

Loving the Tornado

By C.E. Giugno

Alexander Eaves lay belly-up on the cool gray grass of the cemetery and blew smoke rings at the stars. No one was watching him (for once in his life). No one would be foolish enough to go to the cemetery after dark. But Alex still had the feeling that someone was watching him-- *maybe the dead*. The idea was ridiculous but the boy didn't laugh. You didn't laugh in a cemetery. He learned that six months ago when--

Alex didn't want to think about that.

He promised himself he would enjoy tonight. Senior year. Only a few months of high school left. It was supposed to be a celebration.

And yet--

And yet-- he was here. In the cemetery. Didn't that seem contradictory? He could just see his parents staring at him with that *look* of half prickliness, half utter confusion, etched upon their faces. "*Why aren't you out with friends tonight?*" they would say. "*Why are you spending your time amid skeletons and corpses? You're a teenager, don't you realize? All of that is years away.*"

But they would be lying, Alex thought darkly. Not that he was going to commit suicide, he amended (though no one could see inside his brain but himself), but the fact was he could be hit by a bus tomorrow. Come down with some deliberating illness, cancer maybe. He could be stabbed, kidnapped, gunned down, garrotted-- the list went on and on. It wasn't even like Alex had a big imagination for these sort of things either. All he needed to do was turn on the news and-- bam-- there were the possibilities.

Adults didn't think teens knew about death. And maybe they were right-- like half of the time. But teens weren't idiots. They noticed stuff even when parents thought they weren't listening.

Anyway.

The real reason Alex liked the cemetery was because it was the only place he could really think. Not all that synthesis, assertion, thesis shit he did in school but actually *think*-- about the important things. Where was he going? What did he want? What made him *him*-- and why did it matter? Outside of the cemetery, he was straight-A, honor student, Ivy-bound Alexander Eaves. In here, he was nothing but Alex. He rather liked it.

The sky darkened as the teenage boy blew out another hazy breath, feeling woozy. This stuff was supposed to make him relax. That's what James the Town Stoner had told him--and James the Town Stoner wouldn't lie. *Try it*, he'd said in a voice that Alex thought would be seductive but was instead disappointingly normal, *It takes the edge off when you can't deal anymore.*

What James couldn't deal with anymore, Alex didn't know. But there was always something, wasn't there? Personally speaking, Alex hadn't been able to deal for six months and he was getting tired of it. Genius little shit and he couldn't even pass a day without feeling so sick he'd gladly empty his insides then starve until he was numb.

And, truth be told, he'd never done drugs before. Maybe because he believed all that crap they told you in elementary school-- brain cells dying, emotional imbalance, physical deterioration-- it *was* science after all, and Alex was nothing if not scientific. But he was getting desperate enough not to care about brain cells dying-- or at least to take the chance that if a few did die, they'd be the ones he was trying to get rid of anyway.

Morbid thoughts. Still true.

And if Alex had learned anything from--well, if Alex had learned anything, it was that truth was important.

He shifted his gaze to the little trees dotting the cemetery. What was it like to grow here alone? One of the few places humans would actually avoid--with the not entirely inaccurate feeling that they would "catch" death like it was some kind of disease.

Did corpses make good fertilizer?

Shit. Alex frowned. That was too far, maybe. But when people died, the "people" part of them was gone. So really, the only bit that was *left* was the part that would either make or not make good fertilizer for the trees. See. Not over the line at all.

By now, the woozy feeling was subsiding and Alex was beginning to realize why James the Best Friend enjoyed this stuff so much. It wasn't the euphoria, really, though that was nice. Or the havoc it wreaked on any sort of logical thought process. No-- it was the fact that Alex knew that the precious control he fought for every day was gone, fading like the last rays of light in the evening sky. And for once in his life he didn't even care.

High and almost giddy, Alex rose to his feet, beginning to hum a tune. *For the ghosts-- the boy thought-- some music to dance to.* Though he was no Mozart, if the only thing they got was TAPS at funerals, he didn't think the spirits would care too much.

As if to prove his point, he waltzed with a grace more fitting a duke from some faraway land than a senior from upstate New York. Especially a senior who was high as a kite, high as the moon playing shadow puppets with the trees and the headstones. A senior who had only taken ballroom dancing once and that was in middle school with a bunch of--

"Girls!"

Whether it was the drugs or the waltz, the memory struck Alex right between the eyes like a bullet. He stopped in his tracks, afraid he would suddenly start bawling and be unable to stop. He'd made a promise, a promise to himself--

"Girls, please get in line across the gym."

And yet it was too late. Alex had given up control the moment he blew his first smoke ring. The memory came flooding back.

