It was like he didn't even inhabit the same planet he used to live on.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor couldn't believe it was really happening. Officially. He was in love.

The words had been said, feelings and bodies shared. Alex hadn't been inside of him yet, but he was going to rectify that as soon as possible. He wanted to give him everything he had to give, his body, his heart, the rest of his life. He never intended for this to happen when he was so young, for sure never meant for it to happen with a guy, but it did.

Funny thing is, as soon as he knew that Alex loved him, really loved him, that it was real and as far as he was concerned going to last forever, then he stopped caring if other people knew. He didn't exactly tell his friends, but he wasn't hiding anymore, he couldn't hide it anymore; he wanted to be near Alex every second of every day.

It started slowly. Little touches and hugs in front of the group, and then they even started holding hands and cuddling. It felt really good just to let it happen. They hadn't kissed in front of their friends yet but he had a feeling that wasn't far off. Telling the rest of the world wasn't far off either. Taylor wanted everyone to see how happy he was. He was so proud of the wonderful guy in his life that he just stopped caring what anyone thought. If they had a problem with it, then it was going to be just that—their problem.

Beth was happy for him, for both of them. She would tell him every chance she got how adorable they were together, that she could tell how much Alex loved him. She wanted him to tell his family, so they didn't eventually hear it from somewhere else. He was afraid they weren't going to take it well, but he agreed. They needed to know he planned to be with Alex forever. It would be unfair to both Alex and his family to keep it a secret.

Alex's parents already knew, and were totally cool with it. Taylor guessed that the whole world traveler thing made them a lot more open-minded. Alex had told them a long time ago that he was gay and they basically just wanted him to be happy.

The boys had been talking for a while about Alex applying at UPS. They could live in the dorms together or rent an apartment somewhere in the neighborhood. The small school hadn't been quite what Alex's parents had in mind for him, but Taylor hoped they would come around. The future was such a different place than it had been just a few months before. He couldn't even imagine not having Alex in it.



## **Chapter Twenty-two**

Taylor jotted a naughty little note during fourth period on a wet April Thursday. He grinned the whole time, trying to keep his face from showing too much laughter so he didn't get singled out in class. It was definitely not a note you'd want read aloud in front of the other kids! Alex was going to have a heart attack when he saw it.

In the note, Taylor told Alex how much he loved him and that of course he couldn't wait for the next day and their usual Friday night movie in bed ritual. Then he wrote, in detail, about how he wanted to spend the whole night learning what it was like to feel Alex inside of him. With a huge smile, he dropped the note in Alex's locker during passing time and waited for a reaction.

He got it after school as he was shoving his backpack into his car. Alex came barreling out of the building and almost ran headlong into Taylor. The look of frustration and downright lust on his face was enough to make Taylor laugh out loud.

Alex came up close and growled in his ear, laughing softly, "You can't do that to me. I almost had an aneurysm right in the middle of the hallway."

Taylor looked at him in mock concern. "What from?"

Alex leaned even closer. His voice was a thready groan that only Taylor could hear. "From the thought of throwing your legs over my shoulders and sinking into you so deep we won't be able to tell where you stop and I begin."

Taylor's cheeks turned pink, and his breath hitched in his throat. He looked around and realized the whole parking lot was filled with kids. He had an idea of how Alex must have felt reading that note in a crowded hallway. Alex grinned at him.

*Revenge was so sweet...*

\* \* \* \*

“Oh god, baby. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Taylor moaned and wrapped his legs around Alex's naked hips. It had been the longest day of his life, waiting for the night to begin. He couldn't possibly want anything more. He sighed happily when Alex bit softly at one of his nipples.

“Don't you get it, love?” he asked, trying to concentrate on what he had to tell Alex. He knew it was important, it was just....ohhh, so hard to remember.

“Get what? I love when you call me that.” Alex smiled and licked the long graceful line of Taylor's neck.

*He wanted Alex inside of him so bad. Inside. That's it!*

“You have to know that you'll always be inside of me,” he breathed. “Always. You've been there the whole time. I just want your body to be there too. I want to know how it feels.” Taylor spread his knees open, taking Alex's hand and putting it on his thigh.

Alex groaned and hung his head for a second. Then he nodded slowly and gave Taylor a long searing kiss. “Love you,” he whispered, and reached between Taylor's legs.

“Love you too,” Taylor answered. He let out a small squeak at the unfamiliar sensation of warm moist fingers at his entrance.

“Relax, baby. I'll take it slow,” Alex breathed into his ear.

Taylor knew he would.

Alex did take it slow, excruciatingly slow. Getting him crazy one soft little touch at a time. By the time he entered him with two gentle fingers, Taylor nearly hit the ceiling. He had always wondered what it was that made Alex moan and scream when he touched that spot inside of him. Now he knew.

*Holy shit!*

Alex smiled and brushed his lips gently across Taylor's overheated cheek. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

Taylor moaned and let his head fall back. "I had no idea." He laughed breathlessly. "I should have done this months ago."

Alex had him panting and begging by the time he finally slicked himself up. He paused against Taylor's entrance. "Ready?"

"Yes." I want you in me now." Taylor grasped at Alex's hips.

\* \* \* \*

It hurt at first. There was a sharp sting and an uncomfortable stretched feeling. But the pain receded and was completely eclipsed by the wonderful fullness he felt having Alex inside of him. That closeness, the emotion that had been there since their first time together was even stronger now that he was giving Alex part of himself too.

*No one else*, he thought watching the emotions play across his love's face. He would never give this part of him to any other person.

Alex stroked in and out of him, long and slow, his body doing things to him that he couldn't have imagined. It was so much better than he ever thought it could be.

Taylor came with Alex still inside of him, murmuring love words and stroking his face. The vast shuddering release thundered through him, leaving him speechless and drained. He was barely aware of Alex shouting above him and clutching his hips as he reached his own peak. When it was over, he wrapped his arms around Alex and buried his head in the soft area next to his neck.

Tears streamed down Taylor's cheeks and his body was wracked with silent sobs. He felt all trembly and weirdly emotional.

"Oh my god, Taylor, baby. Are you okay?"

He looked up into Alex's terrified eyes feeling a little dumb. He had no idea why he was crying. "Yeah. I'm fine. Really happy actually." He laughed shakily. "I just didn't know it would be so..." He tried to tell Alex with his eyes what he couldn't find the words to say.

"I know," Alex answered, smiling softly and cupping Taylor's face with his warm hand. He wiped the tears away with a delicate touch. "Me too."

They lay quietly for a while, twined together and lost in the sweetness of the moment. Taylor didn't want to ruin it by talking, but as usual he couldn't stand to leave things unsaid.

"Alex?" he whispered. He didn't even know if he was still awake.

"Yeah?" Was the soft answer. Alex kissed his sweaty forehead and tucked his hair behind his ear. Taylor loved when he did that, which was basically all the time. Sometimes he let his hair fall down just so Alex would push it off of his face.

He rubbed his cheek against Alex's shoulder. "I'm telling everybody. My parents, our friends, kids at school. I don't want to hide you anymore, to hide us." He planted little kisses on Alex's chest as he spoke.

"Are you sure, hon?" Alex looked a little concerned. "That's a huge step. Why don't you start with your family? We can tackle the general population later."

Taylor considered that.

"Okay. Will you come to dinner Monday night, then? Tell them with me?"

