**Paper Walls**

**Prologue – Keith Buchant**

The paradox of Keith Buchant was that despite being a man of many opinions he would never actually tell most people any of them. Instead he would stare blankly at them or shrug and offer a chuckle before steering the conversation in another direction. If one were to press Keith, assuming he didn’t just dodge the question by pulling from his weathered playbook of social avoidance, he would simply sigh and utter the following quote “I am not a person of opinions because I feel the counter arguments too strongly” and hope for that to kill the debate. In the instances which it did not he would nod appropriately during the forthcoming lecture, all-the-while intensely debating himself about the issue.

Not even his usual utterances were spared from his mind’s eye. So it came to be that on one day he would, in the process of going about his usual routine, be about to deliver this most tired of authorial references when he was pulled into the throngs of internal debate once more. Keith wondered under his breath whether that was something of a commentary on his life up to that point, a headline of sorts, to be placed atop the roll of footage he would see in the process of death. ‘The life and times of Keith Buchant: He was not a man of opinions because he felt the counter arguments too strongly. Also he stared stupidly at those who asked him for one.’

Spelling out the title to himself allowed him to snap out of his reverie and he realize that he had trailed off in the middle of conversation to stare at the table and whisper intensely with himself. He looked up to find a young woman whose doe eyes looked back him with a cocktail of bemusement and genuine concern for his sanity. Keith apologized profusely for his poor etiquette before doing a quick scan of the mental playbook for a way out of the situation. His fear began to mount as he realized he may have to tell the woman something to assuage her doubts about his mental stability. That would be the socially correct thing to do, yes? When she read his expression - and observed what Keith could only assume was confusion on his face - she set her coffee down and touched her hand to his before looking at him, her eyes impossibly blue, and offered him a reassuring smile.

“Relax, Keith. Take a deep breath” she had said. He took several. “Now start again. You were telling me about your complex opinion on pennies.” Keith had two choices: he could angst again and probably hyperventilate while doing so – though that would get him out the situation he’d gotten himself into - or …

“Well, Skylar, it’s like this.” he began.

“Pennies are worse than useless, they’re completely counter-productive …”

**Mackenzie Anson**

*Accidents out on the highway to somewhere, they tell us about when we’re young.*

*Rescuers working to clean up the crashes before she can see what they’ve done.*

*Nobody told her she’d lose in the first round, the last fight was fixed from the start.*

It was a Thursday night when Mackenzie realized that Hell had well and truly frozen over. She checked her watch immediately; it was 8pm. She opened the door to find a young woman, around her age, standing at the door. The woman was fairly short, around 1.5ish meters tall - or at least short compared to Mackenzie who stood a good 20cm taller. She wore a simple black raincoat and skinny jeans. She ran a hand through her short blonde hair and looked at Mackenzie with a mixture of expectation and boredom –although it may just be disdain, Mackenzie was never good at reading people.

The woman stood on the Anson family greeting mat that read ‘Friends welcome. Relatives by appointment.’ (A rather beautiful holder from the last visit that Mack’s extended family had paid to her place.) This young woman, however, was neither to Mackenzie so what the hell was she doing here, sopping wet no less?

“Hi.” Skylar said

“Hi.” Mackenzie responded before silence descended upon them.

“I’m not sure if we met. I’m Skye.”

“Mackenzie.”

After an awkward handshake, Skylar paused as if she was unsure how to proceed. They hadn’t met formally but Mackenzie knew the girl (and her type) well enough: a blonde haired, blue-eyed manikin with perfect skin, perfect make-up, perfect hair and a smile that disappeared from her face the second it arrived. She was the exact kind of daddy’s-little-plastic-princess that had terrorized Mackenzie throughout high school. Whether it was for her pale complexion or her lack of interest in boys, girls like Skylar Clarke were there at every corner to torment her. Mackenzie didn’t even have to know anything about the girl to know who she associated with and to know that she, herself, definitely did not fit within that circle.

The question of why a girl like her was at the door was something Mackenzie didn’t care to know the answer to. In fact the only reason that she didn’t slam the door in the bitch’s face was out of loyalty to the unfortunate and naïve twit that was Skylar’s boyfriend. When it came to women, Keith was terrible judge of character. He fell deep for easy smiles and pretty faces, never bothering to look for a monster beneath the mask. And there was always a monster beneath the mask of the women he liked. Whether it was Kelly or Rebecca or now Skylar Clarke, they all were monsters in short skirts. Though credit where it was due: this was the first monster that had actually come face-to-face with Mackenzie Anson and not run away.

While Mackenzie really would have been perfectly happy to stand there and stare at the girl while she froze her skinny little ass off, Mack had to get her inside before her visiting mother (by appointment) caught wind of the situation. The older woman would probably spend the next hour fussing over the girl while simultaneously berating her daughter for a lack of empathy. If that happened, Mackenzie may actually throw up or something. The mere thought of it sent waves of anger down her spine to the point where she simply said: “Come inside.”

