

The Reinvention of Skylar Hoyt, book 3

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the reinvention of skylar hoyt

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

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My eyes, innocently grazing the new releases at Blockbuster, locked on Connor Ross.

I would've avoided him, especially since he stood there with Jodi, but we held eye contact too long to pretend we hadn't noticed each other.

We exchanged awkward smiles—what else could we do?—and moved closer.

“Hey,” I said, being my usual creative self.

“Hi.” His smile hung crooked. It didn't always. Just when he felt uncomfortable. Connor hadn't flashed me a straight smile since March. Three months and six days ago.

“Hi, Skylar.” Jodi infused her voice with warmth.

I managed to raise the corners of my mouth. I couldn't trust myself to speak actual words to her. Even when I said simple things like, “Hi,” it always sounded angry and bitter. Two things I felt, but had no intention of her knowing.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked, then nearly cringed. Hello—what else would they be doing at Blockbuster?

Connor acted nice about it. “Trying to find a movie that'll make everyone happy.”

“Not an easy task.”

“Cevin’s the real toughie,” Connor said with a grin.

Both Jodi and I laughed—Cevin’s the Ross family’s dog—then stopped and looked at each other. So awkward.

“Well. I better go.” I waved the case of my selected movie, as if to prove my hasty departure had nothing to do with them, that I was, in fact, ready to leave. “Abbie’s waiting in the car.”

Connor took a step closer to me, blocking my exit. “So, you leave Thursday, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I bet you’re excited.”

“Yeah.”

“Chris says your family’s going with you? That they’re staying for a couple weeks?”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll be good for Abbie to get away.”

“Yeah.” Okay—time for a new word. “She’s nervous about the flight.”

“I’m sure.”

I loved his eyes, so round and expressive. Looking into them now made me long for a few months ago, when he looked at me with obvious tenderness. Now he always seemed on guard. Why? Did he think if he looked at me normally, I wouldn’t be able to control myself? That I’d lunge for him and confess my undying passion? Please. *I’d* broken up with *him*.

My cell phone sang from my back pocket, and I realized we’d been standing there staring at each other. Connor’s face reddened and mine would’ve too if not for my dark skin.

"I've got to take this," I said, though if I hadn't been with them, I'd have pushed Eli's call into voice mail.

"If I don't see you before Thursday . . ." Connor didn't seem to know how to complete his thought.

I took several steps backward, toward the checkout counter. "Have a good summer, guys."

"You too," Jodi said with a big smile.

I scanned her face for signs of triumph. After all, she'd gotten what she wanted. While Jodi and Connor weren't officially dating, they appeared to be taxiing for takeoff. An afternoon movie with the family? It didn't get more "girlfriend" than that. And surely Jodi felt my spending the summer in Hawaii was the final nail in the coffin of my relationship with Connor. *I* did. Or at least I hoped it'd be the final push to me finally putting the past where it belonged—in the past.

But no matter how hard I tried to make something sinister of Jodi's smile, she seemed genuine.

Connor didn't smile, not even his crooked one. He looked like maybe he had something else to say, but he let me walk away without even a good-bye.

I turned and answered my phone with a curt, "Hey."

"We still on for tonight?" Eli asked. In the background I heard distinctive pool sounds—shrieking kids and splashing.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"Okay. Later."

"Later."

I glanced over my shoulder as the cashier rang up my selection. Connor and Jodi's heads bent over a movie, reading the back blurb. From what I'd heard—convoluted gossip passed down from Madison—Jodi was totally smit-

ten. She thought she and Connor could have a real future together.

Connor's feelings seemed murkier. No one knew what he thought.

I needed to look away. I couldn't get caught staring at them. But then Connor's head tilted discreetly, and he looked over his shoulder at me. His eyes shone with regret. Same as I felt in my heart but didn't admit to anyone. Not even my sister, Abbie.

I waved and forced a smile, then grabbed my movie and headed into the steamy afternoon.

Abbie looked just as sour when I got in the car as she did ten minutes ago when I got out. Maybe sourer.

"Did they have it?" she asked.

I tossed the movie to the floor. "Yep."

"It took you so long, I thought you must be trying to pick out a different one."

I ground my teeth and started the car. Each day it got harder and harder to ignore Abbie's mood. She rarely said anything blatantly mean. Instead, she sulked and sighed and draped cloaks over her insults.

I rammmed the gearshift into reverse. As I waited to turn onto the busy road, Abbie noticed what I'd hoped she wouldn't.

"Isn't that Connor's car?"

I glanced at the familiar Chevy Tahoe. "Looks like it."

"Was he inside?"

I hesitated only a second. "I didn't see him."



"You're leaving for Madison's already?" Mom asked as I entered the kitchen. She stood at the counter, transferring

leftover takeout into Tupperware. Even doing mundane tasks like handling discarded food, she still managed to look beautiful and regal.

“Yeah.” I hitched my overnight bag higher onto my shoulder. “Where’s Abbie? I wanted to say bye.”

“I’m right here.”

I turned to the living room. Abbie’s hand waved over the back of the couch.

“I’m heading out,” I said, stepping to where I could see her sprawled on her side.

“Yeah, I heard.”

Owen slept beside her, turned into her body. After three months, you’d think I’d be used to seeing Abbie in a mother’s role, but sometimes the surprise of it still hit me. Especially on days when she skipped makeup and braided her hair in two tails. She looked even younger than fifteen-almost-sixteen.