He wanted to do it right away. You know, the whole tearing the band-aid off quickly thing. He was trying not to be afraid of what his parents were going to say, how they'd react. It didn't really matter what they said, it wouldn't change how he felt. But he didn't want a big horrible scene.

"Of course. If you want me there, I will be."

Taylor wrapped his arms tightly around Alex's chest. He had never been so scared but so completely sure of anything in his life. "I will always want you to be there. Always."

## **Chapter Twenty-three**

Taylor felt his stomach muscles cramping from nerves as he shoved his books in his locker after school on Monday. Today was it. He had already told his parents that Alex was coming over for dinner, now he just had to do it.

Over and over all day, he had tried to form the words he was going to use to tell his parents that he was in love with a boy, that this was for real and not just some dumb high school phase or something. They were going to freak out and probably not understand. He had to make them understand.

It wasn't like he could say he was only into guys now, since he wasn't sure if that was even the truth. How do you explain that it's just *this* guy? That it wasn't about him being male or female, but about him being Alex. Alex who was so perfect for him in every imaginable way.

Taylor didn't want the conversation to be about his sexuality, about what he was or what he wasn't. This was about making his relationship with Alex real. Official. About telling the people he cared about that he had found someone he wanted to spend forever with. He just wished it were over with already.

Taylor piled his homework assignments into his backpack, although he doubted that he would really be getting any work done that night. He was about to head to the parking lot to meet Alex at their cars when he heard something slamming hard against the lockers down the hall.

"C'mon, fag boy! Tell us who's shoving it up your ass. You must like it." Jeremy Strivens' loud voice rang clearly through the now empty building. He was a quarterback, a chick magnet, and a total dick. Taylor heard another slam as something solid hit the lockers again.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about." The shaky but resolute voice that answered Jeremy made Taylor's heart catch in his throat.

*Oh my god...Alex!*

“Larissa Blake said you turned her down for the formal. She’s the hottest girl in the school. Nobody says no to her unless they’re some kind of faggot queer!” There was a low group chuckle then a sickening crunch followed by a third metallic slam.

Taylor was frozen. *Do something, you jerk! They’re hurting him!*

“You’re going to beat me up because some girl asked me to the prom? What are you, jealous?”

*Oh shit, Alex. Wrong thing to say!*

“No, I’m going to kick your ass because you’re a fag. You deserve it.”

Taylor dropped his backpack and started running down the hallway. What he saw when he turned the corner made his stomach turn. There were four huge football guys surrounding Alex. He had blood dripping from a scrape on his head, the beginnings of a black eye, his shirt was ripped, and he was on the ground. He didn’t look beat, though. He looked angry. Like if each one of those guys didn’t weigh at least fifty pounds more than him; he’d take them all down at once.

“Get the hell off of him!” Taylor shouted, pulling Jeremy’s jacket as hard as he could. He’d never had any real problem with these guys before, but he hated their dumb ‘rule the school’ attitude.

“Awww, how sweet. Pretty little fag boy’s boyfriend is coming to the rescue,” Jeremy mocked. He shoved Taylor against the lockers with the same force he would use to take down huge linebackers.

His head bounced off the metal and it hurt like hell but he tried not to flinch. He looked down at Alex. “You okay?”

Alex nodded. There must have been something in Taylor's eyes, because Jeremy started to laugh.

"Oh, I get it. You two little queers really are fucking each other. Wait till I tell the rest of the guys! This is fucking awesome."

Alex stood, trembling and angry. "Screw you asshole! He's my friend, and a nice guy unlike you. Get the hell away from both of us."

Jeremy went to lunge at Alex again. Luckily, the clicking of high heels stalled him.

"Is there something going on here, boys?" The vice principal peered her head around the corner.

"No, Ms. Jenkins," Jeremy said, turning on his ass-kissing charm.

"Young man, are you okay?" She addressed the question to Alex. Luckily he was smart enough to lie.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Taylor didn't know why the hell she believed him, but she did. He was glad. The last thing they needed was more trouble for tattling.

"Well, move along, boys. It's time to lock up."

Jeremy shot Alex one more glare before he grabbed his backpack and headed for the front door followed by his friends.

Taylor followed Alex home to make sure he was okay. The original plan had been for them to drop Alex's car off and ride together over to Taylor's house. When Alex got out of the car with his torn clothes and his rapidly darkening eye, he knew that there was no way dinner was going to happen.

He gathered Alex into his arms and felt him trembling. He felt pretty shaky himself. What happened back there in the hall scared the shit out of him. What if the principle hadn't come? There was no way in hell Alex and him could have fought off those huge apes.

Was this what it was going to be like?

Taylor petted Alex's silky black hair and brushed gentle little kisses all over his poor hurting face, as if he could heal him with his touch.

"Thank you for sticking up for me," Alex mumbled. He ducked his head into Taylor's neck.

Taylor held him back at arms length, looking at him incredulously. "Oh my god, are you kidding me? I'm only glad I hadn't already gone out to the cars. I would have never left you with those assholes."

Alex looked up at him gratefully. "I love you, Taylor Quinn. You are so amazing." Taylor smiled, even though seeing Alex all bruised and broken made his heart break.

"I love you too. You know I do. C'mon. Let's get you inside."

He helped Alex get cleaned up and into bed, then he headed home for dinner on his own. Instead of telling his parents the truth about the fight and about him and Alex, he found himself saying that Alex had gone home sick earlier that day. He felt a little sick himself.

He had been so sure of everything last week, so sure that he wanted to broadcast it to the world how much he was in love. Now, the fears that had disappeared when Alex said he loved him were back with a vengeance.

Was he really ready to fight every asshole that didn't understand them? Could their relationship survive the stress of constantly having to defend it? He loved Alex and still couldn't imagine his life without him. Was love enough, though?



Taylor tried to tell himself not to be a coward. Yes, love was enough. It was everything. But no matter how many times he pounded that into his head, there was no denying it. He was spooked.

*I'm still going through with it, I am. I love him.*

He said it over and over, trying to get it to stick. Only problem was every time he thought of taking his relationship public, he could hear the nauseating crack of Alex's head hitting the locker.

## **Chapter Twenty-four**

Alex didn't think he would ever hate anyone as much as he hated Jeremy Strivens. It wasn't his dumb jock attitude or even that nasty scene in the hallway. It was because ever since that afternoon, Taylor had been completely different. And this time it wasn't in a good way. It was like they were back to the way things had been in January.

Oh, Taylor was still amazing and loving when they were alone, but in public it was friend city all over again. Having had it the other way, having known the joy of getting to touch him and hold him in front of their friends, made the whole thing suck ten times worse.

He knew Taylor was scared, and he didn't blame him. Coming up against bigoted assholes for the first time would be enough to shake anyone. But he had to learn to be strong. If they were really going to do this, then Jeremy Strivens wasn't the last dick they were going to have to deal with. And Alex needed to know that, given time, Taylor would be ready to have a real out-in-the-public relationship with him.

\* \* \* \*

They were hanging out playing video games in Alex's room. It was a beautiful sunny day, but neither of them really felt like doing much other than staying in. Taylor was curled up as close to Alex as he could get, sneaking in little kisses and touches between games. Alex loved this side of him, how sweet and affectionate he could be. It made him feel like a jerk for wanting more. But he did, and no matter how much he tried to talk himself into thinking everything was fine the way it was, the taste of how it could've been had changed him. He hadn't said anything about it, but the need burned in his chest. There couldn't be any more avoiding this conversation.