“Girls!” Coach Janet said. She was a teacher, and a middle-school one at that but she still insisted that every student call her “coach.” “Girls, please get in line across the gym.”

And they did, the pack of beginning-women wandered in a fit of giggles and whispers across the basketball court. On Alex’s side, the boys gawked. Most of them had known these girls since kindergarten but this year...this year, everything was different. They could all feel it-- even Alex who couldn’t keep his eyes on one side of the gymnasium and wasn’t sure what to think about it.

Coach Janet blew her whistle, a sign for the girls to hurry up. This was middle school so the command of a teacher still carried weight to most of the students. But not to everyone. A few remained on the outskirts of the pack, every slow step a gesture of defiance.

That was when Alex saw him for the first time.

Loner. Dark curls, even darker glare. He hadn’t come out yet-- most likely hadn’t gotten beyond the beginning stages of “this body isn’t really mine”-- so his hair was still wound in tight pigtails. Could you fall in love at first sight? Alex wasn’t sure but there was something about him that drew you in. Something... wild, tucked within a panda t-shirt and ripped corduroys. He was a prepubescent tornado, ready to strike.

When Coach Janet told the boys to line up, 12-year-old Alex made sure he was across from the interesting kid.

Meanwhile, in the cemetery, 18-year-old legal adult Alex took another lungful of smoke. Maybe if he got shitfaced enough, the memories would leave him alone.

But he should have known.

Tornadoes were nothing if not persistent.

“Bow to your partner.”

They met in the middle. The tornado bobbed his head a little, a far cry from the curtsy that Coach Janet had taught him. But Alex didn’t really care. He gave a deep sweeping bow and held out his hand. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Then the tornado raised his eyebrows. “Who taught you to bow like that? Prince Charming?”

If Alex had known how to lie, he would have said something like. “No-- I’m Prince Charming.” Then smiled like a toothpaste commercial. But he didn’t. He was twelve after all, and barely knew how to pack his lunch without help from his mom.

So instead Alex said. “I did. I like it too.”

“It looks funny though. You know that right?”

Even a twelve-year-old mama’s boy could sense that this was some kind of test. But what kind it actually was evaded still him. So Alex just nodded in response. “I know it looks funny but yeah. I still like it.”

At first he was pretty sure that was the wrong thing to say. After all, this was middle school. Liking things didn't really matter unless they were the right things. But then the other kid gave Alex his first smile. "Good. I'm Jackson Taylor."

"I'm Alex Eaves." Back then, he didn't use his full name. Why would he? Middle school Alex had nothing to prove. "Do you like pandas?"

Jackson seemed to squint in confusion. "What? Why would you ask that?"

Alex's cheeks turned red and he gestured to the shirt. "It's got...you know."

"Oh!" Eyes widened in understanding, the tornado opened his mouth. Surely, thought Alex, something fascinating was about to pour out and change his life forever. But before it could, the two were interrupted.

"Taylor! Alex! Come on-- this is physical education not social education!" Coach Janet smirked, proud of that particular zinger. "Get your bodies moving!"

Alex turned in confusion to his partner. "Why did she call you by your last--"

"It doesn't matter." The smiling kid from before had turned tornado again. "Were you listening when she was giving any of the instructions?"

He had been listening, sure. But to Jackson, not to Coach Janet. So Alex only shook his head. "Not really. I think we just have to do what everybody else is doing though."

Jackson scoffed. "Boring." Alex didn't exactly agree. The other kids were dancing, one set of hands on each other's shoulders, the other set held in front of them like the prow of a ship. The thought of doing that with this tornado...

Well, quite frankly, it set every part of him on fire. So Alex took Jackson's hand, trying not to erupt all over the gymnasium floor. "We'll do it our own way," he said.

And they danced.

Eighteen year old Alex *was* shitfaced now. But the memories wouldn't stop coming. Even worse, every gust of wind that blew by whispered *Jackson* in his ears. Repeated it like a cheer at a pep rally which he knew the tornado would have hated but--

Jackson. Jackson.

The spindly trees lurched and spun to the tune, shadows forming a stop motion sequence of lips touching. Coming in close. Bodies moving together.

Jackson. Jackson.

Alex stumbled to his feet, clinging to a headstone. He took a few steps-- shaky and unbalanced-- toward what appeared to be the cemetery gate. But it kept moving-- undulating to the beat of the shadows.

Jackson. Jackson.

God, what kind of idea was this? Go to the cemetery and get totally stoned? Come to think of it, the whole thing sounded like the plot to a horror movie. And now... even if the only ghosts were those of Alex's own making, he knew he wanted out.

“You’re a lunatic, Lex.”

Alex Eaves froze. He knew that voice. He knew that nickname.

