

Party Time

Seven months earlier

Poet Jeremy Taylor said, “*love was like friendship set on fire,*” and though I’d never found my own form of kerosene, I’d throw myself in front of the flames for my best friend Zeke rather than let him crawl back to his skeezy ex making his way over to the overcrowded, ratty couch we perched on.

My feet throbbed in protest at the idea of running away when we’d only just found a place to sit, but I struggled to the edge of the cushion, desperate to herd Zeke elsewhere when pointy loafers pricked my ankle. I hissed at the contact. Knees jammed into my thigh as someone fell over me and the mixed contents of a wine glass dumped down my dress.

With a squeak, I jumped and reached for Zeke, only to find he was steadying and feeling up the offender—his ex, Jarret.

“Ooh, sorry.” With a low, grunt-moan, Jarret climbed over my frozen legs and offered a wide, loose smile to my friend. “Didn’t think you’d be out tonight. Definitely didn’t think you’d bring the baby.”

At least I knew how to walk! With an offended gasp, I pulled

at my dress and glanced over my shoulder at the impossibly long bathroom line, then the sink overflowing with recycling.

Zeke stretched on the couch cushions like a cat inviting pets. “Well, people kept texting me to drop by, so I decided to make an appearance.”

“I’m glad you did. Lookin’ good, Zeke.” Jarret toasted him with the splash of wine mix left in his glass. “Any chance I could get you a birthday drink?”

Dread twisted my gut, a chill setting in as Zeke’s tone dipped with suggestion. “Is that all I’m gonna get?”

“Zeke,” I whispered, tugging on his shirt.

“*Miranda*,” he echoed, mocking my alarm. “It’ll be ten minutes. We’ll look for some napkins by the bar.” As if there was anything left! A bone-dry paper towel roll clung to a stand on the kitchen sink by abandoned bottles. “Then, we’ll go home and have those snacks you promised me!”

“Ooh, that sounds good! I miss *Miranda*’s cooking,” Jarret said.

Scowling, I pulled the tightening, chilly material of my dress away from my midsection. “Too bad you lost those privileges.”

The boys shot me unimpressed looks, and Zeke clasped Jarret’s shoulder to spin him around. Why was either of them interested in going through all this again?

On their way to the kitchen, the boys kept bumping into each other—and I had a feeling it wasn’t to get ‘revenge’ and spill that sip of wine onto the white shirt Jarret buttoned up under an ascot.

Burning in shame and obviously alone, I inched into the space Zeke vacated, the people on the other side of the couch eyeing me like I was the stain on their evening.

The thin, glittery material of my outfit clung to my chest like a second skin. Sniffing back embarrassed tears, I wrestled the hemline over my thighs. If only I had enough material to swaddle myself.

Searching for the only other member of our 'party tour' meant dragging around the cement blocks my feet had become—not to mention the throbbing, screaming scrapes on my toes slashed under sparkly rainbow butterfly wings.

A chill sank through my ribs. This apartment was packed with people and party refuse. No food, though. Not even pizza. Still, I'd need to get up eventually. To leave. To support my friends. To shake off the passing judgment of people whispering about me, the anxious stranger.

"Is she a high schooler?" someone to my left asked.

Shivering, I turned, willing for Zeke's boisterousness to return and mask my presence. A thick fog filled my lungs at the idea of invading any of the groups here, like the one by the entryway, even to blend in. My nails curved into my palms through the material of my dress as my breathing ran ragged.

I wasn't going to be Zeke's weeping, wet rag roomie who ruined his birthday party. And I was *not* a baby!

Five minutes. No, ten. I could hold it together for that long. Maybe the ride home. Then, birthday pancakes. Showering. Laundry.

Strangers left the other side of the couch only for another set to plop down in tandem, swallowing the space Zeke and his jerk of an ex left vacant. The air in the couch cushion burst up with seesaw energy that almost sent me sprawling.

A warm body pressed into my side, its owner leering at me as his crew converged to fit, sitting on each other's laps and shoving others off while I squeezed down to nothing. "Hey, sweetheart." I cringed at the endearment. "Are you here with anybody?"

"Yes, my friends," never went over well. They thought it was a trick, a playful, annoying way to avoid the question or a challenge to win me over. "No," veered into uncomfortable territory for everybody. Their side of the conversation usually played out something like:

Would you like to be?

That's crazy! You're so pretty!
How about we be lonely together?
I'm just being friendly!
Thanks for wasting my time.
Bitch.

I twisted the ends of my French braid, running my fingers over the sparkly tie I'd put on for Zeke's birthday. The festiveness was more appropriate in Boystown than a stranger's apartment. Taking a deep breath, I strained a polite, barely apologetic smile to the guy next to me, telling him, "We won't be here much longer." Hopefully, I wanted to add. My stiff, swollen arches flexed against sticky soles.