“Thank you. It’s raining cats-and-dogs out here.” Skylar responded, a look of gratitude crossing her face for a three Nanoseconds. That was two nanoseconds longer than Mackenzie would have expected.

“Well lucky you’re coming inside then.” Mackenzie replied, her voice as flat as it could go.

**Mackenzie Anson**

*There’s a place off Ocean Avenue where I used to sit talk with you.*

*We were both 16 and it felt so right: sleeping all day and staying up all night.*

The longest week of Mackenzie Anson’s life began with an unceremonious knock at her bedroom window. At the time she hadn’t regarded it with any degree of significance - she’d thought it a bird or something. That had changed when the intruder managed to get the window open and fumble his way into her room at 04:51am on Monday.

When he landed at the foot of her bed and immediately began reciting the tale of how he managed to crack his glasses and injure his right arm in the 36-hour period since she had last seen him, Keith Buchant was certain to mention two points. Firstly: the woman involved, and there was always a woman involved, was mind-blowingly beautiful with a set of, and she was quoting him directly here, “sparkling blue eyes that [he] could get lost in for days.” Secondly: he hadn’t actually managed to get her number.

Mackenzie’s first instinct was grab her hockey stick and bludgeon whatever was at her window that had just woken her from her slumber. Keith was lucky that she had realized it was him before she had the chance to do anything or he’d have a bashed-in face to go with that arm.

Mackenzie’s second instinct was bludgeon Keith anyway for scaring her half to death. Seriously, who the bleeding-heck breaks into their friend’s house at 5am to tell them about their escapades with some girl?

‘Whatever, Keith, You have a girlfriend. Welcome to the rest of your life! I don’t need to know about it at 5am in the goddamn morning.’ Mack had wanted to scream in his face, except:

1. He didn’t even get her number (which would repulse her if they did actually have casual sex – that level of exploitation was something she thought Keith above, though Harry may be rubbing off on him.)
2. This was Keith Buchant she was talking to. A girl only had to bat her eyelashes at him before he began composing poetry about her which Mackenzie would have to suffer through (seriously, Keith’s prose was horrid).
3. Screaming would wake the neighbors and Mackenzie really didn’t want to deal with a pissed off Mrs. Jacobson before she had, at least, ingested some coffee.

Despite herself, she told him to wait while she made them both something to drink before she would take a look at his wounds. When she regained a degree of functionality, Mackenzie found herself relatively impressed that he’d managed to have a full conversation with a woman other than herself for any extended period of time without tripping over his words, much less spending the 8 hours he claimed to have spent with his blue-eyed doll.

She put one spoon of sugar in her coffee and two in his tea – the way he’d been drinking it since they were teenagers - before heading back to her room, trying to remember why it was so critical that he came over right this instant.

Now, it was not that Keith Buchant 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. It was that it was 5am in the bloody morning and could he not have at least waited two hours for when he knew she would be getting up? So why exactly was it so urgent that he get to her right this instant?

Her question was answered when she returned to find Keith sat cross legged on her floor, trying – but failing - to get his woolen top off using his good arm. Mack set down the beverages before going to assist him.

“Okay, what the hell did you to yourself?” she asked, helping him to pull the damned thing off.

“Parkour?” He replied, having dropped down to a single layer.

“You don’t do parkour.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” she asked, crossing the room to fetch her gloves and the first aid kit.

“Of course. Are you going to check my arm out?”

“Is that even a question?” Mack responded, pulling on a pair of white gloves.

“Well it really starts yesterday evening.” Keith began.

**Chapter 2 - Skylar Clarke**

*All I can think about is you and me driving with a Saves-The-Day record on.*

*We kept singing till voices were gone and I was falling hard, you were barely hanging on.*

*Now I just want to chase forever down with you around.*

Taking in the situation before her, Skylar Clarke decided to focus on the positives. In this case the bright side was that her date had managed to escape being clubbed to death by an angry middle-aged woman. Of course he still was being chased by mall security for invading the women’s rest room but Skye was a glass half-full kind of girl. Her optimism being noted, she wasn’t particularly ecstatic about the situation she’d had to put herself in to ensure Keith’s escape.

“You listen here, girlie. I don’t know what you and your boyfriend were planning but it is DISGUSTING!” the woman said to her.

“Ma’am we didn’t plan anything, he didn’t have his glasses on so he couldn’t see properly, that’s all”

“Don’t lie to me! I know about girls like you.”