“No seriously-- you’re a lunatic.”

He spun around, half expecting to see Jackson’s ghost popping a knuckle. It was one of those habits that he was pretty sure *everyone* found annoying but the tornado didn’t care. Half of Alex was pretty sure that’s why he did it in the first place.

But no ghost.

Just drugs. And empty thoughts. And one early September day, still a touch too hot to really be considered fall.

They had been under the bleachers.

Alex Eaves had always hated the first day of school (too much talking, none of it about anything important) but he had to admit, Jackson was making it interesting.

“Why am I a lunatic?” he asked.

A few meters away (close enough to touch), the tornado shook his head-- he hadn’t changed much since middle school apart from a close-cropped haircut and a new pair of combat boots. Alex loved them both but wasn’t fool enough to comment. Jackson, he was sure, wouldn’t give a shit either way.

The other 14 year old confirmed it. “Listen. It’s not like I really care or anything. Just, really? The football team? It’s like you want to be made fun of.”

“By who?” Alex didn’t get how his friend could defy high school logic and be so blasé about it. “Dude, no one makes fun of the football team unless they have a death wish. That’s kind of the point of playing. Besides, coach thought I would make a good running back.”

“Running back!” Jackson snorted. “It’s like you want to be a walking high school stereotype!”

Alex glared at him. The tornado wasn’t the smoothest talker in the world but he normally wasn’t this much of an asshole. “At least I try to fit in. Not walk around in black and make everyone call me by the wrong name.”

“It’s not. The wrong name.” The other teenager said with sudden ferocity. “You call me Jackson, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” What could Alex say? That he thought the nickname was just between them? Special? “But--”

“Then what right do you have to say it’s wrong?”

The air beneath the bleachers was quiet for a moment as Alex puzzled it out. To be honest, yeah, he didn’t really have any right. The tornado could call himself whatever he wanted, be it “Taylor” or “Jackson” or anything in between. But Alex supposed the thing that he

cared about wasn't really the name. It was the why behind that name. He told the other teenager just as much.

"Seriously...? You want to know why?" The tornado looked taken aback. Again, 14-year-old Alex got a distinct feeling that he had made a mistake. But 18-year-old Alex knew the truth. No one had asked Jackson anything when he began to transition. Occasionally, someone might give him a smile instead of a grimace and eye roll but-- overall?-- they kept as far away from the subject as possible. As far away from him as possible. None of their business.

So yeah, 14-year-old Jackson was surprised when his friend didn't dance around the topic. But it wasn't angry surprised--more good, old-fashioned shock. "Okay... listen. And swear you won't laugh at me either. Swear it on your eighth grade report card."

Dang. Alex sucked in a deep breath. His eighth grade report card was the first in which he had gotten all As. Marked down the page in red ink like tiny doses of heroin. Jackson was serious then.

"I swear it on my report card."

Jackson quirked an eyebrow in exactly the same fashion as when they had first met. "Eighth grade report card."

"That's exactly what I meant. Eighth grade report card." Alex bit his lip a moment, wondering if the tornado was going to say something really funny just to mess with him. But he didn't.

"Lex...I think I'm a boy."

There was silence for a moment as the two teenagers stared at anything but each other. Alex had heard about this kind of thing, mostly on the radio or the evening news before his parents fumbled the remote and in an almost comical anxiety, shut it off. It was called "being transgender" and was in the same category as "queers", "drag" and "bisexuals." Unfortunately, Alex was pretty sure that he as one of the above as well.

As for Jackson being a boy...Alex guessed it kind of fit. He hung out with the girls without really being part of them and hung out with the boys as naturally as breathing. Anyway, even if it didn't fit in his head, Alex figured it was sort of like the name thing. How could he, who had admired Jackson up close and from afar for a grand total of two years, tell him what gender to be? It just wasn't what friends did.

So he just nodded as his hopefully-friend continued.

"Okay, so I know I don't have one of those...things." -- They were fourteen. You could pick any boy out of the freshman crowd, have him drawn and quartered and he still wouldn't say "penis." -- "But I know I'm a boy. I think like one."

"How?" Alex asked. Truth be told, he was just kind of curious but the tornado fixed him with a cold hard stare. He had asked the wrong thing again.

"The same way you know you think like a boy. Duh."

It was a very Jackson thing to say. Not answering any questions while still making utterly perfect sense. Alex nodded.

"I believe you," he said and the tornado ground to a halt.

"Okay then. Just so you do. Because I know what I'm talking about. There's a difference between how boys and girls think 'cause they've done studies on it and they show you can think like a boy even if you don't have a.... Anyway, what's the deal with fitting you with a label at birth anyway? You don't even know who you're going to be yet. I mean..." Jackson paused, uncharacteristically self-conscious. "I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"I don't care," Alex said. He was on fire again.