"Taylor, we need to talk," he finally said, muting the game.

The look of terror on Taylor's face would have been funny if it wasn't so real. He immediately scooted closer and put his arms around Alex, as though the contact would be comforting. "I love you," he whispered.

Alex felt his resolve melting. He gave himself a mental shake, and continued, "I know you do. I love you too. You know what this is about, don't you?"

Taylor looked defeated. "Yes. I feel like such an asshole. I mean, I told you I wanted to tell everyone, and now I just can't. I've opened my mouth to say something to my mom so many times, but it won't come out."

"But why the difference when we're with our friends? You were fine with touching me in front of them a few weeks ago."

"I don't know. It just seems like they're looking at me or something. Judging me."

"Taylor, you know they don't care. I know they don't care. What the hell is going on?"

Taylor pressed up against Alex tightening his arms. Even when they were arguing about their relationship his first instinct was still to be as close as possible.

*God, he made it so hard to be angry with him.*

"Alex, can you just give me time? I'll get over this, I promise. I want to be with you forever. You know that, right?"

Alex had a hard time saying no to those huge golden eyes. He shook his head ruefully. "Do you have any idea what you do to me? Of course I'll give you time. Just not too long, okay?"

Taylor nodded and crawled on top of Alex's lap, straddling him. It only took one good look at his face, so hopeful, to give in completely.

They still had a month of school and all summer before any real decisions had to be made. There was time to get this all worked out. He grinned and kissed his beautiful boyfriend who

made his heart flip-flop happily in his chest. Maybe, he thought, given time, Taylor really would be ready.

Unfortunately, as he learned not even one day later, time was the one thing they didn't have.

## **Chapter Twenty-five**

Alex's parents were very excited the following night at dinner.

Alex was confused. As far as he was concerned, it was a regular Sunday night. What was going on?

He got his answer soon enough. It was the kind of answer that would make his dinner come back up his throat.

His dad told him that he had finished all the necessary work with the Seattle account and luckily they had wanted his father so much for the job in Tokyo that they had held it for him. He had just found out that evening that the contract was still available and he could start in a week. So they were getting everything ready to go for move number who knows how many.

It was the same as every other time his dad had announced they were moving, the only difference this time was that the thought of leaving made Alex want to curl up and die.

Alex barely had four weeks of high school left, and he had planned on spending the summer loving Taylor so completely that he would stop caring what anyone else thought. What was he going to do now? The time that he so desperately needed to convince Taylor that they were worth the possible pain that coming out would cause had just been wrenched out of his hands.

*One week?*

He shut his bedroom door with shaking hands and did the first and only thing he could think of doing.

"Hi, baby, I didn't think I'd get to talk to you until later," Taylor said when he answered the phone.

Alex didn't know where to start. He could feel his throat getting thick.

"Um, wow...I don't know how to say this."

“Alex, what’s wrong?” Taylor’s voice sounded suddenly shaky.

“God. Well, my dad...he got a new job. The one in Tokyo.”

“Isn’t it really high paying? That’s good for him.”

“Taylor.” Alex’s heart was breaking. “The job starts next Monday. My parents said I had to go with them since I don’t really have a college picked out yet and the house will be going up for rent again.”

“No!”

“But—”

“I’m coming over.”

By the time Taylor pulled up, Alex had worn about a mile into his bedroom rug. He heard the door open and loud footsteps bounding up the stairs. Taylor came barreling into his room and didn’t say a word before he pulled Alex into his arms. It felt so good to be held by him. Alex didn’t know how he was going to let that go, even if it was only for a few months.

“You’re not going,” Taylor mumbled into his neck. He kissed every inch of skin his lips could reach.

“It’s not like I have anywhere to stay here. It’s okay. I can still apply at UPS. I’d see you in September.” He could feel Taylor’s fingers clutch in his hair. He understood. The thought of those four empty months was horrifying.

“I asked my parents if you could stay with us until school started in the fall.”

Alex didn’t want to hope. He needed to be clear. “Stay with you as what?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what are we going to tell your parents? It would be easier to be in Japan than on the couch in your living room pretending to be your best friend.”

Taylor looked heartbroken. “You don’t want to stay?”

“No, Taylor, I do want to stay. I want to kiss you goodnight and fall asleep in your arms, cuddle with you on the couch, and look for apartments together in the fall. I want it more than you can imagine. But only if we’re honest about what we are.”

“I thought you were going to give me time.” He could see the panic rising in Taylor’s eyes.

“I was. I wanted to. I just don’t have it to give anymore. I’ve got one week, then I’m either staying here with you as your boyfriend, or getting on a plane to Japan as...well I don’t know what as.”

“What do you mean? You’d still be my boyfriend, right? You just said that you were coming back in September!”

Alex didn’t know how to answer him. His heart was breaking, but the look on Taylor’s face said it all. He wasn’t going to tell. Alex would give him the five days, but he knew nothing was going to change. Not in a week. Not for a very long time.

He had a feeling that if he left, it would be for good.

## **Chapter Twenty-six**

*December 2009*

“You invited your boss over for dinner tomorrow night?” Alex’s hand froze over the soup pot where he’d been adding seasoning to their dinner. He desperately hoped he had heard Taylor wrong. He’d hoped to use that weekend to start decorating and getting the house ready for the family Christmas party they were hosting. His parents, Taylor’s family, Beth, her mom and the twins were all going to be at their house in exactly one week. He groaned.

“Yeah, I didn’t think it would be a problem. He wanted to see the new place.” Taylor looked mystified.

“That’s great, but did it have to be this weekend? I really needed to have time to get the house ready for the party next week. I mean next you’re going to tell me you decided to have a brunch on Sunday for the guys at the gym.”

“No, Sunday we’re going over to my parents’ house, remember? It’s my sister’s engagement party.”

Alex wanted to scream. Sometimes it felt like he didn’t get any time to relax. People had been in his office constantly all week, asking his opinion on graphics, running ad campaign slogans by him. It was good to be needed, he guessed, but a lot of the time he felt like he was going to go nuts.

“So you knew Sunday was already out, tonight we’re supposed to hang out with Beth and Katie, and you booked a dinner for tomorrow night too? When the hell did you plan on getting the house ready for Christmas? I mean, really, Taylor, what were you thinking?”



“I was thinking I wanted to show off the new house and my amazing husband to my boss. That was before I realized that my amazing husband had somehow gotten abducted and replaced by one of the pod people from planet asshole!”

“I’m not an asshole!”

“Could’ve fooled the hell out of me.”

“Coming from the guy who keeps inviting people over when he knows how busy we are. How exactly do you think the house is going to be ready for all these guests? Did you hire Martha Stewart to come decorate? No, you probably just invited her over for dinner too. No problem!” Alex slammed the silverware drawer shut and stormed up the stairs to their bedroom. He could hear Taylor following him, feet stomping loudly.

“What the hell is your problem? Will you please tell me who you are and what you did with my husband?” Taylor froze and looked at Alex and then he shook his head and smiled a little. When he spoke his voice had softened. “This is stupid, love. I’m sorry I invited my boss over but it’s too late. Can we just drop it?” He moved to hug Alex, but Alex wasn’t quite ready to be nice yet.

