

out with the in crowd

the reinvention of skylar hoyt

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All winter break, I'd planned for this moment, the one about to happen.

"Hey," Eli said as we passed each other in the hall.

I intended to say hello back, to smile like things between us hadn't changed, but something inside me bristled. I locked my jaw, turned away from his hypnotic smile, and picked up the pace.

Then I mentally kicked my butt as I sped toward my locker. That was *not* how it should've gone.

For starters, when I saw Eli for the first time this semester, I intended to be hanging off Connor's arm, transfixed by him and unaware of Eli's presence. Since Connor and I rode to school together, I assumed this would be easy to arrange. If only Connor hadn't questioned whether he'd locked his car, then abandoned me here in the hall to run and check, things might have gone as planned.

Secondly, I should've been casual and cool. A simple "Hey." A killer smile. But really, anything would've been better than avoiding eye contact and rushing off. Especially because I couldn't avoid Eli for long. We had first period together.

But deviating from the Eli plan did have its perks. It gave me something to focus on besides what possibly awaited

me down the hall. When I chose my locker at the beginning of the year—seemingly a lifetime ago—it never occurred to me that my friends might no longer be my friends. That Jodi, Alexis, Lisa, Eli, and John would become the five people I wished most to avoid.

I took a deep breath as I turned the corner, then exhaled with relief. Just Lisa, who ignored me only when we were around the others.

“Hey,” I said, same as I should’ve to Eli. “How was your Christmas?”

She shrugged. “Fine. You?”

I shrugged too. “Okay.”

I’d spent my vacation days choosing between Connor’s family—full of comfort and silliness—and mine. My moody little sister hardly strayed from the couch, and our parents tiptoed around each other, their sparse conversations sounding like two strangers chitchatting at a party. But at least we were all under the same roof.

Lisa shut her locker door. “How are you doing with . . . you know?”

Did she mean my parents’ confusing separation, my little sister’s pregnancy, or Eli and Jodi getting back together?

“I’m fine,” I said, but I felt far from it.

“How’s Abbie?”

“Fine.” It seemed I should say something else. “We’ll find out what the baby is on Friday.”

“Cool.” Lisa shifted her weight and tapped the toe of her adorable penny loafers. They had that “I might have borrowed these from my boyfriend” look, but with enough femininity to know they were chick shoes. I wanted a pair, something I’d never thought before about Lisa’s shoes.

She noticed me looking and smiled. "Christmas gift. I never would've picked them out for myself, but I like 'em." She lowered her eyes, and I saw she wore false lashes. "They looked like something you'd wear."

"They're great." I tucked my bag over my arm and hesitated. I wanted to thank her for calling, for giving me a heads-up about Eli and Jodi, but couldn't think of how to say it.

Connor came around the corner before I figured it out. "Yep. I left my door unlocked." He glanced at Lisa. "Hey."

"Hey." She shifted her weight again and looked at me. With her cornflower eyes and those long lashes, she appeared wide-eyed and innocent. How deceptive appearances could be. "I should go. See you around."

We watched her stroll away. "It'll get better," Connor said, but what did he know? He'd moved every few years since kindergarten. He couldn't understand the difficulties of what I was doing, trying to change while everyone around me stayed the same.

Plus, it'd been like this since October. If things hadn't improved with my friends in the last two and a half months, what were the odds they ever would?

When Connor brushed my bangs from my face, I jumped. The gesture took me back to Eli, something that rarely happened when Connor and I were together. The two guys couldn't have been more different.

"Jumpy," he said.

"Sorry." I smiled, hoping to convince him that everything was fine, just fine. "I was thinking."

He slipped his fingers through mine as we headed down the hall toward our first class. "Can I guess what about?"

I smiled again. This always proved interesting. "Sure."

"Hmm. What would the beautiful Skylar Hoyt be thinking about this early in the morning?" He snapped his fingers. "I know. How you wish you could pull off my effortless style."