The man slid his elbow behind my back and sucked the inside of his cheek. "Pity."

He didn't even know me. Crossing my arms over the spreading stain, I looked for somebody, anybody, who did.

My gaze slunk to a circle of Zeke's classmates. The most comfortable one in the room was the one at the center of their orbit, Zeke's tennis partner and other best friend, Rhett. Ever since high school, Zeke swore Rhett was a funny, awesome guy—always looking out for him on the tennis court and in the classroom, playing the straight wingman for potential hook-ups. But how great of a friend could Rhett be? He barely even made the effort to talk to Zeke tonight and he hadn't joined us for dinner or clubbing beforehand.

People kept directing their stories at Rhett, reading his face with eager anticipation, like they were hoping he'd boost them with an intelligent remark or quip. A petite girl texted away while serving as a sling for his arm.

Zeke hadn't said anything about Rhett having a girlfriend.

Though maybe I was being presumptuous about their relationship status. Perhaps that girl was a moth drawn in by the sun-kissed skin, lustrous blond mane, and... general symmetry.

Rhett caught my gaze, his eyes flashing as he raised his chin

in greeting. My weak attempt at a smile and a wave got a sharp look from his human leaning post. This was high school all over again—with some of the same actors even.

I clasped my fidgeting hands in my lap.

The stranger next to me nudged my knee. “Seems like your friend isn’t ready to go yet. Why don’t we get to know each other?”

A tension headache yanked my brain, my eyeballs, straining against the light of my phone screen. With a tight shrug at the guy, I texted the voice of reason in our party, Yasmin, and Zeke.

The stranger unfurled his arm behind me and leaned over to get a better look at my dress. “What’s your name, sweetheart? You look like you got in a mess.”

“Miranda,” I clipped, scooting forward and arching my back so I didn’t have to touch him. “It was an accident.”

“Did you try to chug something? Or was some other girl jealous?”

Were those the most likely options for people at this hour? I squirmed and searched for an exit. “No, and I doubt Jarret’s jealous of my sparkly dress.”

“Oh, Jarret! Ha! Well, you never know, someone like him.”

My braid whipped his shoulder as I fixed him with a look. “What does *that* mean?”

“Nothing.” His smile thinned, the bright energy from his buzz burning out as he shifted to talk to his friends, dragging his arm out from behind me.

Was this guy even *friends* with Zeke? Why were we here, really?

And where the hell was Zeke? Or Yasmin? Or... anybody?

The crowd shifted and I caught a glimpse of Yasmin deep in conversation, both her and the girl stone-faced. The subtle way she shook her head at me indicated it was something private.

I sighed and shifted against squashed, barely-there pillows.

Rhett’s challenging, but playful, “Did you think you’d get

away with that?” cut above the white noise. That intensity reminded me of when he would play on the high school tennis courts: the glint in his eye, the peek of his canines before he bounced the ball and snapped it over the net. I could do with some of that resilience.

The petite girl put a hand on Rhett’s forearm, inserting herself between him and everyone else and pushing him closer towards the side of the room I was on. Their conversation raised just enough that I could hear. “Can we get some air?”

He frowned. “We were outside ten minutes ago.”

“We could have a cigarette.” She dragged her grip down to his wrist. “We could talk.”

“We’re talking *here*.” His tone was tight as he nudged his jaw at his friends. “And I don’t smoke. Athletic scholarship.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to loosen up.” When she tugged on him, he leveled her with a hard stare. His neck muscles flexed as he pried her hand off him.

“I don’t like interruptions,” he growled, the low, dangerous tone making my heart beat faster. “Wait ten minutes, and I’ll take you outside, then.”

Huffing, she pulled back. “We’ve done what you wanted all night.”

“Do you think I owe you something for that? Ask one of your girlfriends to go outside if you’re that desperate.” He resumed the conversation with his friends like she didn’t exist.

That was one way to set a boundary. It seemed odd to me, considering how he’d let her hang all over him earlier. Being chewed out for my own neediness was a personal nightmare. Confrontation only made sense to me for big issues, not little ones, like my dress. I tugged on my skirt, debating if I should invite the petite girl to sit with me to soothe her embarrassment.

Scowling, she processed the cold shoulder. When that didn’t get his attention, she dialed her phone and stalked towards the

exit. "Jen? Have you guys left yet? Oh, you're outside? Great! No, I'm not getting anywhere with him."

Getting anywhere? I frowned. What did that mean?

Oh no—Rhett caught me puzzling after her. Embarrassed heat streaked through my chest. Did he notice everything?

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my emails. There wasn't going to be any news on my internship and job applications in the middle of the night. The art and cute animal blogs I followed were taking a while to load. With my blurry, strained vision, it was easier to move colorful squares on my phone in a puzzle game than process anything.