“Yeah we can drop it if you start doing some of the work to get the house ready.” “You jerk!” The soft apologetic look from moments ago was gone. “I cook, I help clean, I wrapped all of the millions of gifts we bought for everyone. Where do you get off saying I don’t help?” Taylor yanked open the door to their closet and pulled out a shirt.

Alex cringed, knowing he’d gone too far. “Baby—”

“Just save it! I don’t want to talk to you right now. I’m going out with Beth and Katie, and you can stay home and have some of that precious time alone that you obviously need. I’ll stay the hell out of your way and you stay out of mine. Don’t wait up!”

He yanked his t-shirt over his head and pulled on the shirt he'd just gotten out of the closet. Then he slammed his way down the stairs and out the front door. Alex was flabbergasted. Taylor never took off like that. The only one who had ever left before things were resolved was him, and he'd only done it that one awful time. He flopped backwards on their bed wondering if he should run after Taylor or let him go.

Alex changed into pajamas that he barely ever wore, and padded downstairs to have some of the soup that was on the stove. Later he climbed into bed to watch TV, knowing he wouldn't really sleep until Taylor was home and in his arms. Eventually, he curled himself around Taylor's pillow and squeezed his eyes shut trying to force himself to doze off so the hours would pass quicker.

He felt the same as he had those few dark months long ago when he had said goodbye to Taylor for what he'd assumed was forever. The time when he'd spent every night wondering if he would survive until morning.

## **Chapter Twenty-seven**

*May 2000*

“I’m going with my parents to Japan. Our flight leaves in three hours.” Alex had tears running down his cheeks. His usually pale face was ashen.

Taylor could feel his heart splintering into thousands of little shards. He walked over and wrapped his arms around Alex as tightly as he could.

“You can’t leave me. What am I going to do without you?”

“Taylor, you’ll be fine. Go to college, make friends. Maybe meet a girl you can introduce to your family.”

Taylor shook his head vehemently. “I don’t want to go to college alone. You’re going to come with me. We have to be together. Remember? You said you’d still apply.”

“And what if I did come with you? What if I changed my whole life to be with you? Would you tell people about me then? Or would we just be buddies once we left our apartment? I can’t live like that, Taylor. I can’t hold you in my arms at night and pretend to be pals with you during the day. I couldn’t watch college girls flirt with you and act like it wasn’t eating me alive.”

“I wouldn’t want any of them. I love you. I always will.” Taylor was panicking.

“But do you love me enough to do this for real? To tell everyone we’re together? To walk down the street holding hands with me and not care who stares at us?”

Taylor wanted to say yes, to tell Alex that everyone else could go fuck themselves, that he was the only thing in the whole world that mattered. The words were in his mind screaming to get out, but he couldn’t say them. God, he was so scared. Scared of losing the most important thing in his life, scared of a future of never knowing how people would react to him, scared because he didn’t know which one terrified him more.

Alex's face crumpled.

Taylor clung to Alex, holding on as hard as he could. He felt his chest shaking, but didn't even realize he was crying. He was gasping for air and refusing to let go.

Alex reached behind his back and took Taylor's hands, like he had so many times. But this time, instead of kissing them, or twining their fingers together, he dropped them and stepped back.

"I love you, Taylor, more than I can ever say with words." Taylor tried to go to him, but he stepped back again. "I know you love me too. But no matter how much we love each other, if we can't be together for real, it's not enough. I can't do this anymore. I have to go." He turned and walked through Taylor's bedroom door.

"No," Taylor whispered, as the door shut behind him.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

Taylor sat on his bed in shock for more than a half an hour, staring at the wall, barely breathing. Finally, after ages, it seemed like his brain had enough oxygen to string together a coherent thought. He hated the fact that Alex was leaving, that he was just letting him go. He sat there for another few minutes letting that idea sink into his brain.

*Wait a second. Alex is leaving, and there's something you can do to stop him? Are you insane? Go after him! Tell him that you don't care who knows how much you love him! Tell him you don't even want to try to be happy without him. Go!*

Something snapped inside of Taylor. He jumped from his bed, grabbed the keys to the Scout and scrambled for the front door. He nearly ran his mother over as he careened down the stairs.

"Taylor, what on earth's going on? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to tell Alex that he can't leave, Mom. I'm going to tell him that I'm in love with him and I want to spend the rest of my life showing him in front of everybody just how much he means to me."

He flew out the front door, started his car and sped as fast as he could to Alex's.

When he pulled up, the house looked sad, empty. Like the magic that had existed there had vanished with Alex. Taylor jumped out of the car and ran up to the front door. He looked in all the windows, checked all the places where someone could still possibly be. There was nobody there.

Alex was gone.

The reality of the situation dawned on him slowly. Taylor had just lost the one person he loved more than anyone in the world because of his own stupidity. He knew he would spend the rest of his life regretting it.

The pain in his chest was too much to bear. He crumpled down onto the street and lay there next to his car heaving huge silent sobs.

## **Chapter Twenty-nine**

*July 2000*

Alex hated Tokyo. It was hot and humid, expensive, way too crowded, and just plain unfamiliar. He had been there before as a kid and remembered being in awe of the huge city filled with so many faces and the jumble of foreign speech. Now all he felt was homesick.

In the seven months he was in Seattle, it had started to feel like home to him, the first real one he'd ever had. Taylor had felt like home.

Alex's heart wrenched painfully in his chest every time he thought about Taylor— which was every single minute of every day. It had been nearly two months since he had boarded that huge 747, tears threatening to fall at any second. It felt more like two years. Every day was the same, a big blur of unhappiness. All he did here was wander around all day, looking at things that didn't interest him through eyes that were unseeing.

The nights were the worst. He woke up ten times a night the first month in Tokyo, clutching at air where he had dreamed Taylor's warm body to be. God, he wanted to hold him so badly. And every time he tried to fall asleep, he could see the pain in those soft golden eyes when he had walked out the door.

Why hadn't he stayed? Taylor would've come around eventually, right?

Leaving had felt like the right thing to do at the time, his only real choice. Now it felt nothing but wrong.

Alex had finished his high school courses by correspondence a few weeks after they'd arrived in Tokyo. Last week he'd received his diploma in the mail. He knew he should have been excited to have one chapter of his life over, but it felt hollow. He hadn't wanted it to end when it did. It would have been so much fun to walk down the aisle with his newfound friends, to

celebrate, go on the harbor cruise that lasted until dawn, to spend those free summer months loving Taylor with everything he had.

His mother had been hinting heavily, leaving applications all over the apartment for Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, all the places she had imagined he would want to go. He avoided all of her hints, hoping she would eventually give up. None of those places appealed to him at all. He really just wanted to go home.

To Seattle. To Taylor.

It was early August when Alex's mom finally sat him down for her soft cultured version of a 'come to Jesus' talk.

"Honey, you need to pick a school. Classes at a lot of colleges are going to start in a month."

He gave her a pained look. "Can't I just go second term?"

"You don't want to do that. Friends will have been made, routines set. You should be there in the beginning of the year. Look." She pulled out one of her many brochures. "Oxford has a wonderful English department. You love literature."

"Mom, I'm not going to Oxford." He hesitated for a minute. "Maybe the University of Washington?"

His mother looked horrified.