“See you tomorrow, pal.” I stroked his silky dark hair, but he didn’t stir. Looking at him, I suddenly didn’t want to spend the night at Madison’s, away from him. And what would he be like in two months when I returned from Hawaii? Technically we’d only spend six weeks apart since they’d be there the first two, but even just six weeks . . . He changed so often, so rapidly, I ached to think of what I might miss.

“Aren’t you going?” Abbie asked.

“Right.” I dropped a kiss on Owen’s forehead. “Bye.”

An early evening rain shower had come through, stealing away the humidity. I rolled my windows down as I drove, appreciating the fresh summer smells and cool breeze. Perfect outdoor weather—warm enough for shorts, cool enough for long sleeves as the sun set.

Lisa stood at the end of her driveway, dressed in one of her usual way-too-tight ensembles. After I'd pulled alongside the curb, she slid into the passenger seat with a mischievous grin. "You look nice."

"Same thing I've had on all day."

"Sure it is."

I rolled my eyes and stepped on the gas a little heavier than necessary. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Implying I look extra nice for something. For someone."

Lisa's eyes widened. "I've got no idea what you're talking about." But a smile toyed with the corners of her mouth.

"There's nothing going on with me and Eli."

"I didn't say there was."

"I leave on Thursday."

"That's like sixty-two hours from now."

I considered this. *Sixty*-two? "Seventy-two."

She blinked rapidly, the way she always did when sorting things out. "But it's three days from now. Three times twenty-four is—"

"Seventy-two."

Lisa shook her head. "Whatever. My point is, in sixty- or seventy-two hours you'll be saying good-bye to Eli. Maybe forever. Shouldn't you, like, make those hours count?"

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. These were the moments when I missed Connor the most. He'd been a great moral compass. Lisa and Madison would have no qualms about encouraging me to make my last hours with Eli "count."

Of course, Lisa and Madison hadn't broken my heart. Score one for them.

"I'm not interested in hooking up," I said as I turned down Madison's street.

"Might be just what you need. It's good for the complexion, they say."

"Who says?"

"*Cosmo*."

Of course. *Cosmopolitan* was the closest thing Lisa had to a Bible.

"Well, my complexion's fine." But as I pulled into Madison's driveway, I double-checked in the rearview mirror.

Lisa glanced at the in-dash clock. "Is it just me, or are we always having to wait for Madison?"

I killed the engine. "Punctuality isn't her thing."

Lisa pulled a cigarette from her purse. I might have asked her not to, but with Hawaii so close, I didn't want to bicker. "If you'd have told me six months ago that I'd be hanging out with Madison Embry . . ."

"Same here."

Lisa propped her feet up on the dashboard. I opened my mouth to tell her to move her stinky feet, but what did I care? The car would be Abbie's once I left.

"It all seems so stupid now," she said with a flick of her lighter. "Shutting Madison out of the group these last few years."

"Not much of the old group left."

She gave me a funny look. "Sure there is. It's just Jodi and Alexis who are out."

True. Jodi now spent her time with Connor and other youth group friends. I didn't know much about Alexis.

Except she didn't want to hang out with Lisa, who'd unintentionally stolen her most recent boyfriend; Madison, who'd stolen her first boyfriend; and me, whose only crime was hanging out with said girls.

"Finally," Lisa said as Madison jogged down the front steps of her modest brick house. As best she could, anyway, in her platform sandals.

Madison slipped into the seat behind Lisa. "I know I'm late. Sorry."

"We expect it," Lisa said.

In the rearview mirror, I saw Madison stick out her tongue.

"I'm sure the guys will be late too. I think Eli and John were playing disc golf," I said.

This time when I glanced in the rearview mirror, Madison grinned at me, wicked. "What?" I said flatly.

"It's just so sweet that Eli fills you in on his every move. What a good boyfriend."

Madison and Lisa cackled.

"He's *not* my boyfriend." Did they even hear me over their immature giggling? "I said, he's not my boyfriend."

"You sure spend a lot of time with him," Lisa said.

"Because we're friends, okay? We were friends for three years before we dated, and we're friends now."

"Does he know that?"

"Of course he knows."

"Is that why he kissed you?"

I hesitated, mentally replaying the kiss that had started me down this road. The familiarity of his mouth on mine, his hands in my hair, the sticky taste of rum and Coke.

"That wasn't anything," I said. "He'd recently broken

up with Jodi and I'd just broken up with Connor. It was about—”

“Attraction,” Madison said.

“I was going to say ‘comfort.’”

Lisa snickered. “As in Southern Comfort.”

I slanted her a glare. “He may have been drinking, but I wasn’t. I told you, I—”

“Gave that stuff up,” the girls said along with me.

I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel and ignored their snickers. What would they say if they knew I’d been drinking too? Oh, they wouldn’t really care—not like Connor would—but I’d been denying it for so long that I couldn’t stand the thought of coming clean. And what really mattered was that I hadn’t touched a drop since that horrible, drunken night with Eli. I cringed—okay, *one* other time. Prom night. And, okay, graduation too.

“Well, if being a good girl is what makes Eli Welling turn his head, I might just have to reform,” Madison said.

I didn’t answer, not quite ready to admit that I’d abandoned my fantasies of ever being a good girl.