

# Stay

## A Spectrum of Stars One Shot

I didn't really have all that much work to do, but Thursdays had become hellish at Athlen's house. For weeks I'd sat on the sofa, trying to keep my mind off the fact that he was out with *Tanner and Caid*. I had a pretty good idea of what that meant. We'd barely been back from the *Chicxulub* for a month when he started getting together with them again.

The last Thursday night that I'd come home at my normal time hadn't been good. I was lounging on the couch, my feet in front of me on the cushion, knees up, the Pad resting on them. Athlen had come through the door in all too good of a mood - *I wonder why* - and he plopped down next to me on the couch.

"Whatcha reading?" he asked.

I looked up over the top of my Pad, just for a second and I knew instantly that the look I gave him was cold and 'bitchy'. "A book."

He just looked at me with those green eyes that seemed like they were reading me. "Okay..."

"It doesn't matter, Athlen." I turned and put my feet on the floor and with a click on the side of the Pad, I darkened the screen. My stomach growled.

A laugh escaped Athlen and it was somehow like music and the sound of battle. "Didn't eat?" he asked.

I shook my head, as I rose and started toward the kitchen. "I was waiting for you."

"Oh." He sounded sheepish.

"Right," I said, haughtily. "Shoulda known you'd eat with them." I tried, really I did. I tried not to put venom in 'them.' I'm not sure I succeeded.

"Yeah," he said as he started to rise from the sofa. "We got a few beers and had pizza at that new place in the suburban district on Island A."

"Athlen." Even I could hear how exhausted I sounded. "I don't give a single fuck about what you three did."

He dropped back onto the couch. "Oh."

I continued toward the kitchen. "I'll just reconstitute something. I'll fuck off after and let you do whatever. Good night, Athlen."

After that, I started staying at work late on Thursday nights.

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After a few weeks of late Thursdays nights in the colony management facilities, I decided I couldn't take it anymore. It didn't matter that I couldn't see him coming home late from Tanner and Caid's. I *knew* what he'd been doing and every time I came home, every time I saw his face, my heart broke. For years I'd been able to balance being in love with him with being his best friend, but now that carefully built house of cards was collapsing right in front of me. If I wanted to get over him and if I wanted to still be friends with him, I knew I had to leave Athlen's house.

It was a Tuesday night when it finally happened. We'd been *almost* normal. Tossing jokes back and forth, picking on each other. He listened as I caught him up on the most recent drama between some of my coworkers, laughing at the absurd bits and gasping at the surprising parts. When he said he was thinking about inviting Tanner and Caid over to help him do his whole garden, the whole mood shifted. At least it felt like it had. Athlen must not have noticed because he just kept acting like he hadn't just stuck me with a pin and given me a slow leak.

After a while of pretending I wasn't deflating, I made a big show of yawning. "Right." I knew I sounded off. "I'm off to bed."

"Oh okay."

I got up off the couch and started heading upstairs.

"Hey Fletch. Wanna go out this weekend?" He sounded almost like he was waiting for me to tell him something he was dreading. And maybe he was. Maybe he knew what I was about to do. Maybe he had picked up on the change in my mood.

"Ath, I need to tell you something," I said as I turned on the staircase, looking at him still on the sofa.

Athlen's already pale skin seemed to go ashen. He knew I was about to hurt us both. "What?" His tone was absolutely flat. I've noticed that about Athlen. I noticed it our first year at the Academy. When he's being reprimanded, or he's about to have a fight with someone, his affect often goes totally flat.

I came back down and sat down next to him, hoping the proximity would somehow make it less painful for both of us. "Ath, I'm..." I could feel my throat tightening. I started again. "I'm gonna move out."

He shrugged but otherwise stayed totally flat. "Okay. Why?"

In all my planning about telling him, I'd never gotten that far, I'd never figured out what lie to tell him. I had to come up with something quickly. "I just think it's time to move along. It's time for me to get a place of my own." Sorta true. "Figure out the next stage of my life." *Figure out how to get over you.* "And uh... you need some privacy too."

For the briefest of seconds, a look of anguish seemed to flash across Athlen's face before his features returned to that unmoving affect. Maybe it was a defense mechanism. "Why?" His voice was not flat that time. He sounded small and pained.

I shook my head. I couldn't answer that. Not honestly, and any lie would taste bitter on my tongue. I stood up and started upstairs. I had to get into my room before I broke down crying. As I got to the top of the stairs, I almost convinced myself that I could hear Athlen say 'but I need you.' I didn't turn around. I knew it was my heart and my head playing games with me, imagining what I wanted to hear. I closed my bedroom door, crawled into bed and shattered.