"A state school? Oh, Alex. You can do so much better than that." She raised her eyebrows at him. "Is this about Taylor?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I just miss Seattle. It felt like home." Alex sighed and put his head down on the table. How could he explain that his heart felt too tired and sad to keep beating?

His mother shook her head. "Alex, you need to get over that boy. He made his choice."

Alex wanted to cry for perhaps the thousandth time since he walked out of Taylor's bedroom.

"No, he didn't. I did. He wanted me to stay."



“But he wasn’t going to tell anyone about you.” She cupped Alex’s face in her hands. “Don’t you know how much you’re worth? He should have been willing to do anything to keep you.”

“I know, Mom. I just love him so much. It hurts more, not less; the longer I’m away. I don’t know if I’m ready to find him, but I think I need to be somewhere that it can at least be an option.”

“Stanford’s not that far from Seattle.”

“Mom.”

She looked resigned. “Okay. UW it is.”

Alex knew it was the right decision. He felt the first little breath of fresh air lift him from the stagnant hole he had been wallowing in. Maybe he wasn’t running back to Taylor, at least not yet, but he was going back to Seattle. Back home.

All of a sudden fall term couldn’t come quickly enough. Applications were filled out, and a few strings pulled so that a month later he was on a plane heading for the University of Washington. He couldn’t believe it was real until the plane was in the air headed exactly to where he wanted to be. It was hard to stop grinning. He didn’t have a plan for finding Taylor again, but he doubted that he was going to be able to resist making the trip to UPS for very long. He didn’t want to see Taylor until he was sure of what he wanted. He only hoped that Taylor still felt the same way about him by the time he figured it out.

## **Chapter Thirty**

Taylor shuffled the last of his stuff into the tiny closet that was called a dorm room. He wished he could smile, be excited, be bouncing off the walls at the idea of leaving home and being free and on his own. It's how he would have felt if things were the way they were supposed to be—if he were here with Alex. Now, all he felt was sadness, horrible, aching, sadness that wouldn't let him out of its grip.

He barely remembered the last few weeks of high school, and graduation seemed like a vague dream. What he did remember were the hours, days, weeks, sitting in his room with his chest aching and tears constantly filling his eyes. He remembered the pitying looks from his mother who didn't quite get him anymore and sad little attempts from his sister to get him out of bed. The summer had been so long, a big black expanse of time where he couldn't imagine being happy again.

His parents were relieved when it was time for him to leave for school. They didn't say it, but it was in their eyes. He didn't care. He had waved to them and made empty promises to drive up to Seattle on the weekends for dinner. Truth was he was relieved too. He didn't have to see them look at him with sad misunderstanding in their eyes. He could be at school on his own, go to class, and dream of Alex in peace. It was better this way. Too bad it hurt so damn much.

Like he did a thousand times every single day, he wondered where Alex was, what he was doing. Was he in Tokyo, living a glamorous life in the big city, or at some Ivy League college with other privileged kids, starting new, meeting friends and maybe even a boyfriend? The idea of someone else touching him made Taylor want to scream. He dumped the last box onto his new bed and sighed. He felt broken.

Taylor heard a tentative knock on his open door, and nearly jumped. He turned to see a long legged sweet-faced girl with big brown eyes and a wavy blonde ponytail. At some point, he would have been very interested in her, but now...nothing.

“Hi,” she said, sticking out her hand. “I’m Katie. I live down the hall. You’re lucky you got one of the singles.” He was paying extra for it. There was no way he could’ve tolerated acting cheerful for a roommate. Being friendly in the shared bathroom with his suitemates was going to be enough work.

“Hey, Katie, I’m Taylor.” He shook her hand and smiled. The girl really was cute, and she seemed so genuine.

“So I’m from out of state, and I don’t know anyone. Would you mind going to get coffee or something later?” Her lost little look broke his heart.

He smiled. “Sure. Let me unpack. Why don’t you come back in an hour or two?”

\* \* \* \*

Coffee with Katie was comfortable, friendly, and just what he needed. She told him that she had gotten there earlier in the day, having driven all the way from Montana. Even though they weren’t in Seattle, UPS still had more people than the small town she had been from.

She reminded him of a sweeter, quieter, version of Beth. He hoped she wasn’t getting the wrong idea. It would be nice to already have a friend. They ended up going to dinner together too, figuring out the dining hall and laughing at the spongy macaroni and cheese. He could tell by the end of dinner that he was going to have to tell her.

They walked back to the dorms together, and he invited her into his room to talk. It was awkward as all hell. He hadn’t really sat down calmly with anyone and told them the whole story about Alex before. She took it well, though, and was totally sympathetic. She even told him that

she could sense he was sad about something. He smiled and laid his head on her shoulder. He already felt comfortable with her.

“Friends?” he asked hopefully.

“Of course.” she answered, smiling.

And that was how his year started. He had Katie, and his suitemates were pretty cool. As long as he kept busy, he barely noticed the weeks going by. It was in the quiet moments, when he was alone in his room or walking through campus that the pain sliced him through, catching him off guard. He spent a lot of nights curled around his pillow, trying not to cry out loud and loving Alex so much that he felt like he was going to die.

## **Chapter Thirty-one**

It took Beth until the middle of October to make it down for a visit. She came bounding into his still undecorated room with the energy of a tornado. Taylor laughed quietly as she gave him a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek before holding him out and taking stock.

“You’re not over him yet, are you?”

*Wow. Talk about easing into things.*

He laughed again and shook his head. “I miss you.” It was the truth, but also an attempt at distraction.

“I miss you too, and you look miserable. A little better than you did during the summer, but not like my Taylor.” She ran her fingers through his hair, fixing the places where it stood up.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be the same again, Bethie. I’m still so in love with him.” Just saying the words out loud made Taylor want to cry. Beth hesitated, looking at him uncertainly. Taylor knew that look. He’d known it for years. She knew something and didn’t want to share.

“Well then, I guess I need to tell you.” She paused again, whether for dramatic effect or real hesitation, Taylor didn’t know.

“Enough with the drama. What is it?”

“I saw him, Taylor. I think he goes to UW.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw Alex. At least I think I did. The guy was wearing a hat, but I could tell he had black hair, and he walked just like him. I think I even recognized his book bag.”

Taylor didn’t know if he even wanted it to be true. He decided to go for blatant disbelief.

“Oh my god, no you didn’t. You just saw some guy that looks like him. UW is huge. I’m sure there are a few look-alikes wandering around.”

“C’mon, T. How many people in the world are as pretty as Alex? Not many. And I swear he looked at me too.”

“Then it couldn’t have been Alex. He would have said hello or something. Have you seen him more than once?”

“No. It was a few weeks ago. I haven’t seen him since. I didn’t know if you’d want to hear about it. I figured you were trying to forget him.”

“Not if he’s here I’m not! How can we find out if he’s enrolled? I don’t know how to look that stuff up.”

“I do,” said a quiet voice from the doorway.

“Katie!” Taylor beckoned her into the room. “This is Beth, my friend from high school. I was going to take you to Seattle when I went to visit her remember?”

Katie waved shyly. Beth stood up to shake her hand, gave her an appraising look and must have decided that she passed whatever test there was because she smiled.

“Nice to meet you, Katie. I was afraid our Taylor was going to be a recluse.”

“Do you guys need my help to find Alex?”