I gave him an exaggerated once-over. He looked the same as always—hoodie, track pants, and sneakers. "That's it," I said in a flat voice.

"I wish I could teach it, I do, but it's not really learnable." He shrugged. "You either have it or you don't."

I bit back a smile. "Well, I guess I'm out of luck."

"Fraid so." He squeezed my hand. "So what were you really thinking about?"

"I saw Eli on the way in. He said hi, but I didn't answer."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. I guess I got so nervous about acting weird that I didn't know how to act normal."

"Or maybe you're more upset than you originally thought."

My laugh sounded contrived. "There's nothing to be upset about. Eli and I are broken up, and Jodi and I are . . . well, what do you say when you're no longer friends?"

"That you're no longer friends."

"Right. So there's no reason for me to be upset."

"That doesn't mean you aren't." He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed it. "It's fine if it's weird for you. It doesn't bother me."

"It's not weird." Maybe the more I said it, the truer it would feel. "I'm fine. Honest."

Connor paused outside our classroom door. "Then we're

going to walk in that room, you'll smile and say hi, and we'll go sit at another table."

"But we have to sit with Eli and John. Assigned seats, remember?"

Connor shook his head. "New semester, new seats. All you have to do is say hi, then follow me to our new place."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It's just saying hi. What's hard about that?"

The guy had a point. Surely I could put on a smile for my ex-boyfriend and say hi to him like I didn't care that he'd gotten back together with Jodi. Yeah, Lisa's call had caught me off guard. And maybe there'd been an initial sting, but what I felt now, this weird sensation in my chest, it wasn't jealousy. It was . . . adjustment. Not about Eli moving on, but about his choice in girls. Jodi had been my best friend since eighth grade up until last summer, when I got together with Eli and broke her rule about not dating a friend's ex. I didn't have the right to be weirded out by her dating Eli.

Eli and John sat at our old table, the one Connor and I had shared with them last semester. John's skinny arms waved as he told Eli a story, and I smiled. John looked the same whether relating an anecdote about standing in line at the movies or a near-death experience while white-water rafting.

Eli's eye caught on me as I stood in the doorway, and John's arms fell to his sides as he watched us. I hesitated only a moment before marching to the table. "Sorry. About earlier."

Eli shook his head. "No worries."

"I'm not sure why I did that."

He flashed his dimpled smile. "Because you're mad at me?"

"I'm not mad."

Instead of responding, he looked at Connor, who stood at my side. "Hey, man, how's it going?"

"No complaints." Connor reached out his hand, and the guys exchanged their usual elaborate handshake from their summer baseball team. He nodded at John. "What's up, Pratt?"

John grinned. "Just telling Eli about this wicked skiing up in Crested Butte."

Eli smiled at me. "And the tradition lives on—John rubbing his great vacations in our faces on the first day back at school."

"Like Skylar can complain," John said. "Her family always takes killer vacations. Where'd you guys go this Christmas? Costa Rica? The Alps?"

"We stayed home." Despite my best efforts, my voice sounded wooden. There hadn't been a trip this year because the planning got lost in the shuffle of my parents' marital counseling and Abbie's pregnancy. Instead, we sat around the house and pretended it felt normal to be home at Christmastime.

With his foot, Eli pushed out the chair across from him. "You wanna sit?"

Connor looked at me. We'd planned to sit at another table. To spend as little time as possible with the people who'd been my friends and now were so not. And sitting there then meant sitting there the rest of the year. Mr. Huntley, a former middle school teacher, firmly believed in juvenile practices like assigned seats. Even for high school seniors.

I knew all this and sat anyway. So much for all that planning.

Connor raised his eyebrows at me and took the remaining chair. I could guess what he thought. That this was a sign of weakness. That I'd never truly be able to separate myself. That if I couldn't stand strong on something simple like where we sat for American History, what chance did I have of resisting getting sucked back into their world?

