

Chapter 1: I Used to be a Good Boy

by DomLuka

A/N: Thanks to Jim for editing!

"Happy birthday to you..."

It was way too early for this.

"Happy birthday to you..."

It had to be too early. I felt like I'd just gone to bed. The way I saw it, I needed those extra twenty minutes of sleep that I was about to miss before I actually got up.

"Happy birthday dear Nelson..."

But it wasn't every morning that I woke up to three off-key voices singing in my bedroom. Only every July fifteenth. The least I could do was open my eyes. I did so just as three smiling faces finished off the song.

"Happy birthday to you!"

And to top it all off, the one woman in the group leaned over me with a candle-lit chocolate cupcake with green icing. Her long, carmine hair, which usually cascaded all the way down her back fell forward and brushed my bed as I smiled up at her warm smile and dark eyes.

"Make a wish," she instructed.

"Mom," I groaned.

"No arguments," she insisted, and my brother and my dad laughed behind her as I lifted myself onto my elbows in my twin-sized bed and blew out the candle.

"Thanks," I told her as she leaned down, kissing my forehead as I placed a loose arm around her to give her a hug.

"Happy birthday," she whispered to me before she moved back so the tall man with a thinning head of dark hair, a beer belly and box-shaped glasses could move in. I commonly referred to him as Dad, even if I'd only known him since I was six.

"How does it feel to be seventeen?" he asked me as he wrapped me in a huge bear hug and I was forced to sit up entirely.

"Pretty much the same as it felt yesterday," I decided, and he gave me a hearty pat on the back before moving aside for my brother, who was a year older than me, but almost a foot shorter at five two. He didn't have to do much to lean down and hug me.

"Happy birthday, freak," he remarked.

He was one to talk. Currently, his shoulder-length hair was dyed an interesting pink color, which matched two of his three eyebrow piercings, and the one through his nose looked akin to a bull ring.

"Thanks, Chad," I replied, and as he moved back I looked at the three of them, staring at me expectantly. I hoped they didn't expect a speech. It was way too early for one of those. "Can you guys do me a favor?" I asked.

"Sure," my mother said.

"Can you get out of my room?" I asked, pulling my covers further up my bare chest. "I'm naked under here."

That was met with a mixture of groans and snickering, but my mom left the cupcake and announced breakfast would be ready soon, and the three of them left together, leaving me to close my eyes for five more minutes before my alarm went off, and I forced myself out of bed. No shower. My family had a system. My parents took theirs in the morning and I got mine in the evenings. It didn't matter when Chad took his because he didn't live with us.

He just showed up for two meals a day. It kept him fed and my mom happy. My brother had just recently moved into an apartment with his longtime best friend, Greg Hugh. He'd decided that when he started taking classes at Heywell Community College next month he didn't want to be living with his parents; and meanwhile, he was working at the only tattoo and piercing shop in town, Dane's House, named after the owner who happened to live in an apartment above the shop. Chad still made time to see us, though, just like he still made time to volunteer every Saturday to read to disabled children at the Heywell City Library, like he had every weekend since he was sixteen; and to drive across town twice a day to walk Blinky, the thirteen-year-old poodle who belonged to Mr. Helton, Chad's first-grade teacher, who'd broken his hip last year and landed himself in a wheel chair. Outwardly, my brother didn't look like it, but he was known as "that nice Larmont boy" around most of the community. That made me "that nice Larmont boy's little brother."

I never really minded, though, as long as no one expected me to fill his shoes. I'd been in his shadow for as long as I could remember. I often wondered if that would be the case when I started my Junior year of high school in three weeks, now that my brother and most of his friends had graduated.

I pulled on my best pair of blue faded jeans over the same forest-green swim trunks that I'd been wearing all summer, and then an equally worn-out black t-shirt. But, before any of this I'd coated my entire body in the best waterproof sunscreen I could find. Like my mom, I was fair-skinned. Early on I'd learned that it was pointless to attempt a tan over the summers. My skin didn't tan; it would freckle, or blister, instead. This was the first summer since I'd turned fourteen that I'd managed to get through without acquiring either. I was very proud of that.

Next, I made my white-comforter-covered bed, and straightened up my room enough to be able to walk in it. I wasn't exactly messy. You wouldn't find layers of dust on my oval-shaped windowpane; or on my blue bookshelf, which matched the rug on the furry white carpet. But, I did manage to make a lot of clutter. Mostly, it was laptop accessories, markers, paper, pens, some colored pencils every now and then; and when I was in the mood for it, like I

'd been the night before, paint. Sketching was like a hobby for me. I had stacks and stacks of homemade comic books dating back to when I was ten, mostly featuring my friends as silly superheroes in even sillier costumes and predicaments. I didn't read comic books, but creating them proved to be an entertaining pastime. Artistically I wasn't that bad, so I used it. But as far as passions went, I liked to write the most. My shelves were full of binders containing stories, mostly of the fantasy genre, and my computer had even more filed away. I loved writing. Only, unlike my comic books, I never actually finished anything I started to write. I also refused to let anyone, including my family, read anything that I wrote. As far as I was concerned, there was a huge difference between liking to write stories and actually being good at it. But at least my parents and my brother were respectful of this. In my family, we didn't hide things from each other as much as we were respectful of privacy. My mom had brought us up that way, and as a result, neither my brother nor I had ever really found it necessary to keep secrets from her, or lock our doors because we were afraid she'd snoop. Kenny Larmont, my dad, was pretty much the same way. He had fit right in with our family, ever since the day that my mom married him eleven years ago; and she, my brother, and I took his last name and moved into his house, inherited from his grandmother, just like the three bakeries he owned were. As I grabbed the duffle bag I'd left under my bed and opened my door, I noticed that currently the house smelled like a bakery. Probably from the cupcakes. That reminded me to grab the one my mom had left me. It was gone in two bites, and as always, so sweet that I could hardly taste the chocolate.

When I left my room, I wasn't met with a hallway like most people. I was met with cement stairs leading up a narrow passage that could be downright creepy at night. My bedroom, which was decent in size but more long than wide, had once been used as storage. But when we moved into my dad's house, he'd let us choose our own rooms, and me and my friends had thought the room would make a great clubhouse because back then it seemed like a secret room to us, the way that the stairs wound up to the main level of the house. So, my dad had painted the walls, made sure the heater worked, put in new carpet and did everything he could to turn it into a bedroom that had lasted since I was six years old.

I stopped in the room that my mom commonly referred to as the family room. I referred to it as Mom's room, because it was all her stuff in it. I put down the duffle bag for a moment when I saw a large grey rat making its way across the beige carpeting, and smiled when it made no objection when I picked it up. Just like the piano, the various plants and fairy-figurine knickknacks, the large cage containing an African Grey parrot and another with two white rabbits--the rat belonged to my mother. She was a piano teacher wh

o didn't seem to think normal pets, like a dog or cat, were for her. The rat got out all the time, but generally, he didn't get far, and I was easily able to return him to his own little home before I grabbed my bag and headed down the hall to the kitchen, which happened to be everyone's favorite room in the house. It was also the largest room in the house, round in shape with tall windows looking out towards a green field that, according to my dad, had at one time been filled with cattle when his grandmother was living. Now, there were a few apple trees that had actually produced a few fist-sized red apples this year, and a white goat with a gentle temperament and a healthy appetite for--apples. The goat was also my mother's.

Along with cupcakes, this morning my mom had made a rather large breakfast that seemed to cover the long table that she only brought out for company. And, it seemed, we already had company. Around the table with my brother, as my parents set out the rest of the food, were three faces that I was accustomed to seeing at my house, or anywhere else I went for that matter. I'd been expecting my friends to be there. They were always there on my birthday. We'd be out celebrating all day, too, if Caleb Spangler had anything to say about it. The tall blond with wavy hair; a cleft chin; an interesting dream complex that he'd only share with his closest friends; and one of the most unpredictable temperaments in all of Heywell, was my best friend. Ever since third grade, when he told me that I was going to be his best friend, actually. Caleb had always been like that. He'd say something, and then he made it happen. That's why I didn't even bother to question it when he'd called the night before to tell me I needed to wear a swimsuit under my jeans and bring an extra pair of clothes today. I always had fun with Caleb, no matter what we were doing. Only, having fun with Caleb could occasionally result in trouble. He didn't always think things through before he did them. But that was okay, because Haily Geld and Joe Douglas were always around to keep him in line.

I'd known Haily for almost as long as I'd known Caleb. She was the biggest tomboy I knew, but even her boyish clothes and backwards hats couldn't hide the fact that she was a girl. She was hardly five-feet tall, slim, but all curves, and her long brunette hair was always pulled back into a neat braid. She also had a huge crush on me. I'd noticed last year, after Caleb pointed it out to me, but since then, I'd adamantly ignored the fact. It was better that way. No way was I going to confront her about it and risk our friendship. Besides, just because I knew about it didn't mean that I was interested. Haily was one of the prettiest girls I knew, and the nicest. But, still a girl. I wasn't interested in girls. Whatsoever.