“She knows?” Beth asked.

“Yeah. I don’t want to hide it anymore. Even if I never see him again, I can’t pretend I don’t love him.”

Beth rolled her eyes at Katie. “Don’t you wish some guy was like this over you?” Katie laughed and nodded.

Taylor told Katie about how Beth thought she saw Alex at the university. She said it would be a pretty simple matter to search the student directory and see if there was a match. They thought to be safe, they should try a few other colleges too, ones Taylor thought it more likely he would

be at: Yale, Harvard, Brown, maybe even some of the fancy schools in England. She told him she'd be back as soon as she found anything.

Turned out there was good news and bad. There was an Alexander Stewart at UW. Bad news was there were three. There was also one at Yale and four between Cambridge and Oxford.

“Well, that should be easy enough. These list middle names. What's his?” Katie asked.

Taylor thought for a second and realized he had no idea. “I thought I knew everything about him. We never got around to talking about it. Weird. Let me see if any of these ones jump out at me.”

Of course none of them did. He sighed and shook his head.

Katie said she could do more digging, but it would take a few days. Beth suggested they wait and see if she saw phantom Alex on campus again. She promised this time she'd find out for sure if it was him or not. Taylor figured if worse came to worse, he'd just start calling all of the random Alex Stewarts hoping that one of them was his Alex.

## **Chapter Thirty-two**

Alex knew it was Beth that day on campus. It was probably immature to hide from her, but he wasn't ready to see anyone yet. As soon she saw him up close, it would be obvious that he was still dying inside. Beth never had much trouble reading him. He had tried, but it was impossible not to think about Taylor. All it took was a lapse in distracting activity and Taylor would be there, in the forefront of his mind. School was interesting, and it was a relief to be back in the place where everything had been so good, but the biggest part of his happiness was still missing. It had been months since he'd gone to Tokyo, months to decide what he wanted. Thing was, the answer had been there from the start.

Alex drove slowly south on the interstate to UPS on a crisp cold Friday. It seemed like an eternity since he had seen Taylor's face, held him in his arms. It had taken him a long time to get up the nerve to get into his car and go find Taylor. Now he couldn't wait. He realized he should have thought the whole thing out more clearly.

Where was he going to look? What was he going to say?

Alex's strategy was to sit in the main quad between the buildings—it was a small school—Taylor would surely pass through there at least once in a day. At least he hoped so. As far as what he was going to say, he could only pray that it would come to him when he saw Taylor again.

His heart was pounding and his hands were sweating by the time he got to the college. He found a parking spot in the visitor lot and paid for his parking pass with fingers that were trembling so much they could barely pull the money out of his wallet. On shaky legs, he headed to the middle of campus; ready to wait in the chilly fall air for Taylor.



Alex sat in the middle of the grassy quad on a park bench, scared and excited, his heart jumping every time he saw a guy who was the right size, or had swingy caramel colored hair. Finally, he saw him.

Taylor was walking out of one of the brick buildings, pulling on a jacket and smiling at a tall, pretty blonde who had a sweet face. Alex thought that he looked a little sad, even through his smile, but he couldn't be sure. He smiled and started to stand, tears springing in his eyes. Then Taylor did something that made his heart stop.

Taylor wrapped his arm through the girl's elbow and laid his head on her shoulder—just like he always used to do with him.

If Alex had been thinking clearly, he would have noticed things were different. He would have seen that Taylor's eyes weren't on her face like he could never look away, that his arm was hooked through her elbow, not wrapped around her waist pulling her as close as possible, that he hadn't nuzzled her neck with his lips before he laid his head down. It was completely different, but all Alex saw was Taylor falling in love with someone else.

Suddenly Alex couldn't breathe.

*I have to get the hell out of here!*

He walked quickly towards his car, blending into the crowd of students rushing in between classes. Somehow he found it and was able to drive away. He didn't remember driving back to Seattle but that's where he ended up—back at his dorm, curled up in bed trying not to cry.

He had waited too long. Everything was over.

Alex knew he needed to leave. Get as far away as he could. He'd transfer to school in Europe somewhere; he didn't care. It could be anywhere as long as it was far enough away that he would never see anything to remind him of Taylor. He tried not to remember that even Tokyo hadn't been far enough to make him forget Taylor's warm arms and sexy smile.

It didn't matter how far he went, where he tried to hide. Alex knew he was never going to stop loving him.

## **Chapter Thirty-three**

Three dark long weeks later, Alex was plodding home to the dorms after another grueling day of classes. He hadn't done anything about switching schools, he'd barely done anything at all other than go to class and sleep. He couldn't believe how much it still hurt. He'd told Taylor to move on, to find a girl. Why the hell was he so shocked that he'd done it? The idea made his stomach turn. But it was nowhere even close to the nausea he felt every time he thought of Taylor putting his head on that girl's shoulder. He couldn't stand it, but for some reason couldn't get it out of his mind either. The whole thing was awful.

He was so lost in his misery that he almost didn't hear the voice calling his name. If he'd been thinking clearly, he may have been able to avoid her, but it was too late.

"Oh my god, Alex Stewart. It is you!" The girl ran up to him and threw her arms around him in a huge hug.

"Hey, Beth," he answered sheepishly.

Beth socked him on the shoulder. "You've been here since September, haven't you?" "Yeah. Sorry I didn't say hi last time I saw you. I just didn't know what to say."

"Well you look like hell. Maybe you didn't want me to point that out. You miss him too, don't you?"

That was all it took for him to feel like crumbling into a pile of dirt. "Yeah. I miss him a lot."

"Then go see him, you jerk! He's been half alive since you left last spring."

"I did go to see him, but he has a girlfriend now. I didn't want a big awkward scene."

"Is that why you're not with him now, cause you think he has a girlfriend?" She rolled her eyes dramatically. "You are both such morons. I've never seen two people more in love, but you

keep doing the dumbest things! Alex, he doesn't have a girlfriend. Did you actually talk to him when you saw him?"

Alex shook his head mutely.

"You probably saw him with Katie, his closest friend on campus...tall, blonde hair?" Alex nodded, suddenly feeling a little sick to his stomach.

"He's spent the last month looking for you and before that he was acting like a total zombie. I told him I thought I saw you here, but he couldn't believe you'd be back and not contact him."

"I really wanted to, I just didn't know what to say."

"How bout 'I love you'? It's so obvious that you still do. He still loves you too, you know. He'd do anything to have you back."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. You need to go see him. Today. Before this goes any further. Listen, his last class isn't over for two more hours. He lives in Harrington Hall. Wait outside or something. Just go to him. You two obviously need each other."

He looked at Beth. He tried not to feel the elation that was soaring through him. It seemed so impossible. "Are you sure he'd still want to see me?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "What's your middle name?"

"Shane. Why?"

"Shane. I was right. That was my vote for which one was you. Taylor compiled quite a list of Alex Stewarts when he was looking for you. Three at UW, and more scattered all over the other colleges he thought you might be at. He'd have called you weeks ago but he never knew your middle name."

Alex's eyes grew wide. "I think I gotta go."

“I believe you do.” Beth grinned at him as he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and ran for his dorm.

## Chapter Thirty-four

Taylor was glad that break was coming up in a few weeks. He was tired of acting cheerful and the ache in his chest kept growing every day that he couldn't find Alex. Katie had hit a dead end using the computer. It turned out that colleges guarded students' information a little better than they'd hoped. He was frustrated, drained and scared that the longer he waited the greater the chance that Alex would move on.