"Really?" The tornado gave a half-hearted sigh, trying to muster himself up to his usual strength. But he couldn't because...somehow, against all odds, he was waiting for Alex's answer. "Because even if you..., I'd rather know the truth. Truth is important."

The teenager took a deep breath, feeling buoyed somehow. Then he replied. "I really don't care whether you ramble Jackson. Whether you're a boy or a girl. Whether you uh, have a... Yeah. May I show you that? How little I care?"

The teen tornado nodded faintly-- but just enough.

Then Alex did something that he'd been waiting to do. For two long, glorious years.

Honestly, it wasn't even that great of a kiss. They were fourteen. Neither of them had ever done anything like that before--so it was all tongue. Messy.

That hadn't mattered though-- and why should it?

He was kissing the tornado. *Finally* kissing the tornado.

Alex gave a deep sigh as the memory fizzled out in his brain. Even now, the flames of that kiss warmed him against the cemetery night. The hallucinations were fading too-- as if blown away by the heat. Though at the edge of his vision shadows still danced, they didn't dare come closer. And the cemetery gate had ceased its unnerving flicker.

With a start, Alex realized that he was just meters away from the exit. He could-- if he wished it-- return to the world of the living.

But *did* he wish it?

The tricky thing with memories is that they're like a story-- beginning, middle, and end. Right now, Alex still hadn't hit the climax and it struck him as improper to stop. Unnatural, actually-- and he would be an expert considering how many times the word was bandied about to describe him.

Jackson and Alex came out to their families a couple of weeks after the kiss. It had gone better for him-- probably because on the sliding scale of sins, "bisexual" wasn't quite as bad as "transgender." But they still both got an earful of the same old arguments:

It's just a phase.

You haven't met the right person yet.

It's unnatural. Or rather (though this bit was never said) *you're* unnatural.

The similarities ended there.

Alex knew his problem was easier to dismiss. Bisexual meant you could pass as straight if you needed to. Avoid the stares even if it killed you a bit on the inside. And as far as ignoring things went, his parents were experts. They'd demonstrated *that* skill every time they shut off the TV/radio/computer. All he had to do was sit through one talking-to and they'd never bring the subject up again in their lives, at least not if they could help it.

Granted-- they didn't know he was dating a guy yet either. But it's not like Alex was about to tell them.

As for Jackson...things were a lot different. He didn't get kicked out. That's what they both had been afraid of. Nor had his parents sent him to "gay camp" (even if they *had* threatened to a couple of times). No-- for Jackson Taylor, all that happened was a nice talk where his parents made it abundantly clear that until this "phase" ended, any type of support, financial, emotional or otherwise, would be off the menu. It was his own fault. He had made things difficult when they should have been clear and simple, rocked the boat when there was no reason, messed with everyone's sense of *family*.

The truth, as Jackson would mutter to Alex between flaming kisses, often did.

Jackson, in fact, was an expert on this-- for in the remaining three years of high school, he got in trouble multiple times for telling the truth. Some of it was the way he said it. Jackson was blunt to a fault, and while this was one of the things Alex loved about him, it didn't seem to elicit the same sort of affection from teachers. The other part was who Jackson was. Nobody wanted to hear it from the town queer kid how inherently homophobic the notion of prom king and queen was.

As for Alex...he helped when he could. He wasn't great at it-- one of the side effects of growing up in a house where anything uncomfortable would be censored within the minute-- and he knew that more often than not, Jackson found his efforts rather lackluster. But the other teen put up with it. They were in love, after all. And the tornado knew his boyfriend had a reputation to keep-- a GPA of 4.0 and a spotless record sure to entice college admission boards across the nation.

He was their ticket out. But... then again, the thing about tickets was that they could only be redeemed by *one* person.

"So tell me the plan again," Jackson whispered. It was, quite possibly, an attempt to sound seductive but Alex couldn't know for sure. For all he knew, it could just be his own horny wishful thinking. Besides, it was incredibly difficult to sound seductive when sitting across from the men's showers in a school locker room at the butt crack of dawn.

Still Alex decided he would hold out. If anyone could do it, it would be Jackson.

"Here's the plan," he whispered to the tornado. Just like three years ago, they were close enough to touch. Only this time they actually were touching. "I apply to college at Stanford. My SAT score is high enough and I've gotten all As since--"

“--The eighth grade report card. You know a B in sophomore gym class doesn’t count.--”

“Fingers crossed. It’s hard to know what colleges care about now. Anyway, even if I don’t get into Stanford, I’ll probably get into UC Davis, and if not there... Well it doesn’t matter. Anywhere 2000 miles away from this place is good enough.”