I was interested in Joe Douglas, though. He was the hot friend. Every group has one. Joe was ours. He was disgustingly attractive. Dark hair. Slim build. A really appealing smile. And, I'd always liked his eyes. He had these rea

lly great, dark eyes. He was also Haily's cousin. He'd started hanging out with us just two years ago, and I'd had a huge crush on him ever since. It was too bad he was completely straight. And, really too bad that his personality didn't match his looks at all. To put it bluntly, Joe was a prick, and I'd had better conversations with toiletries. But, despite having an undesirable personality for ninety percent of the time when he was conscious, he was still one of us. He'd find flaws in everyone he encountered, but I'd never heard him say a bad thing about one of his friends; unless it was to our faces, and he was joking--he'd better be joking. And, that was at least something. All of my friends scored bonus points because they treated my family like their family. Haily was like everyone's little sister, including Chad's. After I got 'Happy birthdays' and hugs from everyone Haily spent the next half hour trying to talk Chad into piercing her belly button--but he refused, unless she could come up with her parents permission; and Joe spent his time convincing my parents that we weren't going to get into any trouble today because we were responsible, young adults and stand-up citizens; and at the other end of the table Caleb was promising that today I'd get so shitfaced that by the time the actual party started I wouldn't know my own name anymore. "As long as it's not like the last time," I informed him.

He widened his chestnut-colored eyes at me. "But the last time was fucking great! You know I hooked you up," he added with a smile. I rolled my eyes at him. The last time, was at one of Caleb's parties. He'd talked me into a drinking game and the next morning I'd woken up so sick that I could hardly move for two days; but that wasn't half as bad as the fact that I'd woken up in Caleb's guest bedroom with Teresa Mildrum next to me. She was one of Caleb's on-again-off-again girlfriends. Thank god she had no hard feelings when I told her that I really wasn't interested in anything more than what had already happened; but I was a little miffed to discover she'd just been doing Caleb a favor. In this case, that would be taking my virginity, which no one really knew I still had, because like most guys, I'd make small embellishments to the truth. From what I remembered, the event hadn't been a complete disaster, but I wasn't exactly interested in repeating it. Especially the part where Haily walked in on Teresa and me as we were getting dressed and referred to me as a slut for the next month.

"We'll party," I promised Caleb. "But I'm not looking to hook up, okay?"

"Dude, everyone's looking to hook up," Caleb responded, looking exasperated with me. This was nothing new. Around the time we turned fifteen and Caleb lost his own virginity, he had decided that I didn't have enough sex. Which was true if you asked me. I just never felt like explaining to Caleb that I didn't have enough sex because I only knew of one gay guy in all of Heywell, and he was the forty-year-old flamer who owned the bookstore.

"Whatever. Where are we going today?" I asked Caleb. "Hangman?"

"Of course, Hangman," he responded, shoveling a large helping of strawberry-covered pancakes into his mouth in the process. "I've got a few surprises for you later, too."

"Cool." I swallowed down the rest of my orange juice, deciding not to ask what those surprises were. Caleb rarely disappointed, so long as his surprises didn't include throwing random girls in my direction. And Hangman, was Hangman Cove, a place at Haywell's lake. It was a spot mostly secluded from the main roads, and the perfect place for a bunch of teenagers to generally hang out and have a good time. Most of the older folk around town liked to stay on the other side of the water for this reason, but several vendors knew where to find people who had the munchies, and Hangman was popular enough to stay busy. I liked busy, and crowded, and basically anywhere I could socialize, so it was one of my favorite places to be. Caleb knew this, and I'd suspected that we'd be going as soon as he told me to dress for swimming.

I was on my way out the door of our two-story--not including my room--white-brick house when Chad caught me at the door and pulled me aside.

"Got you an early birthday present," he announced, and I became suspicious when he waited for my friends to move out of sight with my dad, who wanted to look at Caleb's '89 black, hard-top jeep because my best friend was thinking about selling it.

I watched as Chad reached into the red-leather jacket that he'd taken to wearing lately, and I rolled my eyes as he presented me with a magazine, which happened to have an overly muscled, shirtless construction worker on the cover. "Studs in Love?" I read, trying really hard not to giggle.

"Yeah," Chad responded proudly. "Has some short stories in there, and Leanna says lots of man-pussy. I didn't look."

"Thanks," I responded, laughing. "You showed this to Leanna?"

"Who do you think bought it for me?"

Leanna was Chad's girlfriend, a dance instructor. Sometimes Chad accused me of liking Leanna more than I liked him. Usually I told him that he was right. They'd been dating for two years now, and my family was always telling Chad that if he ever broke up with her he'd have to find a new family, because we were hers. She was the only person other than my family who knew I was gay.

"What are you guys doing?" my mom asked, suddenly appearing next to us, and snatching the magazine out of my hands before I could hide it from her. Chad and I both turned an interesting shade of red as my mother stared at my birthday present in stunned silence before she flashed us a sidelong look that had, Oh you boys written all over it. "Chad!"

"What?" my brother replied innocently.

My mom snorted, and then stood on her toes to kiss my cheek and smooth d

own my short blond hair, which I hadn't spent much time combing this morning.

"You'd better get going," she told me. "I'll put this in your room."

"Mom..." I started.

"Where your friends won't run into it," she added, and I smiled at her. "Don't forget tomorrow. Six o'clock."

"We'll be back way before then."

"You'd better be," she insisted, and I promised again before I was out the door. Tomorrow would be Saturday, and at six o'clock we'd be having a barbeque--my family's way of celebrating my birthday. I'd made a habit of spending the actual day with my friends every summer since I was twelve, with no objection from my parents. They just cared that I made it home in one piece by the time my relatives and neighbors showed up to celebrate, and while Caleb liked to have a good time, Haily and Joe always made sure that everyone was sober when they needed to be. And I decided that I'd probably need both of them when the first thing Caleb did when we started driving away from the house was pass me a can of beer from under his seat, where I was riding shotgun.

"Happy Birthday, Nels."

I regarded him suspiciously while opening the can. "It's nine o'clock in the morning. Have you been drinking?"

"No," Joe and Haily both informed me.

I shrugged, and took a drink. I guessed that it would be Joe doing all of the driving later, because Haily was suddenly between the two front seats, asking me to pass her another beer. It was relatively safe in my neighborhood for a bunch of underagers to be driving around with alcohol. Heywell wasn't very big, and the sheriff's department usually stuck to the main roads. And, I did have a neighborhood. Paved roads, sidewalks and everything. There was a field behind our house because we lived on the hill, but most of the ranches and farms had disappeared years ago when the housing developments went up and came right to our front door--mostly ranch style houses and a few condos. My dad had donated a large portion of his grandmother's land to the city to build a public park on, and in return, we kept our long, gated driveway and no one tried to build on the rest of the land. And there were developers everywhere. Heywell was a growing community, and currently, a lakeside view was the popular theme. But, only north of the lake. The rest was public property, and as far as my friends and I were concerned, all ours. I'd lived in Heywell my whole life. Never been anywhere else, actually. But that wasn't a huge deal to me, since as it was, it had taken me the last seventeen years to explore all of Heywell and get to know the people in it. And I still didn't know everything, or everyone. It would probably be a lifelong task that I wouldn't object to, as long as the view while driving down

n the hill never changed. In the summer, we never saw many clouds; the sky was blue and the rain usually came overnight; and from there we could see part of the lake, surrounded by mostly oak or whatever other species of trees kindergarten classes went to plant every year when school started. To the east were the older buildings, the court house, the sheriff's department, the only church that had an actual bell, and all of the old shops that had been there since the town had existed. The area, like many others, was surrounded by more housing developments; and to the west, were mostly shopping centers and other businesses that according to my dad, boosted our economy because outlet prices brought in customers from neighboring towns, and the campground near the north side of the lake with the big houses and private school brought in tourists. But, I'd never thought that we got many of those. I was probably wrong. I'm sure we did and I just didn't notice because my world revolved around people who tended to stay close to home. Like my friends. I laughed at Caleb when he slowed down to give a black, stray dog a dirty look as he turned onto Chariot, the main road that would take us straight to the lake. I never quite knew why Caleb did some of the things he did, but usually he had a reason for it. When he actually growled at the dog, I looked towards the back seat, where Haily was laughing, and Joe was rolling his eyes.

"He had another dream, didn't he?" I asked.

Haily grinned at me and then took it upon herself to reach forward and tap Caleb on the back of the head. "Tell him your dream," she said, and Caleb glanced at me.

"I was a dog. Big one," he explained.

"That's it?" I was unimpressed. Caleb had strange dreams all the time. They were a constant source of entertainment for us.

"Julie kept kicking me, over, and over, and over..." he continued. Julie was Caleb's twenty-three-year-old sister who recently moved back home because her trucker husband was always on the road, and she was pregnant and miserable. A lot of Caleb's dreams had been about her lately, because when Julie wasn't happy, which was generally all the time, she'd take it out on Caleb.

"Oooh, poor baby," Haily crooned, leaning forward to scratch behind Caleb's ears. He glared at her through the rearview mirror and smacked her hand away. She giggled.

"Just get to the good part," Joe insisted.

"What good part?" Caleb responded. "It was a nightmare."

"Just say it!" Haily insisted, and as I polished off my drink and slid the can under the seat, Caleb looked at me sidelong, his full, top lip curling up in disgust.

"I was pregnant," he explained. "It was awful."

"You dreamed you were a bitch, getting kicked by your sister?" I responded, and laughed when he glared at me.

"It's not funny," he insisted, as Joe and Haily started laughing. "My nipples still hurt from it!" Caleb rubbed at his chest, as if to make the fact more obvious.

"Your nipples?" Joe repeated.

"Caleb, you know you're not really, pregnant, right?" Haily asked, still laughing.

Caleb grunted. "You all have permission to shut up now. Also, if you repeat any of this, I know where to bury bodies." No one doubted him, but we laughed, anyway.