I'd just have to prove him wrong.



"Actually, I wasn't thinking any of those things."

"You weren't?"

"No." Connor hitched his bag higher on his shoulder. "You're seriously paranoid. I never said you should cut off your old friends. *You* chose that."

True. Although, really, they'd cut me off last semester and left me with little choice but to bow out as gracefully as possible. Though on the outside our group had appeared as tight a clique as ever, in truth I'd been backing out since Jodi's rager in July. That's when it became apparent to me that this path I was on—excessive drinking, flirting for sport—was potentially dangerous and I needed to get out before something bad happened. My decision to return to church, to pursue a life God would be proud of, didn't go over well with my party-all-the-time friends.

I groaned. "I just wish senior year was over."

"Hey." Connor stopped walking and faced me. "No doom and gloom. We're gonna have fun, okay?"

"Kay."

He slugged my shoulder. "See ya around, Hoyt."

He took off down a branching hallway to his art class, and I continued toward English, smiling. Connor and I had started as friends. Well, *friends* wasn't the right word because he annoyed me, and Connor thought I was a spoiled brat. But Connor was the only one who had really supported my strides toward a life transformation, and that fused us. At first, dating felt awkward. We knew how to hang out and secretly pine for each other, but being a traditional couple—going on dates, saying “I love you”—felt foreign. Now, two and a half months later, we'd found a good mix of shoulder slugging and PDAs.

Inside the classroom, I spotted Jodi and Alexis huddled together, and the smile drained from my face. At one point in time, I'd have taken my rightful seat with them. But now I assumed they gossiped about me.

Funny, last semester I'd grown so accustomed to their snickers and snide remarks that I hardly noticed them anymore. My two-week break had apparently softened me. I wanted to hang my head and shuffle to a seat, but I mustered the energy to match them glare for glare and strut to the opposite side of the room.

“This seat free?” I asked Madison Embry.

Her dark eyes widened. We'd barely spoken to each other since sophomore year. “Yeah.”

I glanced at Jodi and Alexis once more before sliding into the chair. Alexis's face burned red, and I could guess why. Several years ago, Madison caused the breakup of Alexis and her boyfriend, and my group never allowed her back in, never let her forget what she'd done. Though it was no longer *my* group, but Jodi's.

Madison followed my gaze. “Hmm.”

“What?”

“Just noticing I’m no longer public enemy number one.” She gave me a wry smile. “You must like him a lot.”

“Who, Connor?” I asked. Madison nodded. “It’s not entirely about that.”

“He seems like a nice guy, but is he really worth losing all your friends?”

I glowered. “This is none of your business.”

She held up her hands, surrendering. “*You* sat by *me*.”

I turned away. I didn’t need more enemies, I needed friends. I began the school year as the queen, the one everyone wanted to be, or at least be around. And now . . . well, now I was on the receiving end of friendship lectures.

“Hey,” Madison said, her voice soft. “I heard about your sister. How’s she doing?”

“Abbie’s strong.”

“I always liked Abbie. I mean, you could tell she might be trouble, but I liked her.”

I didn’t reply, just focused on writing my name, the class, and the date on the first sheet of my notebook. I’d committed to being a better student this semester, although I’d already damaged my chances of getting into a killer college. Luckily, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and was happy to spend a couple years at Johnson County Community College figuring it out.

Madison picked at her nail polish, same as she’d done years ago when uncomfortable. “Is she keeping the baby?”

“She doesn’t know.”

“Doesn’t she need to decide that soon?”

The old me would've ordered her to shut her trap, but I didn't know how to nicely tell someone they were pushing my limits. Especially Madison, who not so long ago I might have called with intimate details.

She solved the problem for me. "Never mind." She waved me away with a hand. "We're not friends anymore. I'm being nosy."

Somehow, her saying this made me want to tell her, but I bit back the answer. Too many people had burned me recently. I'd lost interest in trusting anyone.