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I was sick to my stomach. Every part of my body hurt, my heart most of all. There he was standing at the bottom of the staircase, between me and the door. His copper locks were reflecting the sunlight coming from the window beside the door, giving him an almost burning halo look. God, Athlen looked gorgeous, and that made it all the more difficult to leave. His eyebrows were pulled close, as if he didn't understand.

I heaved my backpack up and onto my shoulder as I tried desperately to convince myself that I was numb. "I've got a room downtown. I'll come back after I've got the apartment squared away." In all honesty, I'd only called to make a hotel reservation within the last hour.

For days I'd been laboring over if I was really going to do this; if I was really about to leave Athlen. But I knew that if I wanted to stop hurting myself, if I wanted to be able to be his best friend, I couldn't live under the same roof as him.

Once again his features were flat but his tone was absolutely bitter. "So, you're going to live in a hotel room till your apartment's ready?" His eyes narrowed, and it felt like he was actually about to argue with me. "When you've already got a room here?"

He had no idea what hell I was in, and he had no way to know that this, his arguing, was just hurting me worse. "Ath, can we not do this?" I said.

His features flashed from flat, to confusion, to hurt, to anger, all in the span of a second. "No." he said, true anger in his voice. A resolve that told me he wasn't going to let this go. "I think I deserve an explanation."

I swallowed hard, took a deep breath and steeled myself, pretending I was ready for this. I would wear 'readiness' as a mask, like I'd done for the first year of my naval career. "Fine." As I

spoke, the words sounded as bitter as they tasted. "You wanna know why I can't stay here anymore, Athlen? Why I can't stay *with you*?" I spat at him. I don't know why I needed to see if he'd react to that. Maybe I was looking for something, some sign.

I got it. He flinched and his features morphed to agony and he nodded, like this was physically hurting him... Like it was me.

It didn't matter. He said he deserved an explanation, and he was right. Regardless of how I felt about him, we'd been best friends. As much as I could hope, we were still best friends. And my best friend *did* deserve an explanation, as much as it hurt me to put it out there. "Because I can't keep watching you go out with all these guys. I just... Athlen. To me, you're mine." I didn't mean to say that part. I didn't want to tell him that, but it slipped out and I was halfway through the next sentence before I knew I'd called him 'mine.' "You're just my... You're who I'm supposed to be with. But you don't feel the same. And I can't just sit here and-"

"Fletch," he interrupted.

"-Let me finish." If I let him stop me, I was going to break down before I finished. "I know you don't feel the same, Ath. But I can't believe you haven't figured out how I feel about you. That I've been in love with you for years. Since the Academy. But you don't feel the same, and I can't just keep bleeding here. I can't live with you *and* without you. I *have* to go." I was sick to my stomach. I felt like I was going to throw up right there.

I reached for the door because I knew if I looked at him any longer, I *would* puke.

"Please don't," he begged as I turned the knob and pulled the door open. He was pleading and I for an instant let it stop me, and I turned to look at him again.

"I'll always love you, Ath. And we'll always be best friends, but I can't live with you anymore if I can't be with you, Athlen." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew there was no getting over him. We'd always be friends, yes, but I'd never not be in love with Athlen Holt and I was going to spend the rest of my life in love with my best friend who didn't love me back, not the way I wanted him to. I turned away again, resolved. I had to get out of there. I took a step. My next step would carry me over the threshold.

Athlen's long fingers wrapped around my wrist and he tugged, stopping me. "Stay." He was begging. "Please."

I wanted to believe, so badly, that that meant something. "I can't. You-" I took a deep breath to push the tears back. "I can't do this anymore."

He pulled my arm again, and this time I turned around. Tears were streaming down his ruddy cheeks and he was breathing heavily, like he was fighting a fit. "Stay," he said again and I saw it.

There was something there in Athlen's eyes that wasn't the rising of a fit. It was the rising of a confession.

"Athlen? You?"

He pulled again and this time, I didn't give any resistance. "Stay," he said with a strength that broke any resolve I had. His tug drew us nearer and nearer until our lips collided and it was like years of dreams exploded into reality and my eyes slipped closed.

His lips were soft, softer than I'd imagined in my countless dreams. And he took the lead with his kiss. He ran his tongue over my bottom lip and without a thought, as if on autopilot, my mouth slackened. He took instant advantage, and his tongue entered slowly and gently and explosions went off behind my closed eyelids. I let him continue to lead the way through our kiss and I realized that my body would always follow where Athlen led.