Alex pursed his lips. In truth, he was a little worried. Though he had come a long way from the middle schooler who didn’t know how to pack his lunch, Alex still had never lived away from home before.

Not that he was going to mention this to Jackson, his loving boyfriend who was already a glowing star seconds away from supernova.

“...and, I already applied to University of Phoenix, Sacramento. We’ll be soaking California sun in no time, you hear me Lex?” The tornado let out a whirlwind laugh. “We’ll be free!”

Alex tried to be cheerful. “Totally.” He was not very convincing.

Thankfully, Jackson was too caught up in his own daydreams to care. “We could go to the beach every other Sunday. You know, to see the Pacific *fucking* ocean. There’ll be actual gay bars with lights and decent music and people. I’ll make art and you’ll study science and we’ll be fine ‘cause we’re together.” A rare moment of optimism from a usually cynical tornado. Alex would have liked to savor it but the moment was followed by a series of questions he had no idea how to answer.

“How does that sound, Lexie?”

Alex bit his lip.

“You’ve got all the applications in, right?”

He was pretty sure he could taste blood.

“Seriously, Lex...what’s wrong?”

Jackson grabbed Alex’s hand and held it tight. He really was a loving boyfriend. Which, of course, only made it even harder to voice his fears.

“I...listen, Jackson... I don’t know if I can do this.”

The air in the men’s locker room fell silent. Only the drip, drip, drip of a leaky showerhead gave any clue that time was still passing for everything else-- the rustle of school uniforms, the sweat of teenage hands, even the tornado-- stopped in its tracks.

“What?” Jackson whispered. He wasn’t trying to be seductive now-- that, Alex was fairly sure of. “You’re kidding, right?”

Alex shook his head. Slow. Silent.

Cold.

Jackson sucked in a breath, still not sure whether his boyfriend was being serious. Tornadoes could be stubborn like that. “Okay... okay. I get it. Life’ll be different, sure. But it’ll be good-different, right? No one giving us the death glare when we hold hands. Or spouting

some sort of high school bullshit about who you have to be to succeed. We can do whatever we want, you know-- *whatever*."

Alex opened his mouth but no sound came out. How was he supposed to explain to Jackson, free-spirit and rebel truth-teller, that that was the scary part? The "*whatever*." That the rules Jackson called bullshit had been holding his Lex together since they first met and, honestly... he wasn't sure what he'd do without them.

While New York might be hell on earth, at least it was the hell he knew.

But that was something the tornado would never understand--and why would he? He was a windstorm that didn't give a shit about rules and tore away whatever didn't make sense. So Alex didn't even bother trying to explain. Instead what came out of his mouth, half on accident, half entirely on purpose, was: "My parents."

"What about them?" Jackson arched an eyebrow in a way that made his boyfriend very nostalgic. A little horny too.

Alex glared at the shower floor, trying to repress any sudden urges. "They want me to stay in-state. Tuition costs less, you know. And there are plenty of good schools in New York--"

--where they can keep an eye on you, make sure you're not turning too gay." Jackson snorted. "Don't you see it, Lex? As long as we stay here, there'll be people watching. Judging. Sorting us into little boxes with labels like we're fucking fruit flies. Personally, I don't give a shit whether they do it or not but I know that you do. Hence, the necessity of California."

As the last words swept out of his boyfriend's mouth like an errant gust of wind, Alex realized what he had to say. It wasn't going to go over well (you couldn't date a person for three years, without knowing what pissed them off. Especially Jackson). But he had to ask.

"Okay, it's just...do we really need that kind of stuff?" Alex closed his eyes as he spoke. For once in his life, he couldn't stand to see his boyfriend's face. "Like--the holding hands in public and hanging out in gay bars and going to the ocean. We know we love each other, right here, right now. Isn't that enough?"

In the silence of the locker room at dawn, the quickening of Jackson's breath might as well have been thunder. He could feel the tornado rise to his feet and quickly opened his eyes. The only thing he could see was the back of his boyfriend's head as he stepped toward the door. A cold rock plummeted into Alex's stomach.

"Wait" he cried. "Shit...Jack, don't."

The tornado whirled around, hands outstretched. "What? What do you want me to do then, Alex? Kiss you and make it all better-- oh wait, I can't because--"

"You know that's not what I meant." Alex muttered, a mix of guilt and frustration. It was just like the tornado to take things entirely out of proportion.

Jackson raised his eyebrows, a challenge. "Okay, then. What did you mean?"

"I..." His boyfriend, the high school honors student, was suddenly stricken dumb. "I meant... Why does this upset you so much? Why are you walking away?"

Why had been the right question three years ago. Alex could only hope it kept its charm.