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There were no actual roads leading to Hangman Cove. Just the trails that people made walking to and from it. Most people found parking in the actual lot where everyone visiting the lake parked. Five dollars per vehicle would get you an all-day pass. We never did that. Like a few others, we knew about the old bike trail that always gave us enough room to park, since everyone who had a bike knew about the new and improved bike trail that pedestrians weren't allowed to walk on. That left us a short walk uphill, over the bridge that still covered an old irrigation ditch, and a careful walk through natural terrain famous for its poison oak before our feet hit white sand and the smell of food hit our nostrils. From there, we could see the lake, and the many people frequenting the area under the oak tree where a scarecrow was hanging by a rope from one of the branches. That's how Hangman Cove got its name. Back when my mom was first starting high school and Heywell was a farmer's town, it was rumored that a Freshman had stolen it from Francis Covlier, a trouble-making drunk farmer who liked to shoot at anything that came onto his property. It was an ugly scarecrow that the local youth had liked to call haunted. Except for the guy who stole it, I guess. People said that the kid's dog had wandered onto Covlier's property and never came back, but shots were heard. The scarecrow was stolen for retribution purposes. This rumor had never been proved true, but as easy as it would have been, the scarecrow was never taken down and not even the most juvenile of my peers would be disrespectful enough to attempt it. Although, it had been a longstanding tradition for guys who got laid at Hangman cove to hang their girlfriend's bras up there next to the scarecrow. It was also one of Caleb's favorite hobbies to point at some of those bras and say "Hey, I know that one!" It was Friday, and summer, and vendors were out in full force; but despite the traffic that the area got, Hangman Cove was still a great spot, and it was always clean. At least people, locals and visitors alike, knew what trash cans were for. I helped Haily pick a spot in the sun for our towels while Caleb and Joe went to get a second load from the jeep. Our first trip had cons

isted of my umbrella and the cooler. It was my birthday, so Haily said I didn't have to help with the rest of the stuff. After applying even more waterproof sunscreen, I was in the water with her and at least fifty other people.

Some I knew, some I didn't. I took my time saying hi to those I did, and then more time out of the water following Caleb around to participate in another one of his favorite hobbies--flirting with every girl who didn't look familiar to him and listening to him as he tried to remember which ones he'd already slept with. Caleb liked girls. Always had. And lucky for Caleb, they liked him, too. I could pretty much get along with everyone. Caleb wasn't like that, though. Guys, were a different story. I think he had some sort of alpha-male complex. I was the only guy he ever actually liked. Until Joe had started hanging out with us, I'd wondered if the anomaly had occurred because

I was gay, and perhaps on a subconscious level, Caleb knew I wasn't to be considered competition, even though I had just about as many girls coming onto me as Caleb had girls he came on to. I always credited most of the attention I got to Caleb, though. Girls just liked being around him, and sometimes that meant settling for being around his best friend. Not that it made much of a difference to me. I'd play my part, and while I was at it I tended to enjoy the scenery around me, especially at the lake, where guys with no shirts and drenched shorts hanging so low on their hips that I could see the clefts of their ass, passed by regularly.

Caleb and guys, were a different story. Two-hours and a twelve-pack-split-between-me-Haily-and-Caleb later, with Caleb having consumed most of it, he'd already scared the crap out of one poor guy he caught checking out Haily's ass, and he'd shoved another backwards into the water because a girl that

Caleb had just met claimed that he'd been bothering her. This sort of thing happened a lot with Caleb. That second time, Haily had been worried that he might take it further as the other guy plucked himself out of the water, so I'd been recruited to get Caleb to go for a walk. This wasn't very difficult. All I had to do was point to a pretty brunette by the snow-cone vendor and tell Caleb that she'd been checking him out. And, it was smarter than using physical force. Caleb's dad was a personal trainer, and Caleb had been mostly muscle for as long as I could remember. I preferred to keep in shape with running and playing tennis with Chad a few times a week, and while I wasn't scrawny or incapable of defending myself, I wasn't stupid enough to accidentally get in front of one of Caleb's fists during his testosterone-induced moments.

As we walked over, Caleb gave some of his plans for later today away when he mentioned that he might invite this girl to the party tonight if she looked as good up close as she did from a distance. When I mentioned that I thought we were already at the party, he'd explained simply, "This is the lake."

"Oh. I knew that," I replied, and he elbowed me with a goofy smile; but it

faded and he made a disgruntled face when his attention was redirected somewhere else.

"Assface," Caleb remarked, and knowing Caleb, that could have only meant one thing. Jame Graham. In first grade, his name had been James. By fifth, he'd changed it to just Jame because there had been thirteen other Jameses in our year. But, whatever trouble he had with Caleb had been an ongoing problem ever since Assface, er...Jame, had been in Caleb's third-grade class. I wasn't exactly sure what had caused it, I just knew that there was something about Jame that Caleb just didn't like. Caleb had always said it was because Jame was a snob, which was kinda true, but I never did think it warranted Caleb's adamant dislike of the guy. By fifth grade, Caleb had pretty much everyone calling Jame Assface. I think the name was chosen because Jame, while being a tall, thin individual, had very round cheeks, which became even rounder when he smiled, and he was always smiling, even at Caleb. But I think that was only because Jame knew it annoyed him. Personally, I had no problem with the guy--other than the fact that he had a problem with my best friend.

"I don't see him," I replied after taking a quick look around. It was a long trail around the cove, and for all I knew, Caleb could have spotted Jame, or someone who looked like him, on the other side of it. Apparently not, though. Caleb stepped behind me, placed his hands on my shoulders and turned me to the left, where I immediately spotted Jame Graham, in front of a painting. Yes, painting, it looked like. Food vendors weren't the only ones who'd taken to bringing their shops to Hangman. I'd never seen paintings there, though. Mostly homemade jewelry and every once in a while someone selling sunscreen for fifteen dollars a bottle.

I watched Jame scratch at his shaggy brownish locks of hair as he stood there shirtless, like most other people including Caleb and me. Only, because of his tan lines, it almost looked like Jame was wearing a shirt. He suddenly shrugged indifferently and turned, facing the guy who was very carefully propping the five-by-seven paintings up on a foldout table, and as my attention turned to the vendor, I almost lost my footing when I paused briefly to stare. Milo. He didn't go to my school. That's all I knew about him, really. I'd heard Jame call his name on the last day of school before summer. He'd been driving a green Honda with a dent in the driver's side door. I remembered him because he'd looked directly at me and held my gaze for ten seconds straight with very emerald eyes beneath thick, dark lashes. When you look at most people who you don't know, they tend to look away, or at least blink. He hadn't. Not until Jame got in his car and they drove away. That's the first, last and only time I'd ever seen him, but he'd stricken me enough that it caused me to go home and dedicate a poster-sized comic book over to him. I'd drawn him in a green costume; it matched his eyes without can

celing them out. I gave him a cape, too. And, a nice bulge that I didn't bother giving most of my drawings.

I kind of got his hair wrong, though. I could see that now. I'd made it straight and black, slicked back on his head. It wasn't like that at all. It was more like a soft brunette and wavy, framing his face in a way that made his high cheekbones seemed less pronounced and his overall appearance seem more masculine. In the drawing, I'd made him shorter. Kind of stocky. But he was just as tall as I was with shoulders that matched a broad chest, his tanned body tapering down to a narrow waist, to which his black shorts were clinging low. They seemed kinda tight on his butt as he bent over to lift another painting out of a crate. I hadn't gotten the body in my drawing right at all. But hey, I hadn't done that bad, considering that before now, I'd only looked at the guy for ten seconds, and it had only been his face, I realized. I turned my attention back to Caleb when he lightly backhanded my shoulder.

"Do you think we should go say hi?" he asked mischievously.

"To Assface?" Okay, so that's what I called Jame, too. It was expected, I think, as Caleb Spangler's best friend.

"Yeah, what's he doing here, anyway?" Caleb asked suspiciously.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed Caleb's thick, bicep on his right arm to pull him along. "He's not bothering you," I insisted. Normally, when Caleb and Jame met, there was less-than-friendly banter exchanged between them. But Caleb was still worked up from the last guy, and working on a pretty good buzz at this point. I didn't want to take any chances. "Hey, Sam's here,"

I said, pointing towards a short blond coming down the same trail we'd come down after parking.

"Oh, nice," Caleb said with a grin. "He said he'd be here--where'd that girl go?" He suddenly turned and looked to where the brunette I'd originally pointed out was walking further down the cove with her friends and suddenly looked torn before he faced me again. "I'm gonna talk to Sam. Could you..."

"Yeah, I've got it," I responded, knowing what was expected of me.

As Caleb went to talk to Sam, the guy who he only talked to when he needed one thing in particular, I caught up the brunette and easily began to flirt with one of her friends. I was good at flirting. It got me invited into their group long enough to go for a quick swim and to introduce Caleb to the brunette. I entertained myself by talking to the other girls for the next hour, figuring out who went to our school, who didn't, and in some cases, girls who were way too young for us to be talking to before Caleb got a phone number and we moved on.

Caleb kept handing me beer as we made our way around the cove. I'm not sure where it all came from, because he wasn't carrying it, but I was having one

of those days where it just didn't matter. It was my birthday, and I was having a good time, so I didn't decline anything until I had that nice I-almost-can't-walk-straight feeling. I would have gone for the you-actually-expect-me-to-stand-up? feeling, but it was only two in the afternoon and I had the rest of the day to get there. Plus, the sun was definitely out today, and he at didn't exactly mix well with alcohol.