As my dress dried, it tightened. I peeled it away from my breasts, hoping for some air, only for it to suction right back to my skin. Further proof Jarret's presence was a curse. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Rhett appraising my attempts to stretch the fabric. Pouting, I slunk into the cushions and waited for my game to load.

Not everyone could get away with wearing dark wash jeans and a shirt, and no makeup. Despite Rhett's fair features, he tanned to a natural sun-kissed effect. With his glacial eyes, toned muscles, and sharp jaw, Rhett could've been the perfect model for a fallen angel. The devil to my angel, as Zeke would say. All the more reason to stay away from him.

Not that I was avoiding him or anything.

Rhett wasn't evil—although he was kind of scary. In high school, I'd supported a fair share of his and Zeke's tennis matches. Rhett punished the ball, commanded Zeke into formation, and shot sharp looks at me whenever I bounced to cheer in the stands. His passionate intensity combined with squeaking tennis shoes unnerved me to the point I tended to shy away from any further interaction.

My phone pinged. Sitting up straight, I swiped open the notification from Zeke. "*Ten more minutes. Jarret's telling me I'm pretty.*"

Frowning, I typed back, *“I can do that. At home. With the no-bakes and pancakes you requested.”*

“Ten minutes. If he hasn’t given me a blow job by then, we’ll leave.”

I slapped my phone down on my lap in frustration. *“Is it worth it?”*

“You’re just mad he stole your animal crackers. Love you, Angel!”

Any more arguing would only serve to push out the time before Zeke started ‘counting’. At least I’d turned off my phone while we were dancing so I still had a decent amount of battery. Ignoring the mild itch that came with people looking at me, I pulled up a cute game.

A few levels later, the cushions sagged with weight. Rhett leaned his forearms on the back of the couch and offered me a small smirk. “How are you doing?”

The others on the couch glanced up with blank surprise before scooting closer together and resuming their conversation.

I looked and smelled like a haggard, post-party wreck. But that probably wasn’t the right thing to say to an acquaintance checking in. Turning off my screen, I sighed. “I’m exhausted. Zeke said ten minutes until we could leave, but that always means fifteen. It’s been twelve since I started counting. How are you?”

“I’m good.” His gaze flicked across my dress. “How did you get so wet?”

“Jarret.” His name flung off my tongue like a curse word. Even Rhett’s hands clenched.

“You want me to take care of him?”

Puzzled by the mob-like sincerity of his offer, I shook my head. “I would love it if I never had to see him again. Unfortunately, it seems like Zeke is giving him a second chance.”

“Is Zeke talking to him again?” Rhett straightened. “Come on. Follow my lead.”

“What?”

He tugged me to my feet, and in that moment, my pain doubled, flaring through each throbbing toe. I squeaked through

gritted teeth and scurried after Rhett as he carved a path through the crowd, I hobbled worse with each jarring step.

"Why have you kept me waiting?" Rhett grabbed Zeke in a forceful hug and swayed. His playfulness and domineering attitude stopped me in my tracks. How was I supposed to follow that? Wrap myself around Zeke's other side? Rhett's eyes glittered as he smirked at Jarret, his teeth gleaming. "You'll have to excuse us. We have big plans for tonight."

"We do?" Zeke's face lit up with delight.

"Sleepover. Your place. Are you ready to go?" Rhett asked.

"Absolutely!" Zeke thrust his wine glass at Jarret, glowing in exultation. Speechless, I followed the boys as they stumbled towards the exit. "Come on, darling! The cab awaits!"

Zeke laughed as soon as they hit the hall, half-wrestling in Rhett's embrace. "Thank you for that moment of immortal glory."

"He's lucky I didn't throw the glass in his face for drenching your friend," Rhett replied.

Zeke seemed to notice me for the first time since he towed me into the party. Upon seeing my sticky dress, he covered his mouth with one hand. "Oh my God, I forgot! He made Miranda look like she entered a wet T-shirt contest! I should go back in and douse him."

I crossed my arms as Rhett tugged him back, guiding him down the stairs as he said, "You know he thrives on attention. Better to get him back when no one else is watching. We'll plan something."

"Damn straight we'll plan something," Zeke grumbled.

Every step shot spiking pain through my legs. Steeling myself could only prevent so many winces. This was the literal home stretch. "Isn't Jarret going to know this was a setup when you go back to the party?"

"I'm not going back." Rhett rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "I see that crowd too much as it is."

“Then why did you come?”

Rhett stopped on the stairs, facing me so we were almost eye level. “Because I felt like it. Sometimes it’s hard to know what you want – or don’t – until you’ve had a chance to experience it.”

Zeke stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth and wagged his brows. “Look at you, radiating Dom energy.”

I wobbled down the next step, hissing when my sandal grazed my open wound.