Far too soon, Athlen pulled back and I realized the last breath I'd taken was before I'd said his name. My lungs burned with the sudden inrush of air and he led me to the sofa.

When he sat down, I followed.

We both turned slightly toward each other, our feet still on the floor.

His cheeks were even redder, and suddenly the unsure young man who was there more often than not returned. "Please?" he said. "Stay with me, Fletcher." He was begging again, like he hadn't just stolen away any chance I had of leaving.

I nodded, before I found my breath again. "You're not playing with me, are you? You didn't just kiss me to convince me to stay?"

He shook his head violently.

"I'm serious, Ath. It'll kill me if you did."

Tears were back in both of our eyes. "Stay," he said. "I need you. Not just my best friend. I need you, Fletch. I need you to be here with me. *With me.*"

I nodded again.

A shy smile appeared on Athlen's face and he seemed to breathe out a sigh of relief. "I think, maybe, I've loved you for a long time," he confessed. "I don't know when. I realized it though, as I left for the *Chicxulub.*"

That had been nearly a year before. "The *Chicxulub?*"

He laughed. "... I didn't know what to do about it, Fletch. And then you appeared and I wasn't ready and I had just found out about Applecore and... Fuck Fletcher. I don't care anymore. Just." He stopped and took a long deep breath. "Fletcher, I love you. I want you. I didn't know

how to tell you. I had no clue you felt the same. When you said you feel like I'm yours... every part of me screamed 'I am, Fletch. I'm yours,' and I couldn't let you go."

I laughed, then he laughed, a little self consciously.

"Maybe I should uh... unpack my bag."

He laughed again and I started back up the stairs to my room. *My room*. It was my room. This was my home. *Athlen* was my home.

Once I was alone in my room again. My mind started racing. What did any of this mean? Okay, we both loved each other. We were both *in love* with each other. But that didn't tell either of us anything about who we were to each other.

And in love with me or not, Athlen had still been hooking up with Tanner and Caid for the last four months. Tierney and I had hooked up twice. And it had felt horrible. Not just because she was one of my best friends. And not because she was a woman. But I'd felt like I'd betrayed myself and my heart, because I'd already known I was in love with Athlen.

But he said he figured it out a year ago, when he left for the Chicxulub. He still had been hooking up with them. What did that mean? I decided I didn't want to think about it. I would only make myself sick. We'd talk about it eventually. I would have to.

"Knock knock." He sounded shy and an almost scared smile was on his lips. Those beautiful lips had been on mine just minutes before.

"I have *never* knocked on your door," I said. The laugh that came out of me was genuine and it somehow felt like every good interaction we'd had for the last seven years. With something else too, a good something else.

"And you walked in on something you regretted... more than once."

His cheeks blossomed bright red remembering.

"I only regretted it the one time. The other times were... nice."

He nodded knowingly. "When Carson and Ryder were both..." He trailed off as it conjured the image in my head. "That's what you regretted."

"Simultaneously the hottest and most disgusting thing I've ever seen." I was embarrassed admitting that and I wished instantly I could take it back.

A wry smile crossed his face. "So," he cleared his throat and he shifted awkwardly, still standing in the door frame.

"Come in, would you? You're making me nervous, hovering there."

He nodded and took a step into the room. He put his back against the closet door and looked like he was *trying* to look comfortable. He wasn't doing a very good job. "Um... I was thinking."

"A dangerous thing," I teased.

He chuckled as he flipped me off. "I was thinking," he started again. "I um... I know this is all new and everything, but it's also kinda... not."

I nodded. He was right, this admission of romantic love was new, but we've known each other and known we loved each other, in some way, for years. It was new but it was old too.

"I just... do we need a like, 'free trial' period?" he asked jokingly. "Or do we know each other well enough and just dive in?"

I didn't know what to say. What would he prefer? I knew most things about Athlen, but this was a whole new part of him I was seeing - a loving romantic side I'd only dreamed of. I knew what I wanted. I didn't need a trial period. I wanted all of him now.

"Just so you know," he said. "I haven't been with Caid or Tanner - or anyone else - since I left for reactivation."

I blinked, and raised an eyebrow. "You've been with them every Thursday for months."

"They're my friends, Fletcher. I don't need to have sex with them. I love them, just... Not like that. We had our fun but when it was over, that was that. Part of me wanted to, but -"

"Two guesses which part," I said jokingly.

Athlen's dirty look was funny and playful. "I was fine with just friendship with them. And they were too."

I nodded, believing him. "Okay."

"Anyway," he continued. "I don't think... Can we just, not um..." he sighed.