At least I could hold my liquor, though. That didn't mean that I was out getting wasted with my friends every day, either. Usually just at parties, or days like today when we found something to celebrate. And, I was celebrating as Caleb and I drifted from one group of people to the next. We didn't know all of them but at some point I began to tell everyone I could that it was my birthday, and I started passing out free hugs.

It was around three o'clock when Caleb told me that we were going to get going soon, and then I promptly lost him in the crowd when I saw some guys that I knew from school but hadn't seen since it let out. All four of them were on the swim team, and I went to talk to them mostly because they were all hot and half-naked. Almost drunk equaled shallow thinking for me, and being the only gay guy I knew, inviting the swim team to my own party, even though I didn't know where it was, was pretty much the closest kind of thing I ever did when it came to flirting with other guys. That, and when I'd pinched Caleb's nipple earlier in the day to ask him if it was still sore from his unplanned dream pregnancy.

I said goodbye to the swimmers around the time they headed for the water, and I went to find my friends. I didn't have to look very far when one of them abruptly wound their arms around my neck from behind and jumped on my back. Definitely Haily. She was the only one with boobs and I could feel them squashed against my back. Plus, she was really light, and I didn't lose my balance at all as I grabbed her legs, right behind her knees so I could better carry her as she kissed my cheek.

"We've been looking for ya, birthday boy," she announced. "Are you ready to go?"

"Where are we going?" I asked, noting that Haily was already dressed, having pulled her boy jeans and t-shirt back on over her black one-piece swimsuit.

"Caleb wouldn't say, but we need to hurry because him and Joe are about ready to head back to the car and they're threatening to leave you here."

I paused long enough to pout.

"The birthday boy?"

"Sorry," Haily responded indifferently, and then giggled against my ear as I spun us around so fast that her long braid flew over my shoulder and hit me in the face. She shrieked when I pulled the thick strand into my mouth and chewed on it before realizing it was covered in sand and I spit it out.

"Oh, Nelson! No!" she scolded around giggles.

"I'm hungry," I complained.

"Then hurry up!" She used her sandal-clad feet to give my thighs a kick and I laughed before I took off running across the sand with her holding on tightly and shouting for me to be careful while I tried to remember where we'd left the cooler. If I found the cooler, I'd find Caleb and Joe.

I apologized to a girl as I passed her too closely and she spilled her drink, earning me a dirty look from her girlfriend; and just as Haily began to order me to put her down, we started to pass the little foldout table with all the paintings, and rather than the vendor catching my eye this time, one of the five-by-seven framed pieces of art did. This caused me to stop paying attention to where I was putting my feet and the next thing I knew I was landing in the sand, going down face first. I let go of Haily to catch myself, and I still managed to break her fall as she came down hard on my back.

"Oh my god, are you okay, Nels?" Haily asked, already moving onto her knees in the sand next to me. I was still staring at the painting, but became distracted when I heard familiar male laughter above me and glared up at Assface, whose cheeks were nice and round as he laughed at me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Nelson?" he remarked, and then turned his attention to Haily. "If your dog's gonna run wild you might wanna consider a leash," he told her.

"Fuck yourself," Haily responded. She was always quick and to the point when dealing with irritating people.

Assface threw some very pointed eyes at her.

"Well, if you're not busy, Haily..."

"Watch yourself," I warned Jame as I pushed myself up, and then pushed him aside because he was blocking my view of the painting.

"Hey!" Jame objected, and then objected again when Haily pushed him aside, too.

I was almost to the small table when I was met with emerald eyes and a body as tall as mine blocking my path. I blinked and took a moment to look Assface's friend, Mr. Nice-ass, over as he stood in front of me, arms crossed and his jaw set in a way that I'm sure was meant to be very intimidating. I just wanted to ruffle his wavy, dark hair and maybe brush it out of his eyes, which were narrowed at me. Didn't, though. Not that far gone.

"Can I help you?" he asked coldly, and I watched his eyes widen slightly as I carelessly stepped around him and lifted the painting with the black frame that had held my interest.

"Did you do this?" I asked as I looked over a very detailed portrait of the scarecrow hanging from the oak tree. He'd even painted in that the thing was missing one boot, and the tiny little tear in its left sleeve.

"Yes," he responded simply as he reached for the painting, and then looked

seriously annoyed when I held it away from him as I looked at the others. They were all of Hangman Cove, or things in Hangman Cove, and all just as detailed, everything from the colors to proportion, each one looking almost like a photograph taken at different times during the day. The only thing identical on each one were the initials of MT on the bottom right-hand corner. The one I was holding was dark, but it didn't seem like sunset, more like dawn. He'd placed just enough warmth in the sky behind the hanging scarecrow to make it look like the sun was coming, not going.

"Nelson, why don't you just give it back?" I heard Assface say, and became a little surprised when he thought I was there to bully, and clearly wanted to help his hot friend. I resented that. I didn't bully. Caleb did. So, I ignored Jame and looked at Milo.

"How much are these?" I asked. "You're selling, right?"

I watched his perfectly proportioned dark brows raise slightly before he put on a very cute straight face.

"Twenty-five each."

"Fifty for you," Jame said, and I was surprised when I got a little smirk from Milo.

"I meant fifty," he informed me. This was irritating, but oddly enough, I found myself smiling at him. I blame it on my beverage choices.

"Hey, Haily, remember what I did with my wallet?" I asked, turning to her. She looked irritated by all of this. But both Jame and Milo seemed surprised, and that was just fun.

"You gave it to Joe to hold onto, remember?" she responded, hooking my arm. "Come on, Nels, let's get out of here, we don't have time..."

"I'll be right back," I told Milo, carefully handing back the painting. "Don't sell that one."

He regarded me curiously, while Haily released an exasperated sigh and pulled her own wallet out of her back pocket.

"Forget it, Nelson," she stated. "I've got it."

"I'll pay you back," I said, grinning at her.

"Forget it," she responded with a girly grin. "It's your birthday." I hugged her, but fully intended to pay her back. Knowing Haily, she'd already gotten me something for my birthday, and as it was I already had a hard time accepting gifts from her, knowing that she had feelings for me.

I watched Jame whisper something in Milo's ear as Haily held out the money for him, and then watched another smirk curl its way around Milo's red full mouth.

"He says it's only twenty-five for you," Milo told her, handing her change back. Haily looked unimpressed. I just got another glare from him as he passed the painting back into my waiting hands. I ignored the look.

"You're really good," I told him, right before Haily grabbed my arm and we

were on our way again.

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I'd wrapped my new painting in a shirt in my duffle bag after showing it off to both Joe and Caleb, who seemed impressed until Haily explained that we'd bought it from one of Assface's friends. Then, Caleb refused to talk to me. That lasted two whole minutes before he was handing me the last beer he had and insisting that I needed to drink it before dinner. I split it with him, since Haily wasn't interested and Joe wasn't drinking.

And we did go to dinner. We went to Velda's, a patio café on the north side of town. It was near the lake, but a fifteen-minute drive from Hangman Cove. Velda's wasn't exactly near anything for us. Not our school, not our hangouts, not our home; but according to Haily, it was the only place in town she could talk into making me a birthday cake and singing the song when they brought it out. Plus, according to Caleb, it was near the place where we were going next.

During dinner, it was just me and my friends, and when we were away from the crowds, it was just us. No subject was too meaningless to talk about. We made each other laugh and we were honest. For the most part. I'm sure we all had our secrets. I know I did. I guess I wondered all the time, if any of theirs was as big as mine. When we were just there, being us, like we were through dinner as my friends gave me their birthday presents--a new sketch book from Joe, a goofy card from Caleb and a button-up shirt from Haily that she thought would look good on me--I found myself wondering if I'd still be able to sit with them like that if they ever did know my secret. I guessed it didn't matter now, though. I had no intention of telling them in the near future.

After we ate, we changed into the spare clothes we'd all brought using the café's bathrooms, and then sand-free, we drove around the block three times as Caleb lit up the very packed joint he'd gotten from Sam at the lake and we passed it back and forth until there was no more to smoke. Joe was the only one of us who smoked regularly, and driving for him didn't seem to be a problem, even as the rest of us broke into uncontrollable fits of laughter, distracting him from it a few times before he finally got Caleb to stop laughing long enough to tell him where we were going and we ended up in front of Heywell's only hotel. I didn't get it, not until we ended up in a rented hall full of people I knew, some that had been at the lake earlier that day.

According to Caleb, my parents had pitched in and he'd planned the party. It was something he was pretty good at, and he did good this time, I decided. There was food, dance, and more than just beer. It seemed that almost everyone there had raided a liquor cabinet, and Caleb insisted that it wasn't a problem as long as no one started trashing the room. The hotel had supplied the DJ, and he was kept busy with requests. Caleb started a whipped-crea

m bikini competition and just as he promised, I got wasted. I still remembered my name, but I might as well have forgotten that I was gay because I had no objection when two girls stuck their tongues down my throat. That was as far as it went, though, because dancing seemed to hold my interest more than they did, and I danced with pretty much anyone and everyone.

I borrowed Joe's cell phone and called Chad, who was working, and I told myself happy birthday. Chad told me that I'd better not be behaving too much fun. He also told me it was time to stop drinking. But when I got off the phone with him, Caleb disagreed and the next thing I knew I was doing rum shots and taking off my shirt because the room felt too hot. It's never a good thing when hard liquor starts to taste like water because you're too drunk to feel the burn. Caleb got me to the bathroom right on time, and after fifteen minutes of puking and a pretty powerful breath mint from Joe, I was back on my feet, drinking plenty of water and back to the party where Haily started calling me a slut again because she'd heard about my kissing of random guests. But, I was confident that she meant it with love.