Rhett’s attention snapped to my foot, then my face. “Do you need some help?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s only two more flights.”

“If you don’t climb him, I will!” The alcohol must’ve made Zeke forget it was kinda weird to say that about his straight best friend.

Rhett bent his knees and fixed me with a pleading, exasperated look. “Would you do me the honor?”

The surreal almost-proposal vibes dizzied yet grounded me like the first step off a tire swing after spinning. “I don’t want to get you wet.”

“I’ll dry off.” Rhett chuckled, the hallway halogen lights flickering in the reflection of his eyes. “If you don’t take me up on it, I might have to fend off Zeke.”

Taking a deep breath, I weighed the pros and cons of accepting help from an acquaintance. Zeke trusted him. Putting any weight on my feet was agony. Rhett didn’t seem like a total jerk, and he had helped me get out of the party faster than anticipated. Plus, my acceptance guaranteed he wouldn’t be Zeke’s birthday chariot. “Okay. Thanks.”

Climbing onto him brought back happy memories. I hadn’t ridden piggyback since I was a kid, and definitely not in a dress. His fingers hooked around the sensitive skin behind my knees. My arms looped around his neck and my damp chest pressed against his back. The chill combined with the irritation made my

nipples hard. Thank goodness no one could see them! My feet were still aching, but at least this gave them some relief.

As Rhett stood, I squeezed him, barely daring to breathe. He rubbed my thigh with his thumb and smiled at me over his shoulder. "I've got you."

A dull warmth muffled my tingling aches.

His natural heat seeped into me. I tucked my head against his shoulder, a comfortable place to rest my cheek. His hair was a touch too long in the back, spilling over his T-shirt. The feather-softness of his hair contrasted with his firm, flexing muscles underneath me. Faint whiffs of soap and body spray cleansed my nose palette from the dingy hallway and my own stains.

Why didn't we carry people around anymore? Most of my friends were bigger than me so I didn't think it'd work out if I tried to give them a lift. I wondered if Rhett ever did something sweet like this for that petite lady.

Rhett readjusted his grip as we reached the end of stairs. "Hold on tight, and don't fall asleep."

I giggled into his shoulder. "I don't have a habit of falling asleep on people."

He hoisted me up higher on his back, eliciting an embarrassing squeak as I clung to him for balance. "There we go." He scratched the underside of my leg, my thighs clenching around his waist. "Now you're awake."

"Let's commemorate this moment." Zeke held up his phone in selfie mode.

Being on Rhett's back made it easier for all three of us to get into frame.

I peered at their pretty faces on the screen. "You have such nice smiles."

They beamed at the compliment and glanced at each other. Something unspoken passed between them that I was too tired to understand.

A tickle at my knee got me giggling. Rhett kept playing with me until Zeke said, “Got it,” and lowered his phone.

“Put me down!” I pouted, my heart bouncing along with their antics.

With one last squeeze to my thighs, Rhett lowered me to the lobby floor, pain seeping back up my calves and lingering in my soles. “Where are we headed?”

“Home.” I rolled my lips inward at the sight of the damp spot on his back, reluctant to let go of it. “Didn’t we talk about this?”

“I wasn’t sure if this guy had to make any more appearances.” Rhett nudged Zeke’s elbow to distract him from his phone. “I’ll pay for the car as part of your birthday present.”

“Aw, thanks, bud.” Zeke squeezed him in a side hug. “You didn’t need to get me anything. Do you want to come home with us? Miranda made no-bakes and later, I’m gonna have her cook pancakes with faces on them so I can devour their happiness.”

“What?” Rhett laughed.

Not sure if the amusement came from Zeke’s eccentricities or mine, I tugged my hair and looked away. “It’s pretty late.”

Sobering, Rhett nodded and stuck his hands in his back pockets. “I respect the lady’s wishes.”

“Oh, I wasn’t saying I didn’t want you to come over! You’re welcome to charge your phone and hang out at our place.” Twisting my braid, I swayed, accidentally brushing my arm against his. “But I’m pretty tired so I might not be the best company.”

Zeke shrugged, nudging Rhett. “She’s not going to fuck you, by the way. Miranda’s on the ace spectrum, but it’s still worth coming over for the food and games.” Zeke waved his hand but it might as well have been a slap across my face.

My mouth hung open, tears pricking at how easily he talked about my sexuality or lack thereof. Was potential sex the only reason Rhett would be nice to me? Rhett caught my eye, his

nostrils flaring, then glared at Zeke. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Excuse me for trying to save you some energy on someone who's probably demi." Zeke took a step back, fiddling with his phone to post the selfies. "Anyways, I'll be up for hours. We treated ourselves to the new Smash Party game, and I intend to beat at least five levels."

"Okay." Rhett shot me a sidelong glance, the edge of his mouth curling up. "I'm in."