If this had been anyone else in the world, I'd have thought he was backtracking, trying to back out of whatever we were starting. But I knew him. And I'd always know him. "Want me to ask the question?" I asked, figuring him answering it would be easier.

He nodded. It was easier for both of us, somehow, for the ball to be in my court. "Athlen, can we be together, in a relationship? Like boyfriends?"

"Yeah," he said, his smile growing and his cheeks burning. "Yes, please."

He surged forward, toward me. But we didn't kiss. We wrapped each other in our arms and just stayed there, for a long moment.

“So,” he said again, pulling back. “I um... I know this is all good and stuff but, I think maybe it’s a good idea if you stay in here and I stay in my bedroom. Most nights anyway.”

I nodded. He was right. Yeah, we lived together, but somehow, moving into his room - because his was bigger and had an attached bathroom - felt like a step beyond ‘boyfriends.’ And fuck I wanted that but rushing it felt like it’d ruin us both. “Good idea.” My brain played everything he just said back. “Most nights?”

He blushed again. “Well, yeah. I like sleeping with you.” He sighed at his words. “Yeah uh... We’ve shared a bed more than a few times. I like it. But I think we should limit it for a while.”

“Right,” I said. “Boundaries are good.”

“Boundaries are good,” he repeated. “But this isn’t a boundary for me,” he said, advancing again on me.

We fell back onto the bed, giggling as we wrestled around. When we both stopped thrashing and laughing, he placed the sweetest of kisses on my lips and when he pulled back he sighed like it was something he’d been waiting on for decades. I realized that maybe he was just as in love with me as I was.

Somehow, our relationship both stayed the same, we were still each other’s best friends, and it had changed drastically. We were each other’s everything. And it was heavenly.

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Three months had gone by and we were sitting down to dinner. Tanner and Caid would be coming over in the next few hours.

I had tried really hard to stop hating them, and the thing about it was, once I had gotten past all that weird sexual stuff the three of them had in the past, they were actually really great guys. Tanner was a doctor, who Athlen and I both started seeing as our physician, and Caid was a muscular therapist, with dreams of starting a design firm. Quite a career shift, but then I was a weapons specialist who was working for the Von Braun Colony Trust designing colony stability controls for the ‘Next Generation of Orbital Space Colonies’. So, there was that.

Athlen had been giving me weird looks all day. Finally he asked me. “You sure you’re okay with them coming over again? Twice in one week?”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you trying to start a foursome?” I asked, mostly joking.

“Nope,” he said, popping the ‘p’. “I’m good.”

The thing was, I knew that, but hearing Athlen say it felt like a ray of warm sunshine across your back when you’re cold. I smiled at him. It made me feel especially good, because we hadn’t



really taken our own relationship that far yet. We'd done plenty but we'd also been taking it pretty slowly.

Athlen smiled back at me as I stood up to clear the table.

The knock at the door announced his friends. "I got it," I said as he washed up.

Caid was standing there, a grin on his face. His t-shirt was a size too small and it stretched across his chest and showed off his muscles nicely. I couldn't deny that he was attractive in that jock sort of way, whereas Tanner was built more similar to me and Athlen. "Hey Fletcher!" There was an excitable quality to Caid, that Athlen had always said felt familiar.

Tanner caught up to his partner as he rushed up the small curving sidewalk.

"Boys," I greeted, stepping aside. "Athlen's in the kitchen doing the washing up."

Tanner nodded and Caid seemed to rush past. Tanner stayed with me. "How are you doing, Fletcher?" He often tried to connect with me.

"I'm alright." I gave a small smile. "Work's been hectic."

Tanner laughed. "I know that feeling. School's starting back up so moms across the colony are dragging their snotty animals in for check ups and shots."

We both laughed as I led him toward the kitchen.

Caid and Athlen laughed about something Tanner and I had missed.

"Okay," Caid started, cracking his knuckles. "Are you boys ready to get dirty?" he said wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Caid." Tanner's tone was scolding.

Caid rolled his eyes. "I've got wood, let's get started." He rushed through the back door and into the yard.

"He means he's got trellises and wood edging for the flower beds." Tanner sighed.

We spent the next few hours moving soil and wood and what seemed like wooden nets for ivy to grow on.

It had been dark for a few hours, and Caid had set up lights that flooded our work area in light. I was digging out flower beds, deep for some kind of large shrub, when I felt a deep, sharp pain in my back.

When I saw everyone looking at me, concerned, I realized I'd let my moan out.

"You okay, Fletch?" Athlen asked as he put the edging down on the ground and came over to me.