We were supposed to have the room until midnight, but Caleb, Joe, Haily and I left at eleven thirty, leaving it to the hotel to kick everyone out. We were supposed to drop Haily off, and then Joe was supposed to drive Caleb and me to his place to spend the night, which is why I couldn't figure out why we ended up joyriding through Stratfort Ranch, instead.

Stratfort, was basically the other side of town to us. It was where the big houses overlooking the lake were, with lawns so manicured that they looked fake; the private school with all the kids we didn't know; and apparently, hired security to roam their neighborhood. We never went there. We didn't know anyone there, and at first, my drunken mind decided that Caleb was up to something else as I sat in the back seat with Haily, trying to figure out if the world was spinning, or if it was just me. But then I heard Caleb ask Joe where we were going.

"I've got something to show you," Joe explained, checking his watch and then driving a little faster. Maybe a lot faster. It felt a lot faster. "Trust me, you'll appreciate it."

"Dude, slow down. You're gonna wreck my car," Caleb told him as he lifted a bottle of tequila he'd swiped from the party and brought it to his lips before attempting to pass it back to Haily and me. I reached for it, given that that was the popular theme tonight, but Haily swatted my hand.

"I'm cutting him off," Haily informed Caleb, and he stuck his tongue out at her. I stupidly giggled.

"Dude, I'm serious, slow down," Caleb said again, turning his attention back to Joe. "I'll kick your fucking ass if you wreck us."

"Caleb, wrecking this piece of shit is something you'd do," Joe countered, but slowed down as we reached a large grayish house that actually had some up

stairs lights on.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Check that out," Joe instructed, gesturing to one of the lit windows. "Every night at twelve-o-five on the dot."

I looked, and rolled my eyes when there appeared to be a very naked woman who looked to be in her thirties standing up in front of the lit window, inspecting a silky nightgown.

"Oh, shit!" Well, it got Caleb's attention. Haily just made a disgusted sound. "How'd you know about this?"

"Andre Louer," Joe explained. "He was telling everyone at work how his aunt's always getting her kicks by undressing in front of her windows."

"That's Andre's aunt?" Caleb asked, practically climbing out the window to get a better look. I closed my eyes and leaned back in my seat, but when closing my eyes made the spinning worse, I forced them open again. Joe was the only one of us who had a real summer job. He always said mine didn't count because it included helping my dad out at the bakeries. Andre worked with Joe at a gas station three miles from my house, and had been at my party tonight. I'd checked out his butt when he mooned me. Didn't really care about his naked aunt, though.

"Can we get out of here now, please?" Haily said irritably. "You guys brag about seeing breasts all the time, can't you see them somewhere else?"

Caleb turned into his seat to face Haily, looking scandalized. I laughed out loud at the look alone.

"Tits, Haily. Tits. God, you don't have to make it sound so dirty! Plus, these are old ones."

"Joe, start driving now, or I'll tell your mom," Haily threatened, and while I continued my uncontrollable laughter Caleb and Joe laughed at her, and then Caleb smiled back at me.

"How's it going, Nels? Having a good birthday?"

"Fine," I managed. "Now drive!"

"Two more minutes," Caleb insisted, laughing as he turned back out his window.

I tried to look as apologetic as possible as I looked at a very ticked-off Haily. After all, I had tried. And not much would have worked, anyway. Joe and Caleb were way too preoccupied to pay attention to reason. What did get their attention, however; what got everyone's attention, was the sudden flashing light coming from behind us. All four heads spun around and my eyes widened at the sight of a security car.

"Fuck!" Haily cursed, and glared at the tequila bottle in Caleb's hand. "Get rid of that, asshole!"

"Screw it," Caleb responded carelessly. "It's just a rent-a-cop. What's he gonna do?"

"Call the real ones?" Haily responded irritably as the security guard behind us left his vehicle to come towards ours. Haily's words brought a brief silence over us before Caleb looked at Joe. "Dude... get out of here."

"What?" I demanded, eyes widening as Joe laughed and hit the gas. We were speeding away before the security guard reached his vehicle and started following us. But no one seemed to care. Even Haily was laughing, I noticed, and since all my friends were, I started to, too.

I'm not sure what I expected really. Aside from Joe, we were all completely shitfaced, and no one actually knew how much pot Joe had smoked today. I'll be the first to admit that we weren't the most responsible bunch, but, this was really the closest we'd ever been to getting into trouble before, and the threat seemed gone because the next time I looked back, the security car was gone.

"I think you can slow down now, Joe," I said, feeling a little sick each time he took a turn.

"No way, I'm getting us out of here," Joe insisted, and I found myself clinging to my seat as he took another sharp turn. I felt like I'd left my entire stomach two blocks back. All I wanted to do was stop, but unfortunately, over the next sixty seconds, things only got worse.

"Oh, shit!" Joe suddenly laughed. "Look at that!"

"Assface!" Caleb chorused with Joe.

I sat up in my seat just long enough to see something I didn't want to see. Ahead of us in the headlights glare was the dented green car, off to the side of the road, and Jame Graham was standing over another figure who was switching out a flat tire. Behind them was the tire they'd taken off of the vehicle, and next to that, were two wooden crates.

"Watch this," Joe suddenly said, speeding up even more, and my eyes widened as I reached to clutch Joe's shoulder, wondering what the hell had gotten into him.

"Joe, stop!" I screamed, or maybe that was Haily screaming as he swerved Caleb's car towards the dented green one.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Caleb demanded, obviously as alarmed as the rest of us.

Joe continued to laugh like a fucking maniac, not turning away from our guaranteed deaths until the last second as Jame fell into the second figure, looking terrified. They were both safe, but I couldn't say the same for the crates. As they shattered under the tires of the jeep I spun around, my eyes widening as I saw torn-apart frames and familiar paintings, ruined and mixed in with the debris beneath the street light.

Joe brought the jeep screeching to a halt, and as I stared at the damage, watching Milo appear next to Jame to look over the damage, I felt horrified when there was laughter. My friends, stupidly laughing over this. Even Haily a

s she hit the back of Joe's seat.

"You're such an asshole!" she screamed at him.

"Will you guys just fucking stop!" I growled out, and to my surprise, they all did and turned to look at me, suddenly no humor on their faces. I felt like my heart was going a million beats per second, and I'm sure I looked furious

"Dude," Caleb said gently. "It's fine, we..."

I jumped, and Haily screamed when a blunt force suddenly hit the front window in front of us, cracking it right in front of Caleb's head. It seemed to take everyone a moment to get their senses back together, but once we realized what was going on there was a thick silence as we stared at Jame Graham standing outside of the car, red in the face and hands shaking as he held over his head the jack they'd been using for the tire. For once, he wasn't smiling.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that this was going to be bad, especially as Caleb took a good look at his cracked window. Three sets of hands tried to stop Caleb Spangler as he abruptly opened the door and left the vehicle, all of us following him as he snatched the jack right out of Jame's hands, tossed it aside, and practically grabbed the tall, thin, fat-cheeked kid by the neck.

I reached Caleb first, for all the good it did me. He was pissed, and when Caleb got pissed, he didn't see much else around him. I did manage to stop his fist from hitting Jame, but when Caleb's elbow hooked me under the chin I went flying back, having absolutely no balance at this point. I collided with another body and we both went down. I was hoping that it was Joe, rather than Haily, but as I sat up on the asphalt road where I'd landed, amongst annihilated paintings, I realized that it was neither of them when I met emerald eyes, which first widened, and then narrowed before the guy who Jame had once called Milo tackled me, and in my current condition, it was difficult enough to keep his fists away from my face, let alone get him off of me. I managed to grab his shoulders and I rolled us, until I was over him, straddling his waist, my knees on the rough street surface; but as I looked at him, flustered and furious beneath me, I had no idea what to do with him, other than hold him down. I wasn't exactly interested in hitting him, or anyone for that matter.

I managed to look over my shoulder to see that Haily and Joe were in the process of getting Caleb away from Jame. That was all I saw, though, as a blinding pain erupted in my groin and spread from my stomach to my thighs after Milo did an excellent job of lifting his knee directly into my balls. I rolled off of him, rolling up in pain as I clutched myself, thinking only about protecting my assaulted area from further violation as Milo stood over me. As I sobered, I thought that pain could quite possibly be a cure for drunkenne

ss. As I attempted to get up, Milo grabbed the front of my shirt--the button-up one that I'd gotten from Haily, because she'd asked me to wear it to the party--and it tore, buttons popping off as someone--thank god--grabbed Milo and pulled him off of me. I felt relieved for all of two seconds before I turned over on my back, holding my knees to my chest; but then I saw more flashing lights, and just before I turned to vomit on the street, I saw Mr. Nic e-ass with a very nasty temper being held back by a very disgruntled-looking, young, police officer. A real one this time.

Chapter 2: Attempting Amends

by DomLuka

A/N: thanks to Jim for editing!

Another A/N: special thanks to Mary, too.

"Minor consumption, disturbing the peace, resisting arrest--assault! Those are only some of the charges I should be racking you and your friends up with right now! Nelson Larmont, what the hell were you thinking?"

I held my head in my hands as I sat in a very uncomfortable blue, plastic chair, the kind they made us use in junior high. I felt like I couldn't move at all. Everything was spinning. Everything hurt. I was also pretty sure that I was going to puke soon, and I had nothing to say for myself.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Ray."