Taylor plodded back from class, talking to Katie. He looked up to smile at something she had said and...

*What the hell?*

His stomach clenched and he could barely breathe. He focused hard for a few seconds, to make sure it wasn't a hallucination. The vision didn't go away.

"Alex?"

The person on the bench looked up, his brilliant blue eyes sparkling with unshed tears. Oh god. It really was him, and he was there. Taylor stopped dead in his tracks. Katie smiled at him and squeezed his arm supportively, then slipped into the crowd. He didn't even notice that she had left. All he could see was Alex, sitting on the bench outside his dorm looking like every dream he'd had for months.

Alex stood, coming towards him. He looked nervous; he smiled tentatively.

"Hi, Taylor. I'm sorry—"

Taylor pulled Alex into his arms, to the place that had been lonely and empty for such a long time. Shuddering because it felt so damn amazing, he threaded his fingers through Alex's hair and held as tight as he could. "I've missed you so much."

“I couldn’t stand it anymore.” Alex raised his head to look right at him. “I don’t care if I have to be a secret. It doesn’t matter. I just need to be with you. I love you too much to—”

He was interrupted by a very determined set of lips settling on his in the middle of the crowded walkway.

Taylor didn’t want to hear about not telling people. He wasn’t going to make that mistake again. He’d just been given a second chance to have Alex, there was no way in hell he was going to ruin it.

“No secrets. I love you so much. It felt like I was dying.” Taylor kissed him again; a lips caressing, tongues claiming, reveling in the feelings they had both been missing for so long type of kiss. They finally broke apart, blushing, at the sound of enthusiastic wolf whistles. Taylor looked up to see some of the girls from his floor grinning as they passed them to get to the front door.

“He’s hot, Taylor! Go for it!” called one of them as they walked into the dorm giggling. The others catcalled good-naturedly.

Taylor laughed and Alex grinned but looked a little embarrassed.

“It’s okay, love. They’re cool. Sara and Jen live down the hall from me, they already know about you.” He could see Alex’s eyes melt a little when he called him ‘love.’

Alex reached up and traced his cheekbones. “You’re taking this whole ‘not a secret’ thing pretty seriously.”

Taylor couldn’t help smiling. It felt really good to be able to smile again and actually mean it.

“You want to go upstairs?” he asked, twining their fingers together like he always used to.

“Yeah,” Alex answered, smiling back.

Together finally and alone, they lay in Taylor’s tiny bed holding each other as close as they could. Taylor hadn’t even bothered to take his fleece off. He just toed off his shoes and pulled

Alex onto the bed and into his embrace. Alex was in heaven. He couldn't believe that a stupid misunderstanding had almost ruined this.

Instead, he was right where he belonged, where he was supposed to be. He brushed his lips in little kisses all over Taylor's face and neck, unable to get enough of the softness of his skin. Taylor giggled and squirmed.

*That laugh...* He hadn't realized how much he missed it.

"I can't believe you're really here," Taylor said. "I thought I'd started hallucinating when I saw you sitting outside."

Alex smiled remembering how he had felt the same way the first time he saw Taylor again. "It doesn't seem real yet, does it? I think it's going to take a while to sink in." He touched Taylor's hair, his face, rubbed his cheek against the hand that was caressing him. It felt so good he sighed out loud.

They touched and kissed quietly for a few moments before Taylor spoke again.

"How long have you been back?"

"Since September. It actually was me that Beth saw at UW."

Taylor looked shocked, then hurt.

"Why didn't you come sooner? I've been so awful without you, if I'd known you were there for sure..."

Taylor looked so sad that Alex had to kiss him. "I did come—almost a month ago. I had to wait until I knew for sure that I could be with you no matter how it was."

"You were here? Why didn't you find me?"

Alex took a big breath. "Actually I did. You were with your friend. Katie, right? I thought she was your girlfriend; you had your head on her shoulder like you used to do with me. I figured you had moved on and I didn't want to complicate things."



“Katie? Oh, Jesus. She’s like a sister. She was helping me look for you.”

“I know that now. Beth found me, and believe me she set me straight. That was a couple of hours ago. I’m so glad she found me when she did, cause I was going to leave. Go as far away as I could. I couldn’t stand the idea of you being happy with someone else.”

Taylor squeezed him as hard as he could. Alex could feel the panic in his arms at the thought of him going away. He understood the feeling completely.

“I don’t know if I could ever be happy with someone else. I told you I wanted to be with you forever. I still do.”

“Me too, baby.” It felt so good to call him that again.

Taylor shivered and kissed him hard. He broke off the kiss with an ironic chuckle. “What?” Alex asked.

“You know, I think I know when you saw me. I actually thought I saw you too. We were walking to lunch after Psych. It was a Friday, right? You know why I had my head on her shoulder?”

Alex shook his head.

Taylor kissed him again then smiled sadly. “We were talking about you. Do you know how many Alex Stewarts there are? It was so frustrating trying to find you.”

“Beth told me you guys were looking for me. I’m so sorry to have put both of us through the past few months. I wish I had never left.”

“I died when you left, and my heart broke, but I think it had to happen. I think it took losing you for me to realize how big of an idiot I was being. You know I told my mom about us like twenty minutes after you walked out the door?”

“Your parents know?”

“Yeah, and Jason and the twins and basically everyone I’m friends with here. I was so miserable after you left. I couldn’t stop talking about how much I missed you and loved you. I’m sure I drove everyone crazy.”

“So I could have come back months ago and you would have been exactly like you are today?” Alex said.

Taylor laughed a little, looking frustrated himself. “Yeah. I’ve been missing you so bad that I would’ve broadcasted it all over every newscast in the world in hopes that you’d see it and come back to me. Did Beth tell you I ran after you back in May? I went to your house, to the airport, but I missed you both times, probably by only a few minutes. I thought I was never going to see you again.” Tears began to run down his cheeks.

Alex couldn’t stand to hear any more, couldn’t stand to see Taylor cry. “Baby?” He loved that Taylor still shuddered when he whispered the word in his ear.

“Yeah?”

“Touch me. I think I need to feel you so I know it’s really happening. I’ve dreamed about us for so long.”

Alex could feel Taylor’s moan all the way to his core.

## **Chapter Thirty-five**

Taylor pulled his fleece off and gently tugged Alex's sweater and t-shirt over his head. The static made Alex's hair stand on end, and they both laughed and tried to push it down. Taylor loved that they could still be silly with each other, that the easy intimacy they'd always had wasn't gone. Alex went to work on the buttons of his shirt, obviously wanting to feel the familiarity of his skin. He wanted it too, but it was hard not to be distracted by that spot on Alex's neck that he had always loved. Alex moaned when he bit it gently.

"You taste so good," Taylor murmured. He didn't realize just how much he'd been craving the taste of Alex's skin until he had it again.

Alex finished with the last few buttons on his shirt and pushed it off, barely able to restrain himself from yanking on the t-shirt below so hard that it ripped. Taylor laughed, understanding the urgency he could see in those beautiful blue eyes. He felt it too. Their pants and underwear were quickly dispatched, and they climbed under the covers together, shivering at the full contact that their bodies had been missing for so long.