It had started out innocently enough. Skylar had used the bathroom and then looked at herself in the mirror. Make-up? Fine. Hair? It’ll do. Teeth? Nothing stuck in them but they looked a little yellow, she should have them whitened. “Okay, I’m fine.” She said to no one in particular before she was alerted to the door opening to her right.

When he walked through the door Skylar Clarke decided that she was in love – well, not quite in love as she knew it now but she was certainly interested, in-like maybe? It was not that he was particularly handsome or tall or exceptional in any of the superficial ways that Skylar had been attracted to then. It was that Keith Buchant had a quiet intellect to him. Occasionally she could see the steam escaping from him his brain when he thought too hard but that was the point: Keith thought. He was a thinker. So different to anyone that Skylar had met, let alone dated, before that she had almost wanted to see him frequently purely for novelty of the experience. At least normally he was.

Right now, unfortunately, she was becoming privy to his less than graceful nature. When it came to matters that existed outside of abstract terms (i.e. the physical world), Keith was preternaturally unlucky and just a little bit goofy – it was usually quite cute but not in this case. Following her initial reaction, Skye decided that she was bemused. Keith wasn’t the lets-slip-into-the-bathroom kind of guy so what was he doing here, without his glasses to boot?

They had scarcely had the opportunity to converse when a scream erupted behind her. A little girl, around 5 years old, came out of a stall with her mother to find Keith standing in the doorway looking like a deer caught in the headlights. Skye watched in terror as Keith’s expression shifted, his mistake realized, before he spun on his heel to exit the room as quickly as he could. As he did so his shirt sleeve caught on the door handle which the mother took as an opportunity to rush forwards and give him a piece of her mind. The words ‘pervert’ and ‘sicko’ were tossed around before the woman took off her shoe and tried to give him what she described as ‘5 of the best’.

“Ma’am, please stop!” she screamed, placing herself between Keith and the mother.

“I WILL NOT! This thing needs to be taught some manners!”

“Ma’am, it’s an honest mistake, he doesn’t have glasses with him. I’m pretty sure that he just mixed up the signs.”

“I DON’T GIVE A DAMN!” she said before attempting to move towards him again.

If there was one attribute of her new P.O.I. that Skylar was grateful to learn, it was that he was deceptively quick. She had moved to shoot him a sympathy glance, but he had already dislodged himself and was in the process of getting the hell out of dodge when, once again, Keith’s bad luck reared its ugly head. Mall security announced themselves three seconds after he left the room and his speed was really tested.

That brought Skylar back to the beginning. In a room with an angry mother-daughter pairing who, for all intents and purposes, wanted her blood now that Keith had escaped.

**Chapter 3 - Mackenzie Anson**

*I guess that this is over now. I guess it’s called a falling out.*

*And every day I’m learning how to make it through this life I’m in.*

When Keith stopped talking to take a sip from his rapidly cooling tea, Mackenzie quickly debated the value in punching him really hard in the shoulder. No, that would result in him spilling tea all over her carpet and she had just vacuumed it this – no, yesterday- afternoon. Mack would wait until he put the drink down.

“So you just left Skylar there? You ran away and left her there?” she asked trying be patient

“She’s a smart girl.” he said in response

“I’m going to break your arm myself.” she blurted out before swatting him on the back of the head. Not quite as venomous as she wanted it be but it got the message across.

“Ouch! If you would just wait, you’ll find that the night was only really beginning at that point.”

“Just give me the cliff notes” she responded with a sigh.

“No. Your turn first.”

“Fine. There’s a bit of swelling but no discoloration, bleeding, deformity or bone protruding from anything so I don’t think it’s broken. An x-ray will be able to tell us more but for now I’m wondering just what the hell you did to yourself.” Mack responded, letting all those Saturdays spent doing first aid shine through however briefly.

“Patience grasshopper”

“I am going to kick your ass then eject you from my room.”

“I love you too.”

“Keith enough. You broke into my house and woke me up to take a look at your arm, I get it. But I am not in the mood to put up with your bullshit! ” she damn dear screamed

“Fine, the cliff notes then.”

“I’m a person too. You don’t get to do this, just waltz into my room and kick me up whenever the hell you feel like it. ”

“Mackenzie, I’m sorry -” he began

“We’re friends but you’re too much sometimes.” Mackenzie felt a pang of regret when she saw his face fall in defeat. She couldn’t shy away from the truth. The problem with Keith was that for all his earnestness, he could inadvertently be a selfish jerk while carrying out the things he wanted to do. Maybe he’d get that, maybe he’d understand that she had had to say it?

Her eyes trained on him, Keith simply sighed and set down his tea before walking towards the window.

“I didn’t mean - ” she had started to say.

“- No, its fine, you’re right. I’m sorry, Mackenzie.” He replied before shooting her a final glace and climbing out of the window. She stood in the middle of the room, watching him go until he had vanished into the darkness.