I cleared my sore throat and forced myself to look upwards at the tall man standing over me in a western-style black hat that matched his beige-and-black uniform that included a nice, shiny badge and a gun on his belt. With his left hand, the one where he wore simple gold wedding band, he tugged at his thick, scruffy beard, as red in color as my mother's hair. His dark blue eyes, which usually appeared half-closed and tired were narrowed sharply on me as he regarded me with a worried but definitely furious expression over his sharp, masculine features.

Before now, I'd never actually known that the only perk I got as the sheriff's nephew was while everyone else had to wait in holding cells, I got to sit in his office--the small, windowless room with a standard metal desk, gloomy gray carpeting, and a door that faced the main office of the Heywell City Police Department. But that wasn't saying much. I'd never actually been in my uncle's office before, and I decided that it was just as gloomy as the holding cells. The only thing he'd done to brighten it up was pin an unframed photograph of my Aunt Patty and six-month-old cousin, Jay on an otherwise bare, white wall, right next to one of the three black filing cabinets. The picture had been taken at our house. I recognized the apple tree they were standing under, it was the closest to the back deck, where the goat liked to hang out. Also, I wasn't handcuffed anymore. But I had a feeling that the only reason for that was that my uncle hadn't felt like holding the metal waste basket when I was puking into it thirty minutes ago.

It was now three in the morning, and my Uncle Ray was just beginning to sort things out. He'd been able to call Haily's mom, because all she'd been caught doing wrong was being drunk, and he could release her with a ticket; but the rest of us were a little more complicated because of our various charges. All I knew was that parents had been called, but no one knew if we were going to be allowed to go home or not. This was probably the most unsettling experience that I'd ever gone through.

"You're sorry?" Ray responded, exasperated. "Nelson, were you even thinking?"

"No," I said honestly, and he sighed. "Did you call my parents?" I asked.

"And tell them you're in jail on your birthday? She'd have my head!" he ranted, sitting back on his gray desk, and I looked at him, surprised. "She'll get a call in the morning," he said quickly. "But for now, you're spending the night here. Now, tell me what happened. I need to know everything and your friends aren't being helpful."

I looked at him, a little uncertainly.

"Nelson..." he started, sounding stern, and I let out a breath.

"We had too much to drink," I admitted. "We were at my party."

"All six of you?"

I felt confused for a moment as I did the math in my head, and then shook it.

"Just me, Haily, Joe and Caleb... the other guys..."

"Haven't been drinking," Ray said as he looked down at some of the paperwork on his desk. "Do you know their names? I've only got ID off one of them and the other says he won't talk without a lawyer." Ray looked somewhat amused by that, and a little annoyed as he shook his head. "James Graham?" he said, lifting one of the five licenses spread out over his desk. "Do you know him?"

"He goes by Jame--and he's a jerk," I added dutifully.

Ray sighed again.

"Okay, Nels. I need you to tell me happened, from beginning to end."

I groaned to myself, and then clutched my stomach when it churned beneath my hand.

"Can I throw up again first?"

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I trusted my Uncle Ray. But, it still felt pretty damn wrong to tell him what had happened that night. I felt like I was getting my friends into even more trouble, but I tried to be as honest as possible, and hoped that being honest was the right thing to do. Or at least, mostly honest.

I told him about the lake first, and buying the painting there. He quickly tied it to the art scattered on the street in Stratford, but let me get to that part on my own. I explained that we were there because Joe wanted to show us

...something. It seemed unnecessary to mention Andre Louer's naked aunt, but I confessed about the security car and running from it, apologizing because it had been a stupid thing to do. I also reminded my uncle that most of us had had too much to drink, and he pointed out that that included Joe, too, who'd failed a breathalyzer. This little fact pissed me off because Joe was supposed to be our designated. Pot was one thing, but to me, drinking for him was quite another. It did explain a lot, though. It also made it easier for me to tell my uncle how Joe had decided to play chicken with those crates. I explained that everyone else in the car told him to stop. But in the end I also told Ray that Joe was just trying to scare Jame, and that I truly believed that he didn't mean anything by it.

When it came to Jame and Milo--I told Ray I thought that's what his name was--it would have been easy to hang them out to dry, to just say that we were attacked. But instead, I found myself explaining that they were provoked.

Except Jame and that car jack. That was just uncalled for. But when it came to Ray asking me why one of the deputies had to pull Milo off of me, I insisted that it was a misunderstanding, and even if I was scratched up from head to toe--torn clothing, scrapes on my knees and elbows, and plenty of bruises that stuck out easily on my fair skin--Milo wasn't at fault.

I just couldn't blame him. I wanted to think that he attacked me because I'd fallen into him, and it really had been a misunderstanding. But, I had no idea if that would be true. All I knew was that I'd seen the look on his face as he stood over all of those beautiful, detailed paintings of a place that I loved, that I'd had a part in destroying. I didn't want to blame him for anything. And I wasn't about to admit that part of that was because I was drunk and severely attracted to him.

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Holding cells sucked. Just saying, is all. Uncomfortable, small spaces with cement benches that weren't even long enough to lie down on. And it really sucked to know that my friends were right there next to me, separated by thick, gray, stone walls, and I wasn't even allowed to talk to them. So, eventually I passed out, sitting on the cold floor. The room spun less when I was on the floor.

The next time I woke up, my uncle was opening the barred door and telling me that it was morning. But with the only light being the fluorescent bulbs hanging from the ceiling, I couldn't tell the difference. I was nauseous, everything was sore, and I hurt more than I had before I passed out. I was so uncomfortable, that the fact that I was in a shitpot full of trouble, was the last thing on my mind when Uncle Ray took me back to his office and told me to drink some orange juice and eat a plain, dry bagel. It was when he sat down on the other side of his desk and started on more paperwork that I finally realized how quiet things had gotten.

"Where is everyone?" I asked, attempting to swallow the last bite of my bage l. It was helping my stomach feel better, but it hurt to swallow just about everything at the moment.

"Home," he said simply.

I stared at him in confused silence. "Caleb and..."

"Home," he repeated. "Their parents got here a few hours ago."

"Oh... so, am I going to jail?"

Ray lifted his blue eyes from his work, seeming annoyed as he silently look ed me over.

"I called your mom this morning and told her I'd bring you home when I'm done here."

"Okay... so how much trouble am I in?" I asked. My head hurt and I was confu sed. I wanted to tell him to just get to the point, but it seemed that I was on thin ice as it was. If Ray wanted to keep me in suspense, he was going t o keep me in suspense. I frowned and sipped the rest of my orange juice as h e continued to scratch at the papers in front of him with a ballpoint pen.

"Thompson Trust," he finally said, and when I looked up I found his eyes on mine.

"Huh?"

"The kid you call Milo, is Thompson Trust Junior."

"I'm not following you," I admitted. Thompson? I preferred Milo, I think.

"Thompson Trust," Ray continued. "As in Trust Homes, and Trust Financial... Thompson Trust, who donated a large portion of that park the city built on your dad's land... Nelson, he's the man responsible for putting up all tho se houses in the neighborhood you and your friends decided to terrorize las t night."

I had to think about it for a minute. Thompson Trust. Trust in Thompson Tr ust to bring you home. Trust homes. Okay, the name was starting to ring a bell. I definitely remembered TV ads in there somewhere. Thompson Trust...

And as I finally put the face to the name I thought of green eyes and dark hair on a man in his forties, always wearing a tie. His poster was up in the bank that I kept my money in and my mother had once said, and I quote: "He's so dreamy." Thompson Trust. Thompson Trust. The closest thing we ha d to a local celebrity in Haywell was Thompson Trust.

"That's Milo's dad?" I asked in disbelief. Honestly, despite the fact that they were both gorgeous, I didn't see it. Thompson Trust was all business. All money. He was the kind of guy you assumed had diamonds on his pillow ca se; and as I thought about it, it was a well-known fact that he was a bache lor, if you didn't count his recent engagement announcement in the paper. I didn't see him having a son, especially one who drove around in a dented o ld Honda and sold paintings for twenty-five bucks a piece at Hangman Cove j

ust like any other vendor.

"Tommy."

"What?"

"Mr. Trust was calling him Tommy. I assume that's his name," Ray explained.

"Oh." I really did like Milo better. Tommy sounded like a little boy who'd wreck your sand castle. Just didn't fit. Lick-me-Milo sounded much better. "Um... so does Mr. Trust have get-out-of-jail-free cards?" I asked tentatively, and Uncle Ray rolled his eyes at me as he removed his hat, revealing a head full of thick red hair which was sticking up all over the place, before he stood up and walked around his desk so that he was directly in front of me. I shifted in the uncomfortable plastic seat as he sat back on his desk and crossed his arms.

"Let's just say Mr. Trust knows the kind of people that you'd want to know, being in your situation. He'd like to keep the matter quiet, and so would everyone else, I think," Ray explained, and I nodded in agreement. "So, here's what we're going to do for you, Nelson. You're going to be ticketed for minor consumption. You have to pay the fine, or you'll end up in court." He waited for confirmation from me, so I nodded. "And starting tomorrow, you will be reporting here at six a.m. every single day for the next three weeks until school starts."

"Six?" I incredulously repeated, but immediately shut up when Uncle Ray narrowed his eyes on me. He was right. I was in no position to argue. "Okay... six a.m.," I agreed quickly.

"You'll be here, or somewhere else, every day until three p.m. volunteering your time for community service. You don't get sick days, so if you're late, you'll make up the time at the end of the day, and for each day you miss, you spend two locked up during spring break when that comes around. I don't think I need to tell you how disappointed I am, Nelson."