"I love you," Taylor whispered, loving that he could say it again, and not just to a memory.

Alex smiled. "I love you too."

It was just like the dream he'd been having for so many months, the warmth, the soft pale skin, the feel of Alex's lips loving him. It was enough to make him want to laugh and cry at the same time. It was the most amazing feeling, experiencing the joy he'd thought was gone forever.

Alex rolled Taylor on top of him and wrapped his legs around lean hips. Taylor quaked in his embrace, loving his body, his skin, the hard dripping erection that was pressing into his stomach. It had been so long for both of them...

Suddenly Alex shifted, pulling Taylor towards his entrance and lifting his hips. Taylor gasped when his head bumped against the tight hole.

“Wait, love, we can’t. I don’t have any lube. I don’t want to hurt you.” They couldn’t, but god he wanted to. The thought of pushing into Alex’s tight heat made him shudder.

Alex put his finger on Taylor’s lips. Then he rolled them over and slithered down, taking Taylor’s erection into his mouth, licking it and making it slick. Taylor arched his back and panted. “I forgot how good that feels.” He almost protested when Alex stopped, but lost all ability to speak when Alex straddled his hips and pushed down until Taylor was filling him.

“I needed you inside of me,” he murmured, then moaned as he started to roll his hips. When Taylor recovered enough to speak, he started mumbling. “Oh, god...you feel so...I love you. Ohhhh...”

Alex talked too, groaning and telling Taylor how amazing he felt, how much he loved him. He threw his head back and cried out when Taylor started bumping against his hot spot with every stroke. Taylor knew neither one of them were going to last very long. He flipped them so he was on top, and angled his hips so that he would hit Alex in just the right place over and over again. It was like his body remembered exactly how to make it so good that Alex would scream. He nearly did.

Covering his face with a pillow and bucking his hips wildly, Alex came after just a few strokes, shouting and clamping down on Taylor with his inner muscles. Taylor only lasted for a few more seconds before he came himself, collapsing on Alex’s chest and holding him as tight as he could.

Finally, when he could move, Taylor dragged his lips across Alex’s cheek, kissed his closed eyelids, the tip of his nose, his gorgeous pink mouth. Then he scooted to the side and gathered Alex in his arms.

“Love you,” he whispered one more time, thinking Alex might be asleep.

“I love you too,” Alex replied, returning the soft kiss. He brushed Taylor’s hair off of his forehead in a familiar gesture.

“Don’t leave me again, okay?” Taylor whispered. “I need you too much.”

Alex looked like he was about to cry. “I know, baby. Me too.” He used his fingers to trace the lines of Taylor’s face. He laughed quietly. “I do have to leave at some point, though. I have class in the morning.”

Taylor groaned. “What are we going to do about this whole you being in Seattle and me being here thing? It’s too far.”

Alex snuggled in closer to Taylor and pulled the covers up over their shoulders creating a warm cocoon. “We’ll figure it out.”

They *would* figure it out.

As long as they were together, nothing else mattered.

## **Chapter Thirty-six**

*December 2009*

Alex awoke to the early morning sun barreling recklessly into the windows of their bedroom. He had forgotten to close the curtains last night when he had gone to bed worried and upset. At the moment, he could barely remember what the fight was about. Whatever it was, it didn't even matter anymore. He smiled ruefully and basked in the warmth of the body sprawled next to him.

It was always like this when they got in a fight, which of course they did. They were normal, not perfect. But no matter what the fight was about, Taylor was nearly impossible to stay mad at.

Alex wiggled under the covers and nearly purred at the feeling of Taylor's arms roping around his waist.

"Morning, gorgeous," Taylor muttered in that sexy half sleepy growl of his.

"Morning, baby." He loved their little ritual. Taylor pulled him close, wrapping Alex up in his amazingly silky body. The long familiar feel of Taylor's skin still had the power to give him butterflies.

"Do you still love me?" The hesitant whispered question made Alex laugh out loud.

"Of course I still love you, dork!" He rolled over and smothered Taylor's face with kisses.

"Do you still love me?"

Taylor burrowed his face into the crook of Alex's neck. "Always," was the muffled reply.

Alex's heart melted. "I'm really sorry about last night. I was just stressed and annoyed because of work and I took it out on you."

"I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have stormed out and left you, I just needed to blow off some steam. I met Beth and Katie at the club. They both yelled at me for making you mad."

Alex chuckled. Taylor's two best friends were always on his side. He knew it drove Taylor nuts, but he took it with good grace.

"Did you have fun after they were done yelling?"

Taylor made a face. "I guess so. Truthfully, I missed you. Does that make me sound lame?" He paused when his lips were covered in a kiss that told him just how lame it wasn't. Suddenly his eyes grew wide. "Oh my god! I almost forgot. Guess who I saw there?"

Alex laughed again. He loved Taylor's gossipy girly side.

"Who?"

Taylor paused for effect. "Jeremy freaking Strivens."

"What?" Alex felt his hackles rise at the thought of the guy who had caused so much heartache for him and Taylor. "Weren't you at Neighbors?"

Taylor nodded.

"That's a gay bar! What the hell was he doing there?"

"Uh, from what I could see he was sucking face with some barely legal boy he probably had to sneak in the back door."

Alex's jaw dropped open. "No way. That jerk was gay the whole time?"

"Guess so, and judging from the looks of the little dark haired pretty thing he had last night, he was never jealous of you stealing Larissa Blake from him. More like the other way around."

"Wow. Shit. That's crazy."

"Yeah. I wanted to kill him. It took the girls a good twenty minutes to talk me into minding my own business. Good thing. The guy's still huge."

"Yeah, he probably would've found something hard to bang your head into. Wouldn't want my baby to come home with a black eye."

Taylor laughed and snuggled his face into Alex's neck again. Alex reciprocated by sinking his fingers into soft shiny brown hair, and kissing Taylor on the forehead.

It was one of those little gestures that had become part of who they were together. It always made him smile. Alex had loved Taylor for so long, it seemed like it was part of him. Taylor was quiet for a few minutes. Alex thought he had fallen back to sleep until the sound of his voice broke the silence.

"Guess what today is, love?"

"It's the nineteenth isn't it?" he chuckled.

It was ten years, to the day, since that morning when Taylor had shyly confessed that he thought of Alex as his boyfriend. They celebrated their wedding anniversary now, but every year on this day one of them would still find a way to bring it up.

"I still think I fell in love with you that first night," Taylor told him. It was a conversation they never got tired of.

"I know I did. I was just so scared that you'd change your mind by the time we woke up in the morning."

Taylor laughed and gave him a teasing look. "Get back to me in another ten years. I'll let you know if I changed my mind yet."

Alex pounced on him, tickling mercilessly. They laughed and wrestled around for a few minutes before the joking turned into kissing and touching, and before long Taylor had his legs wrapped around Alex's hips.

"I want you inside of me love."

Alex moaned as he shifted and sank slowly into Taylor's inviting warmth. "I love you."

"I love you too," Taylor replied. He smiled softly as he arched his hips into Alex's body, moaning.



“Forever,” Alex answered as he plunged deep.

And Taylor knew it would be forever. He hadn’t intended to fall in love with Alex, but he did; the kind of love that he felt all the way in the deepest corners of his heart. And even though it had changed who he was, challenged all of his ideas about who he should be, he knew they were right for each other. They always would be.