And-- somehow-- it did. A few feet away, Jackson seemed to deflate, all the anger rushing out of him like a cool breeze after a storm. "Believe it or not Lexie, I'm doing this because I love you."

Alex could scarcely piece words together. Sure, he knew. But it's not like Jackson threw the phrase about casually. Maybe...there was hope. "What?" he stuttered at last.

"Why I'm walking away. That's what you asked, right? It's because I love you and I'm upset. We both know it and we both also know what I tend to do when I'm upset--"

The tornado's boyfriend heaved a great sigh in relief. He could see it. He could see their future coming together again.

"I yell."

Four years at some upstate college. Maybe NYC if they were lucky.

"I break things."

They'd steal kisses between lecture. Drink too much coffee and bitch about their teachers.

"I tell the truth."

Just like it had always--

Alex stopped mid-thought. What was it that Jackson just said?

He asked the tornado as much.

"I tell the truth." The way he repeated it... the words seemed to be no big deal.

But Alex's mind was already down the rabbit hole. He had made straight As in 10th grade English by learning to interpret Shakespearean dialogue. Those skills were not going to desert him now.

"Jackson..." the other senior murmured. "If you'd tell me the truth when you're angry...then what do you tell me when you're not?"

Maybe it was a stupid question. Picking up on something that was never there to begin with. But that wasn't what Jackson's face said.

As for the cold stone that had sank into Alex's stomach a few minutes earlier? It buried itself deeper.

Shit. All of those years trading notes in class, hooking up in the closet (both literal and figurative). Rarely finding himself on the receiving end of Jackson's sharp tongue... Yet he supposed it made sense. He was the only other guy in town who liked guys. At least that Jackson knew of. Even if it hurt, it was natural that he would--

"I wasn't lying." The way the tornado said it--definitive, final-- almost made Alex believe him. "I wasn't playing you, Lexie."

His face looked so earnest, sincere. But...

"Then what were you doing?" The question had to be asked. "Why don't you ever... I don't know, tell me what you think when you're angry?"

Jackson pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Does it matter?"

Alex said nothing. He was waiting.

Finally, the tornado cracked his knuckles. Though he did it often, for some inexplicable reason this time actually bothered Alex. "Honestly, Lex? I thought I was giving you what you wanted. What you needed to hear. All of it was the truth but the truth... wasn't all of it. I mean, what am I supposed to do, state the few things that are actually flawed in you with explicit detail?"

"Maybe. Why not?"

"Telling you would defeat the point." Jackson shrugged. "I don't want to lose you, Alex. You heard me say it a hundred times. Truth breaks shit. And our relationship is the only thing I have worth keeping."

Alex shook his head. "Tell me."

"I won't." The tornado started again towards the door. Angry again.

And it was that moment Alex knew-- this quiet they were in-- it was not the absence of sound made by puddled dew dripping from the tips of leaves. Not the silent birdsong that comes as the clouds float away. And not the gentle rush of wind after the tornado has gone away.

It was the eye of the storm.

He stepped just in front of Jackson's path, blocking the door. His lips quivered-- whether with fear, shame or pride, he didn't know. Then the words slipped from his mouth, entirely of his own accord. "I'll break up with you."

The tornado let out what could have been a cough. Or perhaps a half-strangled laugh. "What?"

Alex continued. "You said our relationship is the only thing you have worth keeping. Prove it. Tell me what you think. Everything."

Jackson shook his head, his gaze caught somewhere between frustration and bemusement. "It doesn't matter Lex. I love you for all your flaws. For all your virtues. No matter what happens."

"I'm serious Jack. I'd do it." Alex clenched his fists, willing his body to be like rock, willing the tornado to believe him.

But the teen only shook his head. "Sorry Lexie but--"

"Why won't you tell me? Why are you so afraid?"

The moment the word left Alex's mouth, he knew he had made a mistake. "Why" had been the beginning of their relationship. It had been their first kiss. The word had power for reasons that neither could totally explain and yet here he was, chucking it at his boyfriend like a bomb.

Jackson's face went utterly still. He took a breath. And then it became very clear that they were no longer in the eye of the storm.

"You want to know why I don't tell you?" The tornado snapped. "This is why-- I can't say a goddamn thing without you either ignoring it or making it about yourself! You bitch and you moan and do utterly nothing about it. You're oblivious to shit that's right in front of your eyes--even if it's me. I can't be both, Alex. I can't be your loving boyfriend and your secret for the rest of your life."

"That's not--" Alex spluttered. "That's not what I--"

"That's exactly what you said. Why do we need 'that kind of stuff'? The kissing? The dancing? The going to the ocean? I don't know, genius. Maybe because that's us?" Jackson took a deep breath. "You can't threaten me, Alexander. I want this relationship but I want you too. And if you're not willing to give both--"

He shrugged.

