Paper Walls - Piper

*Tap. Tap. Tap-tap.*

*Tap. Tap. Tap-tap.*

*Tap. Tap. Slide. Scream.*

The last time that Piper Ashton had seen this jack-ass he had been committing another crime. Breaking-and-entering to be precise. She wasn’t really angry at him for that. In truth he was breaking in to places every 10 minutes and getting caught every 20 – If Piper had a quarter for every time she’d had organized his bail then she would be a millionaire by now. No, she was angry at him because it was 03:51 am on a Monday morning when her so-called friend, Harrison Grey, decided that it was great idea to break into her house.

To say that Piper was shocked when her window slid open and gave birth to hooded figure as it tumbled into her room would be the understatement of her young life. When she actually managed to snap out of her initial frozen terror and figure out just what the hell was going on, she had had to try her best not to curl up in a ball and begin wetting the bed.

In hindsight she was more surprised, and a little pissed off, with herself than anything else because she had actually heard the tapping at her window and had mistaken it for a bird or the rain or something other than the human intruder that had just scampered to their feet after coming through the window and landing on their face. In fact she had elected to turn the pillow to the cold side and dose back off to sleep.

Regardless Piper had managed to recover herself before slowly getting out of bed and reaching for her carbon-fiber hockey stick. She’d call the police – eventually. First she was going to corner this guy. He, however, had other plans and caught her by surprised when he crossed the room and switched the light on.

Now, it was not that Harry was unwelcome in her house, on the contrary he was one of her best friends. It was not that this was the first time she’d caught him sneaking into her window like he had no sense of her personal space – because he didn’t. Granted she had snuck into through his window once or twice over the last year. No, it was that it was 4am in the bloody morning and could he not have at least waited two hours for when he knew she would be getting up? Seriously, sometimes she forgot why she was friends with this idiot. So why exactly was it so urgent that he get to her right now?

‘WHAT THE FLYING FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?’ Piper had wanted to scream in his face, except:

1. This was Harrison Grey she was talking to. Screaming at him was the exact wrong way to get him to listen - too many of their teachers had been down that road for Piper not learn.
2. Screaming would wake the neighbors and Piper really didn’t want to deal with a pissed off Mrs. Jacobson before, at least, ingesting some coffee.
3. When her eyes adjusted to the light properly and she got a good look at his face, Piper understood why he was there.

Instead she set her temper aside and regained her composure before taking a proper look at him.

Put bluntly, Harry looked like he’d just gone a 3 rounds with a heavy-weight boxer. Okay it wasn’t that bad. Maybe a little worse than the fight at the Metallic Fire concert she’d dragged him to, but nowhere near as bad as the pulverizing he’d gotten from Greg Madison last year. Harry still refused to tell her just how he managed piss the guy off that badly but then again, he did have a talent for getting under other people’s skin.

Back at her house, the man in question had dropped his hair over his face to create a brown makeshift fringe – if you could call it that - in order to hide the damage. Regardless, the artificial light still exposed his injuries. Off the cuff Piper could see a black eye developing -that was going to look worse than shit against his blue irises when the discoloration set in properly - and a bloody nose. Not broken? That was a first. There were several cuts on his face, the most notable of which sat above his right eyebrow and goodness only knew what happened to his right arm.

It was at times like this when she felt the need to remind him that she technically only started medical school next month and that right now she was still running off of her basic first aid training - that and a few dozen hours of treating hockey injuries. But the pair of them had done that dance enough times for her to know that it would be a futile conversation. So instead Piper decided to get to work on cleaning him up. She also decided to erase the mental note she made to kick Harry’s ass for waking her up. Someone else had clearly already done it.

“Cop or Bouncer?” she asked, dragging him into the bathroom.

“Boyfriend” he replied

The bleeding seemed to have stopped around the wounds but she was still going to have to get out her kit and clean it. He needed stitches, no doubt about that.

“Was she worth it?” Piper asked after a second.

“Not even close” he replied

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“I still don’t know what the hell you were thinking.” Piper said dabbing the cut above his eye.

“I wasn’t thinking that was the point.” Harry replied.

Piper fought the urge to burst out laughing when Harry told her the story. She managed to keep some semblance of straight face on through most of it but she really couldn’t suppress a smile at the prospect of him offering to motorboat the Jock’s man-boobs. As with all of his stories Piper couldn’t tell where the truth ended and the hyperbole began but either way she always had a fun listening to his exploits.

Right. Serious talk. Stern face.