I let out a breath. I already felt guilty. And horrible. And sick. The sick part was my hangover, I decided; but still, I understood what Ray was saying, and I really was sorry. I had a feeling that I'd be saying that a lot in the near future.

"I am sorry," I insisted. "And nothing like this will ever, ever happen again. I swear."

"It better not," he said sternly. "You're very lucky right now."

I nodded, and then lifted my eyes, regarding him curiously.

"What about everyone else?" I asked.

"I'm sure you can ask them that the next time you see them," Ray responded, and then shook his head at me once more. "Go wash up as much as you can in the bathroom. I'm going to call your mom and tell her we're on our way."

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My mom wasn't a disciplinarian. Neither was my dad. I'd never been grounded. In fact, the worst I'd ever been punished was when I was twelve and they made me sit in the corner after Caleb and I had decided it would be fun to cut Haily's hair to make her look more like one of us. In our defense, she'd asked us to do it. It was her mom that hadn't liked the outcome, and for that reason, Caleb and I were held accountable. He had to do odd chores around his house for an entire week; I got sent to stand in the corner for ten minutes.

So now my parents were at a loss when it came to what they should do with me. They seemed more worried than anything, though. I got hugs from both my mom and my dad before they told me to shower and go to bed. They still planned on having the barbeque, and they wanted to make sure that I was rested enough for it. They told me that they'd want to know everything when I was feeling better, and I'd never been more grateful for their patience. Once I was clean, and I'd erased a very vile taste from my mouth, I was in bed, my white comforter pulled over my head, and passed out in moments. Waking up wasn't very easy to do an hour before I was supposed to make an appearance at my own party. My headache was going away, and some of the aches in my muscles, but as last night caught up to me, I felt worse than ever.

The fact that my friends and I had gotten ourselves into a situation like that angered me. But thinking clearly now, I also knew that it served us right, the way we'd been acting. Like a bunch of fucking idiots. And Joe... I was trying really hard not to be angry at Joe, but that fact that he'd lied to us about having had something to drink, and the way he'd made a sport out of destroying something like Milo's--or Tommy's--paintings were both strikes against him. It was just a situation where his good looks weren't going to bring him any leniency.

Leniency. I doubted that everyone else's parents had been as patient and understanding as mine. It occurred to me as I got dressed, making sure to wear long sleeves to hide any unseemly bruises, that I had no idea what was happening to any of my friends, and that just made me feel worse. I called Caleb first, but didn't get an answer. I would have called Joe, but I was afraid I'd start yelling at him on the phone. I tried Haily. Her mom answered, but wouldn't let me talk to her. Then, Mrs. Geld told me she was disappointed in all of us, but they'd see me at six for the barbeque. Haily was going to be there. I hoped that Caleb and Joe would be, too.

Chad showed up with Leanna around five thirty, just in time to hear me tell my parents what had happened. We chose to sit in the living room for this. It was a lot like the family room, but without all of the animals. And, it was just as comfortable as the kitchen with soothing colors of blue and green mixed into the soft sofa that wrapped around two of the walls, all cove

red with family portraits and photographs of various family members from my mom's side, and my dad's. The furry white rug covering the hardwood floor tickled my bare feet as I sat on the armchair that matched the sofa and told my family my story. It didn't get easier, either, knowing that they already knew the outcome.

Every time I mentioned that we'd been drinking, Chad would raise a pierced eyebrow at me, likely suspecting that we'd had more than alcohol. Later, I'd likely tell him that he was right, but any drug use I did partake in, was not something that I discussed with my parents. It ranked right up there with sex. Unless they were giving me the safe-sex or don't-do-drugs talks, I didn't even bring it up. Drinking was something I could 'fess up to, though. They were aware that I'd been drunk at parties before, but they also knew that in the past I'd called them for rides when I knew I couldn't make it home on my own.

Next to Chad, Leanna was being a supportive ear, giving me sympathetic looks every time I apologized. She'd always been really good at that. She was one of those approachable people that you felt like you could talk to. Chad had managed to find a girlfriend who was shorter than he was and just above five feet; Leanna's short blonde hair, thick glasses and petite features gave her an innocent, nonjudgmental appearance that made her the easiest to face.

My dad just sat in his favorite leather recliner, the only piece of furniture we had that my mom actually hated, looking concerned, and as if he were concentrating hard on every word I was saying as he adjusted his boxed-shaped glasses every once in a while. He was also the one who kept the conversation on track when my mom became more concerned with what I'd actually done for fun on my birthday, than what I'd done to get in trouble on it.

I guess as far as conversation went, it wasn't as terrible as it could have been. My parents ultimately decided that I'd made a mistake, and since I felt like I'd definitely learned from it, they told me that community service, and having to work nights on the weekends at the bakeries for my dad was going to be punishment enough. Except, working in the bakeries really didn't count because I was getting paid for it, and I worked in the bakeries all the time, anyway. I think my dad just threw that in there because I kept telling them they could ground me if they wanted to.

I agreed that I'd be paying the fine for my minor-consumption ticket.

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The deck on the back of our house could fit over twenty people on it, the way it wrapped all the way around the back of the house. It was all wood, and my dad would re-stain the entire thing maple every two years. The deck had been the last addition that his grandmother made to the house before she passed away. Now, it was home to my dad's gas grill--one of his favorite to

ys; and two years ago in October when my mom had inherited the goat from a neighbor who passed away, my dad and I had built a small, insulated, gated shed on the east end of it the day after my mom announced that she'd be bringing the goat into the house if it started snowing.

The back of our house was a good place for parties, especially in the summer when everything was green and the apple trees were in bloom; and because we were on the hill, and the terrain was anything but flat, all we could see looking out was fields. It was peaceful, and quiet. Since I'd lived there, we'd had two weddings in the back. One was for my Uncle Ray when he married my Aunt Patty, and one was for one of my mom's girlfriends. My mom had planned both weddings, and they'd both been so perfect that my dad always teased her about changing professions. Chad insisted that she shouldn't be encouraged, but I'd bet that was because my mom had been planning his and Leanna's wedding ever since Chad brought her home for dinner. My mom also planned all of the barbeques we had back there. My entire family had summer birthdays, and mine was always the last of the year. She'd invite my closest friends; family friends; neighbors from around town that had known me since I was in diapers; her brother Ray and his family; my dad's cousin, Ruth, and her two daughters, his only relatives still living in Heywell; my brother's best friend, Greg Hugh, and his parents; and my mom's mom, Grannie Tenny. She'd had a stroke when I was thirteen, and she'd been recovering in a nursing home ever since. My mom went to see her all the time. On Sundays she came to church with us, and she was always around for holidays and birthdays. I always made sure to have chocolate when I saw her because besides her elderly, charming neighbor at the nursing home, Mr. Hoover, chocolate was her favorite thing in the world. Mr. Hoover would be at the barbeque, too. He was one of the people Grannie always remembered. Ever since her stroke, she'd been forgetting names and faces on a regular basis. She only seemed to remember my name once a year if I was lucky, but she always knew me as the boy who gave her chocolate. She was the first guest I got settled at the barbecue. My mom had brought out the long outdoor folding tables with red plastic table cloths and placed them in the field, which had recently been cut down to look more like a lawn. I took Grannie Tenny in her wheelchair and seated her right next to Mr. Hoover before I'd complimented her curly white hair, which still had hues of red remaining from her youth, before I made sure they each were offered chocolate cupcakes left over from the morning before. I found myself wondering what Grannie Tenny would say if she knew about all of the trouble I'd gotten myself into the night before, but as I remembered the short temper she'd had before the stroke, I decided that I really didn't want to know. But, the question did make me wonder who would know. Heywell wasn't that big, and anyone's business was everyone's business. But, Uncle Ray h

elped calm my nerves when he arrived with my Aunt Patty, a plump brunette with a shining smile and Cousin Jay, who looked more like his mother than his father. Ray had hugged me with the rest of his family, wearing the friendly smile I was used to seeing on his face. In his khaki shorts and orange Hawaiian shirt, which clashed horribly with his red hair, he didn't look at all like the same man who'd arrested me the night before. I'd found myself apologizing to him once again, at which point he'd pulled me aside and explained that the matter didn't need to be discussed if we wanted to keep it quiet. He'd be telling anyone who saw me doing community service that I'd volunteered my own time.

It wasn't unusual for my friends and me to isolate ourselves from everyone else at events like this, and that's exactly what we did after having a few of my dad's fat and juicy burgers and my mom's homemade fries. The four of us made sure to stay in sight, not wanting to be rude, so while everyone feasted around the tables, and Cousin Ruth's younger daughters played with the white goat along with some of the other kids attending, Haily, Joe, Caleb and I sat in the four-foot-wide double set of stairs leading off the deck as Haily tiredly leaned into me and Caleb bounced my cousin, Jay, who was now only wearing a diaper, on his jean-clad knee. For all of Caleb's machoism, I was always amazed by his patience and love of little kids. He was the first person my Aunt Patty had sought out when she couldn't get Jay to stop crying, and she'd obviously made the right decision because the kid had been giggling ever since as Caleb made silly faces at him, even as our discussion turned more serious.

Haily was grounded, and lucky that her mom had even let her come to the barbecue. She'd be spending the next two weeks at home, working off her fine, and to her horror, she would be forced to wear a dress at her cousin's upcoming baptism. Joe had not only been ticketed with minor consumption, but also a DUI. There was a good chance that he'd lose his license. As soon as he'd started bitching about that, Caleb and Haily put two and two together and I wasn't the one who had to bring up the fact that he'd been drunk when he was driving us all around town last night.