--Then that's not worth it either."

He turned around, leaving Alex to gaze at him awestruck. Years ago, in some sort of cheap elementary school documentary, he heard that if you ever saw a tornado in its full fury, you'd never be able to forget it. Now he knew it was true.

"Jackson..." Alex murmured. But it was too late.

The tornado tossed him one final glance, a fractured smile held together by tear-stained cheeks--

"Sometimes I wonder if you even give a damn?"

--and walked out the door.

Six months later in the cool haze of a cemetery evening, the cheeks of Alexander Eaves were similarly dampened. Every time he tried to remember, it was like the wound opened fresh all over again. Scabbed. Bloody. Torn. Sometimes, Alex doubted it would ever heal.

Other times, he wondered if he even deserved it.

But bad as it was, the memory was entirely manageable compared to what happened next.

The rest of that day continued in a frustrated haze, Alex stumbling from class to class like a child just woken from a nightmare. All around him the fluorescent lights jarred his vision with their gleam and nothing, even inanimate objects seemed to remain in their place.

Jackson was nowhere in sight.

By the end of the day, Alex was exhausted, deciding for the first time since he had joined to skip debate club practice. He took the bus home and tried not to think of everything that had happened. How he might have just lost his only real friend. How that friend had walked away so maybe it didn't matter. How he had asked for it all.

When he got home, Alex barely had the energy to mumble hi to his confused parents (who were expecting him an hour later). He staggered upstairs to his room, flopped onto his bed, and without changing cloths or even pulling up the covers, fell into a deep slumber.

And then he dreamt.

What he had dreamt, Alex now couldn't for the life of him remember. Dreams were like that: hazy, tricky things that told the truth but never in the way you expected it. In that way, they were kind of like Jackson.

Also-- they had an aftertaste. Some sort of feeling that stuck to the sides of your brain long after you had woken up (like the last remnants of a kiss). And though his mind wouldn't recall the dream, Alex could still, six months later, taste its lingering aroma smooth on his neurons.

Soft--

Delicate--

Pungent--

Fear.

Of course, he didn't make anything of it.

Who would, after all? Certainly not a high school senior planning to major in biology. Dreams were the bread and butter of charlatans not to-be scientists. But even he couldn't deny the effect they had on you.

It was like someone had dipped his brain in ice-cold water and he couldn't warm it up. He needed heat.

He needed Jackson.

Though he was pretty sure that this was an impossible request, he asked the universe anyway. Just to see him. Someone, somewhere up there probably owed him a favor, right? Statistically speaking. Then he called Jackson's home.

The phone rang three times before someone picked up. It was the tornado's mom, her voice the unsettling rustle of reeds in the wind.

"Yes, this is the Jackson residence, Sue speaking."

Alex nearly started in surprise-- why he wasn't sure. There was no reason, really, for his boyfriend to pick up the phone. After all, it wasn't his personally. One of the consequences of the truth was your parents refusing to buy you a phone. Maybe it was the name then: "the Jackson residence." Alex had grown so used to his boyfriend using the last name Taylor that anything else sounded just...wrong.

"Hey Mrs. Tay-Jackson," he bit his lip before he could mess up. "It's me, Alexander."

There was an audible sigh of relief on the other end of the phone that almost made him want to snort. Jackson's parents knew their son liked him. And they knew he liked the tornado back. For some reason though, this idea translated in their heads to: "maybe if they date long enough, that nice boy Alexander Eaves will turn our gay son back into a straight girl." It was ridiculous enough that Alex never bothered to correct them.

"Alexander! Good to hear from you." Sue Jackson beamed. "I suppose you're looking for Taylor, correct?"

That was the other thing: for three years now, the Jacksons had been calling their son by the wrong name. It was a weird thing for family to do but according to a tenth grade tornado, they weren't really that great of parents anyhow.

"You're my real family, Lexie," Jackson had whispered then.

As the memory flooded his brain, Alexander Eaves felt a rush of anger and then regret. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

Then again, he supposed he knew-- truth always was.

"Yeah." he finally responded, unwilling to repeat the name Mrs. Jackson had chosen. "That's what I'm doing."

"Well, I'm terribly sorry but I'm afraid you can't speak to her-- she's at a party."

Alex could barely believe his ears. Jackson? At a party? Jackson?