“This is not a game, Harrison. You could be seriously hurt. Or worse.” Piper said

“Worse than that needle you’re going to use on me?” he said, gesturing to the open first aid kit on the sink to her right. This moment was almost funny when Piper thought about it in context. When she’d first arrived at Seacrest Academy, she’d thought herself smarter, and therefore better, than the likes of Harrison. She thought of him as an idiot, another member of the hive minded hegemony that ruled the place. She’d never pictured herself speaking to him for any stretch of time, let alone allowing him into her house so she could clean the blood off of his face and sew up his wounds – especially with her still in her pajamas and Keith’s old Crimson Spark shirt (yeah, he was never getting that back.) But, Piper knew him better now. The fact that she was willing to put stiches in for him at 4am was testament to just how far the pair of them had come in the last few years. But still, her acceptance of him notwithstanding, his cavalier answers really did get on her nerves.

“Is everything a fucking joke to you? You could’ve been arrested.” Piper said

“You’d bail me out.” Harry replied

“I’ve done that enough, thanks. It’s Keith’s turn.”

“At least Keith doesn’t lecture”

“He does make you pay him back, though”

“Oh shit I forgot about that. Can I borrow 200 bucks from you?” he asked

Piper briefly debated the value in punching him really hard in the shoulder for that response. No, that wouldn’t do. She didn’t want to do serious damage to his injured right arm and she hadn’t assessed it yet. His left arm, though …

Instead, Piper simply narrowed her eyes and shot him a scowl. She really had spent a small fortune over the past two years on bailing him out of jail. So much so that she and her other best friend Keith had developed a system for paying off Harry’s debts to the judiciary. Currently it was Keith’s turn to pay the court.

“Just do me a favor: be more responsible” she said, beginning again

“You sound like my disapproving girlfriend. Or my mother.”

“Your mother doesn’t patch you up after fights.”

“Girlfriend it is then.”

Okay. That did it. Piper was just about ready to start the actual stitches so she decided to take off her gloves and punch his left shoulder as hard as she could. Hopefully he would get the goddamn message now.

“Owww! The fuck Piper!?”

She lifted up his sleeve and started her assessment of his injured right arm. There was a bit of swelling but no discoloration, bleeding, deformity or bone protruding from anything. Okay so it wasn’t broken – well probably not- he’d need an x-ray to be sure but Piper was confident in her conclusion. Once she finished with his arm, she reached for the kit and started prepping to put the stiches in.

“I still can’t believe you pissed Rick off this badly.”

“Do we have to talk about that jerk-off?”

“Do you wanna talk about what that Madison kid did to you instead? “

“I may have actually deserved that one” he conceded

He was touchy about the Madisons. All Piper remembered was arriving home to find Harry slumped over in her doorway, looking like he’d just been hit by a train. She and Keith had gotten him to the hospital that afternoon and called his mom. They took turns staying with him until she got there. What had really surprised Piper was the fact that he didn’t press charges. All he said was that it was his own fault.

“And what about this one?”

“Pipes, all I did was ask a question”

“You went up to The Cheerleader at her own party and asked her whether she was jealous that her Jock boyfriend has bigger breasts than her. You shouldn’t be surprised about, you know, this.” She said pointing at his injuries.

“The girl has a name, Piper”

“I don’t acknowledge that blonde bimbo.” She replied

“I don’t think her hair colour has any-”

At that Piper closed her eyes and raised her hand for silence. She soon found herself clenching all her fingers together to form the universal sign for ‘shut-the-fuck-up’. And for the record, the girl wasn’t a natural blonde. The Cheerleader was, however, a top-grade bimbo. She was pretty but in a plastic and fake-as-shit kind of way. She was also the kind of person that actively sucked the intelligence from the room whenever she opened her mouth. The Cheerleader had, while surrounded by minions of course, once explained to Piper how her life would be “awesome” once she married for money and got to go on vacation to Lirrale in the summer while the nanny raised her children back home. Piper almost throw up in her face and not just because the thought of this girl reproducing made her want to nuke the entire planet from orbit. Rather because this shallow airhead would probably succeed in her plans and therefore succeed in life. Another Cheerleader who would be making the transition to trophy wife. The fact that relegating herself to being someone’s perpetual arm-candy was the limit of the girl’s ambition made Piper’s stomach want to lurch its content onto the bitch’s face.

Another thing, who goes to Lirrale willingly? Especially for a vacation. Okay maybe Northland wasn’t so bad, especially at the height of summer. But it was only one city and it sure as hell wasn’t the real Lirrale. Piper may have grown up there but even she knew that and had subsequently spent a good chunk of her life trying to get out of that there, so she never understood why the fuck anyone would be stupid enough to set foot there by choice. For her Northland – and the country in general- was nothing more than a graveyard for the dreams of the innocent and a torture chamber for the lives of the stupid. The only thing there for Piper was her own dead dreams and a set broken relationships serving as reminders thereof. Nothing of value. Come to think of it, Northland was a good fit for the Cheerleader. Both she and the city were fake and soul-sucking, blinded by the prospect of opulence and deaf to their ignorance.

“That is beside the point” Piper added

“What IS the point?” Harry replied

“The point is that you, my friend, are an asshole”

“A loveable asshole?”

“No. Just the regular kind.”