"Pulled something," I said, straightening my back. "I'll take it easy for a bit."

Tanner and Caid were both eyeing me with skepticism. I watched as Tanner shifted from friend to physician.

"I'm good. You keep going and I'll join you guys in a bit." As I walked along the now winding path through the backyard, headed for the back door, I could feel each movement as it pulled against the sore muscles.

Once I was in the kitchen, I rinsed my filthy hands in the sink and opened the cabinet for a painkiller.

I tossed them back and leaned against the counter, waiting for them to kick in.

"Still hurting?" Tanner's eyes were narrow.

Nodding, I told him I was just waiting for the pain meds to work. "I'm fine."

"I'm the doctor," he said. "I want you to lie down."

"I'm fine," I protested.

The creaking of the back door told me that Athlen and Caid had come to join us.

"Lie down," Tanner repeated. "I wanna take a look."

After arguing for a few minutes, I was on my stomach, shirt off, on my bed as Tanner poked and prodded me with his fingers. His *cold* fingers. Caid and Athlen were standing off to the side, watching.

"Definitely pulled something," Tanner announced.

I rolled my eyes. "I told you that."

"Yeah, but your opinion on it wouldn't have been a professional opinion," Tanner joked.

We all laughed and it hurt.

Tanner made a face at Caid before he suggested Caid massage my back.

"Nope." That felt way too much like they were trying to advance sexually on me. "I'm fine."

That was the moment that Athlen crouched down next to me. "You're not very good at lying about this." He ran his hand through his ginger hair. "Caid knows what he's doing. It's kinda his job. It will help."

I made face ready to protest.

“You two talk,” Tanner said, pulling Caid out of the room. “We’ll step out a sec.”

Once they closed the door behind them, I spoke up. “I don’t need Caid’s hands all over me. One minute he’s kneading out a pulled muscle, the next his hand is squeezing my ass and I’m filled with anger and regret.”

Athlen actually snorted. “You know, it’s entirely possible that our friends just want to help your back feel better without having sex with you.”

I looked at him.

“He’s good at it, Fletch.”

“You’re the one with first hand experience.”

“Yes, I am,” he said, not sounding half as bitter as he had a right to. “And I can tell you, he just wants to help. He’s not going to try anything.”

“You’re staying in here.”

Athlen rolled his eyes again. “You’re right about that part.” He kissed me, and not in a delicate, patronizing way, but the kind of kiss that made me wish my back didn’t hurt so we could kick the boys out and go to his room.

“Fine,” I said when he pulled back. “He can rub my back.”

Every massage I’d ever had had been soothing, meant to relax me. This was not like my other massages. Apparently, that’s the difference between a masseuse and a muscular therapist.

When I’d cursed at Caid, he’d only said, “healing is hard work. Do you wanna feel better or are you gonna whine.”

“Can’t I do both?” I said petulantly as he dug in again. Sending another jolt through my already sore muscles.

Athlen and Tanner shared a humorous laugh. “Is he always a baby?”

Before Ath could reply, I cut him off. “Hey!”

Athlen laughed at me. “He’s not a baby. He’s just embarrassed.”

“I’m right here,” I said before I shouted as Caid’s big hands dug in again.

After a few more minutes, he proclaimed there wasn’t much else he could do, but now that my muscles were worked up a bit, maybe Tanner could give me something.

Tanner nodded and headed to the car as Caid gave me very clear directions. "Water. Now. We'll get back to this once Tan's given you a shot."

When they finally left my room, I had to admit, I felt better. But I was absolutely exhausted.

After a shower, I came back downstairs and joined them. We had a single drink and they left. I started up the stairs.

"Sleep in mine?" Athlen asked. "I'd like to make sure you're okay."

I nodded and went into his room.

A moment later, Athlen joined me and curled up behind me. He kissed my neck and whispered that he loved me, and I drifted off to sleep. This whole being boyfriends had been working out nicely. I'd kept my best friend. I was getting every ounce of love he had, I was happy. And reluctantly, I admit, I'd gotten two good friends. Despite the slight soreness in my back, I felt fuzzy and warm as I drifted to sleep.

When I woke up, Athlen was still asleep and through the window I could see the tiniest bit of light starting to grow. I scooted to the end of the bed, to head back to my own room.

Athlen's arms around my waist tightened and he grumbled.

"I'm just going to get a shower and get started."

His arms tightened more and he mumbled something.

"What?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Stay," he said, still asleep. I nodded and curled up back in the bed, remembering the day I tried to leave. *Stay.*