"Isn't it great?" On the other end of the line, the tornado's mother, it seemed, could barely contain herself. "They're doing a big thing down at Letchworth Park-- music and dancing. Kind of makes me wish I was a little bit younger, you know? Why I remember when--"

For a moment, Alex considered the possibility that Jackson had been lying just to get out of the house. It would be completely understandable-- sometimes Alex wondered how his boyfriend could take being trapped in the same place with people that maintained for three years now that what he was feeling wasn't real. Then again, he was a teenager.

Maybe this sort of thing came naturally.

After a few more seconds of deliberation though, Alex came to the conclusion that Jackson was, indeed, not lying. It just wasn't in his nature. Which, of course, meant that he was actually somewhere in Letchworth park, dancing to crummy pop songs and clutching a Solo cup of beer between spindly tornado fingers.

"I have to go," Alex said before Sue Jackson could get any further down memory lane. He flicked the button that would end the call, and within two minutes he was in the family SUV barreling down suburban roads at a speed most likely illegal. One of the benefits of being a high school honors student is that he could blurt out any sort of excuse-- an urgent project, a forgotten textbook-- and his parents would swallow it hook, line and sinker.

Either that or they just didn't care where he was going at nine o'clock at night. For all he knew, it could be both. Fortunately, he didn't care.

With thirty minutes of mind-numbing driving past trees and empty fields, Alex finally caught sight of Letchworth park in his windshield. Cars lined both sides of the roads like soldiers marching in formation and Alex could hear the dull thump of music in the distance. He had been right-- it was crummy pop songs. Parking the car in the first spot he could find, Alex stepped into the crowds, eyes peeled down to their cores. How could they not be, after all?

Alexander Eaves was looking for the warning signs of a tornado.

He darted between a group of high school sophomores caught in a desperate attempt to look cool and a pack of seniors already too strung out to care. Under the hazy light of the autumn evening, he thought he even could recognize a few of his classmates-- stoner, jock, even a few geeks-- but no Jackson. As the music grew louder and the beat more infectious, the faces Alex glimpsed became less and less familiar. Men with scruffy chins and strange symbols tattooed up and down their arms. Women with piercings and eyes that looked plastic under the harsh moonlight. For a brief moment, he thought he felt someone grab his ass, heard the word "faggot" whispered into his left ear. But by the time he spun around, the grasping fingers and bitter tongue had already escaped into the chaos.

He hated this place.

Not for the life of him, could he understand why Jackson had chosen to go here. Lost within the sea of people, he would be no one. Nothing. Just another body gyrating to the hypnotic call of the beat.

Of course, maybe that was the point.

Suddenly Alex wondered if he was doing the right thing by coming here to find Jackson. The tornado didn't want to see him-- he had made that pretty obvious already-- and if he really wanted to be anonymous... having his (ex?)-boyfriend appear out of the blue with a bunch of petty apologies probably wouldn't be too helpful.

So Alex made the worst mistake of his life--

(not that he knew it at the time)

--he elbowed a path back to his car, plunged his keys into the ignition, and never looked back.

Alex didn't need to turn around.

It didn't matter that the last time he had been here was six months ago-- he could still remember every detail by heart. There was a cherry tree-- green and leafy then but probably in full bloom now-- bending low over freshly mown grass. The smell of rain tainted the air-- as if the sky had never stopped weeping. And caught between the earth and the sky lay one roughly hewn stone cool to the touch. Alex ran his fingers over it now.

"Hello old friend," he whispered. This was a lie, of course. They had been more than friends and that--that was the kicker. The only thing worse than being the boyfriend at a dead kid's funeral--in Alex's opinion anyway-- was being the boyfriend nobody knew *existed* at the dead kid's funeral. That was, if they were even dating at the time. He still didn't know.

Truth was complicated like that.

Alex crouched down as close to the earth as he could without slipping into the mud. This was the nearest he would get to Jackson now.

In this world anyway.

Though he swore he wouldn't do it, thoughts of suicide that would creep in every now and then into Alex's brain. Drugs were easy to get. Guns even more so. And let's face it--two star-crossed lovers: one dead, one still living--it was the natural way to end the story.

Six months ago-- when Jackson died-- they'd called it a suicide.

He wouldn't have done it. Of that, Alex was sure. The tornado had vowed a million times over not to let the world win like that. Not to be some sort of statistic or trope. And he only had a few months left until sunny, beautiful freedom in California...whether Alex would be with him or not.

Our relationship is the only thing I have worth keeping.

"I'm sorry," murmured the honors student named Alexander Eaves. But what he addressed was only stone. It could not respond.

"I'm sorry," repeated the lover of a tornado though he knew he couldn't be the only one who was guilty.

"I'm sorry," Alex finished-- because it was the truth and, if he had learned one thing from Jackson, it was that the truth *mattered*.

Then he rose to his feet, waved goodbye to the stars, and, before he drove away home, looked back one last time--