“I still think it was a legitimate question.”

“And I still think it was stupid.”

It really was stupid. The best thing about Harry was also the worst thing about Harry. He marched to the beat to his own drum. Piper respected that. Admired it even. But seriously, in going about doing the things that he wanted to do, he never stopped to think. He never thought about the consequences of mouthing off to the shit-headed teacher who gave the Queen Bitch a pass on her homework whenever she shook her ass at him, or to the scumbag bouncer who tried to cop a feel off of Piper, or about the ramifications of filling someone’s bag with cereal and milk before hoisting it on a flag pole, or the repercussions of breaking into the school just dye all the food in the kitchen pink or to put up porn in a teacher’s classroom 3 hours before school started so that it was there when the first class walked in. They were all equivalent in his mind. Good or bad, legal or illegal. To Harry all that mattered was having fun on his own terms. He was his own person.

The normal result of his actions was that he got detention – generally on a Saturday and once on a Sunday- but now that they had left school, he simply got his ass handed to him. Regardless, Piper –along with Keith- would hear about it afterwards. He would always tell them stories with the same grin on his face and the same devil-may-care attitude.

Still, the fact that he couldn’t have given a shit about the social order at Seacrest Academy didn’t excuse how really fucking stupid that comment was.

“See this? This is why people don’t like you.” Harry said, folding his arms

“Well then ‘people’ can go fuck themselves.” Piper replied not even lifting her eyes from cut she was currently stitching up. He was playing around but Piper knew what –and to whom- he was referring. Then again, Harry wasn’t the only one who didn’t give a shit about the social order at Seacrest.

“Including me?” he asked

“No. Because you enjoy fucking yourself.” Piper answered, looking him in the eye. When she first met him, she would’ve said ‘yes’ to that question.

“You do care about me.” He replied. Oh great, the grin was back.

“Not in the mood Harrison.”

“Well I like you too.”

Really? He was playing this game? Piper shook her head and rolled her eyes but she couldn’t suppress a smile. Of course she liked him, she wouldn’t tolerate his presence otherwise. As much as she wanted to swat him on the back of the head for the stupid things he said, Harry was still her friend. Piper would say this in his favor: Harrison Grey was one of the few people who could make her legitimately laugh. But he was still having way too much fun right now.

“There. You’re all sewn up. Get to doctor during the day please”

“Thanks doc.”

“Just remember: You don’t block punches with your face.”

Piper had to groan at that. Not her wittiest line. Not by a longshot.

“She makes jokes now.” Harry observed.

“Once her work is done.”

After she packed her kit away, Harrison readied himself to leave. He was in pride mode and subsequently refused her offer to drop him at home. Fine. She didn’t control him. She just dealt with the aftermath of his actions and played nurse to him when he needed her. As they stood in the doorway, he leaned in and reached for her with his good arm.

“Do I really have to -”

Too late. He was already in the process of grabbing her waist and pressing their bodies together.

“Okay fine.” She said, dropping her shoulders and exhaling theatrically. Usually she hated hugging but he still had some goodwill left over in her book – he was using it up but it was there. She slipped one hand around him and patted him on the back with the other. Of course, Piper was still counting down until the hug ended. Goodwill didn’t mean a free ride. She’d give it until the count of five.

One. Three. Five. Seven?

“Harry?”

Nine. Eleven. Thirteen.

“Harrison.”

Fifteen. Seventeen. Twenty.

“Enough! Enough hugging damn it.” Piper said pushing him off her.

“Now get out so I can start my day properly.” She added

“Thanks for patching me up. You’re the best.” He said walking through the front door this time.

“I know.” She replied, shooting him a bright smile for the first time that morning.

Piper Ashton watched her friend walking away from her place, still cradling his bad arm as the night engulfed him. The one valuable thing that she’d learned while living in her parents’ house came back to her. Just before she left for Seacrest, Piper’s mother had sat her down and spoken to her. She had been expecting the older woman to back up Daddy’s anti-Karthan rhetoric but instead she looked at her daughter and said: “… the only thing that's important in this life is the people in it. They are a reflection of who you are and what you have done. Time, money, and things will all pass. Just remember that the true reflection of a person is shown in who they keep around and how they treat them. So when you get to Seacrest, I want you to remember that.”

Okay that wasn’t the whole quote it exactly – the woman hadn’t put it quite as eloquently for one and two it hadn’t been as nearly nice when placed in the context of the entire conversation but it that was the gist of it. Despite herself, though, Piper Ashton smiled.

At the time she had taken it as a sign of her parents’ resignation – if Mother fell then Daddy was soon to follow (which he did) and her freedom would be assured. Now as she dissected it, Piper thought of the life she’d made for herself since moving down to Seacrest and of the people she had it. She thought of her best friends Keith and, yes, Harrison. Now Piper understood that –despite her best efforts- she had probably made the older woman proud.