"Hey, we were all fucked up," Joe said defensively, running a hand through his dark hair and setting his handsome face in a stern expression. "Don't even fucking think about blaming this whole thing on me."

"Hey! Little ears!" Caleb objected as he placed his large palms over the sides of Jay's little head, as if not wanting my cousin to hear us.

"No one's blaming everything on you, Joe," I insisted. "But you were designated. Getting in trouble's one thing, but you could have killed us!"

"It's not like you stopped breathing at any point," Joe responded, looking annoyed. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I just got carried away last night."

"I think we all did," Haily said quietly, her thumb brushing over my bicep as

she leaned into me. "Listen, guys, it was all stupid, okay? Let's just be glad it's not worse."

I sighed and placed a friendly arm around her shoulders, deciding that she was right.

"Hey, at least you guys are just grounded," Caleb said. "I have to spend the rest of my summer waking up at five in the morning."

"You got community service?" I asked him, and he glared at me because I seemed happy about that. "I did, too," I explained, and after taking a moment to digest this information, Caleb actually grinned.

"At least I won't be bored, then," he said, but then his smile faded. "I got it because of the fighting, and if you got it..."

"Then Jame probably has it, too," I finished, nodding. And Milo, I decided silently, unless his dad got him out of it. "But look, I wouldn't worry about it, Caleb. Ray will probably keep him away from you. This is supposed to be punishment, remember? Not your opportunity to kill him."

"He should be so lucky," Caleb remarked maliciously, right before he stuck out his tongue and made the most ridiculous face at Jay, and my little cousin cracked up all over again.

"You know, this is so stupid," Joe suddenly said. "They're the ones that attacked us. We were just fucking around."

"Dude, you could have killed them, too," I said seriously, leaning out to face Joe, who was sitting on the other side of Caleb. "And did you even see what you did to those paintings?" Joe actually laughed, and I narrowed my eyes on him. "It's not funny."

"Oh, whatever," Joe responded coolly. "It was just a bunch of stupid pictures... listen, I'm sorry about drinking last night, okay? I didn't mean to get us in trouble. And, like Haily said, it could have been worse. Let's just... move on. Who knows, maybe we won't be grounded before summer's actually over and we'll have time to hit all the parties."

I continued to glare at Joe, not even sure what to say to that until Caleb nudged me.

"Hey," he said. "Forget it, okay? It's over."

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With my eyes half open, I sat in the front room at the police department, watching as uniformed officers passed me every now and then. It was only five forty-five in the morning, and if you asked me, no time to be coherent. I wouldn't even have eaten breakfast this morning if my mom hadn't caught me on my way out the door with a few toaster waffles and a box of juice in her hands. Then, she'd pointed out that I wasn't wearing shoes, and I had to turn back around, not really willing to chastise myself for forgetting footwear because it had been difficult enough to dress in my old blue-jean shorts and a white t-shirt, stained from every time I ever helped my dad around

the house.

I wasn't a morning person. I just wasn't. I wasn't when I woke up. I wasn't when I left home in my navy blue '81 Buick, which had been passed down to me from my mom. It had been rusty brown before I got it and Caleb helped me replace most of the interior and redo the paint job so it looked like a decent vehicle; and my dad helped me keep up with maintenance, so I never had any trouble with it. Except for when I was on my way to pick up Caleb so we could go to the police station together since he was having the jeep's window repaired, and I spilled hot coffee on my thigh, staining my shorts when I came to a quick stop at a yellow light. I blamed the car for that. It seemed reasonable at the time.

I was irritable, but that was probably because of my headache. I hadn't slept much the night before. I'd been too busy wondering what tasks Uncle Ray would put us up to, or whether or not I'd see Thompson Trust Junior. On the one hand, I hoped that he'd be there just because I liked looking at him. On the other hand, I knew that this attraction was completely one-sided and when I rationally thought about it, it occurred to me that the guy thought I was a complete prick, and probably blamed me just as much as everyone else for destroying all of his work. I wasn't really even sure how I'd face him if he did show up.

I wasn't irritable very often, which is probably why Caleb was so accommodating on the rare occasions when I was. I think he figured it made up for all the times that I put up with his less-than-gentle personality. I looked up as he came from a small lounge, where one of the uniformed officers had told us we could help ourselves to some coffee. I'm sure neither of us looked awake. Caleb sure didn't with his wavy hair a wavy mess on his head, and his chestnut eyes were less open than mine were. He'd attempted to put on a black button-up shirt that morning and the entire front was crooked. I sat up some as he took the seat next to me and handed me one of the two eight-ounce styrofoam cups he was carrying. I looked down at the black steaming liquid in mine and made a face.

"They're all out of sugar and stuff," Caleb explained, sipping his and wincing at either the temperature or the taste. Possibly both. "Coffee sucks... where's your uncle?"

I mumbled a standard don't know response and shrugged. "I hope he doesn't, like, separate us or something."

"I know," Caleb agreed, and then leaned back in his own plastic chair, which like mine, was bolted to the floor, and looked at me. "Hey, Nels, do you think your dad would let me work in one of his stores for a while?"

"Why?" I asked, confused by his question. Caleb had worked in the bakeries before, but as far as I knew, he'd never cared for it. "Do you need a job or something? You know, if you need help paying for that window I think it's on

ly fair that we all pitch in."

"Hey," Caleb replied with a grin. "You guys can pitch in all you want for the window. But I don't really need a job. I'm grounded, you know? And my parents say that the only thing I can get out for is this bullshit or a job, and since you're working for your dad, I thought..."

I nodded. "Gotcha."

"That way we can at least still hang out."

"Here's not enough for you?" I asked, smirking.

"Nels, we're in a police station," he said matter-of-factly. "Not what I'd call a hangout."

"I'll talk to my dad," I promised him, smiling around a rather large yawn.

I stopped smiling, however, as my attention turned to the tall double doors at the front of the building and I watched Jame Graham walk through them. Unlike Caleb and me, it looked like he'd managed to shower and actually took the time to put on clothes that matched. I found myself sitting up a little when Jame paused to hold the door behind him, but immediately sat back, feeling a little nervous as Thompson Trust Junior stepped into the building. Obviously, no one had bothered to tell him that it wasn't even six o'clock on Saturday morning, because he looked wide awake, his sharp green eyes taking in the room, sweeping over Caleb and me as if we weren't even there, and his soft brunette locks were styled neatly on his head. His wardrobe wasn't as tidy as Jame's. Obviously, Tommy Trust knew he was there to work and he'd dressed for it in a faded black muscle shirt and dark blue jeans with a rip in the left knee. He looked good. He'd probably look good in anything he wore.

"You two, take a seat over there." The same officer that had directed Caleb and me to the coffee was now in front of Jame and Tommy, pointing to the two seats left where Caleb and I were sitting. The two seats left, happened to be on either side of us, and for this reason, Caleb downcast his eyes in a you're-not-even-worth-looking-at way as he got up and moved to the seat on the other side of me as Jame and Tommy headed over, each of them ignoring us in their own way. It was awkward, and I found myself shifting in my seat to be closer to Caleb as Jame took the spot next to me and Tommy claimed the seat on the other side of him, and then there was silence.

A lot of annoying silence. There was silence until I couldn't take it anymore and released a frustrated breath before turning towards Jame.

"I'm sorry," I said, and Jame turned a surprised set of hazel-brown eyes on me. I noticed Tommy seeming a little surprised, too, before he went back to seeming uninterested. I decided to focus on Assface. "Look Jame, last night..." I grunted when Caleb abruptly elbowed me.

"Dude, don't fucking apologize to him," Caleb insisted. "It was his own damn fault."

"My fault you guys are always acting like a bunch of fuckheads?" Jame retorted.

"Oh, shut up, Assface," Caleb responded shortly as he glared past me. "I should have put your head through my fucking window."

"Why not yours?" Jame responded with one of the smiles that was meant to aggravate Caleb. "It's thick enough, meathead."

"Meathead?" Caleb repeated, incensed, as if Jame had thrown a real insult at him. "I will break you with my fucking meathead!"

I managed to get my hands on Caleb as he attempted to lunge across me to get to Jame, but I wasn't what stopped him. It was the loud, sharp whistle that had all four of us sitting back in our seats and looking up at my Uncle Ray, who was standing there with his arms crossed, looking disapproving. Next to him was the same young officer that had pulled Trust Junior off of me the night before right before promptly cuffing both of us. He didn't look at all amused now, with his sharp dark eyes focused on us, looking rather intimidating in the same blue-and-black uniform that every officer other than my uncle wore, his short black hair slicked back in a very businesslike way.

"Okay," Ray said sternly. "You... and you." He pointed at Caleb, and then Jame. "On your feet."

"Uncle Ray..." I started, hoping to get Caleb out of any situation that he'd just managed to get himself into, but the sharp look my uncle flashed me abruptly halted my train of thought.

"While we're here you'll be calling me Sheriff Bennet," he informed me, and I swallowed as Jame and Caleb moved to their feet. "That goes for all of you." He paused and looked between Caleb and Jame for a moment before he shook his head. "If I see anything like that again you'll both be spending your time in lockup. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir," they chorused.

"I want the two of you working here today where I can keep an eye on you,

" Ray decided. "Caleb, you know where my office is?"

Caleb simply nodded.

"Wait for me there," Ray instructed, and then looked at Jame. "Both of you. And don't even think about killing each other before I get there or you'll be washing out toilets all day!"

Caleb frowned, and looked at me for a moment, obviously not liking the idea of being separated, or stuck with Jame, but at least he had enough sense to do as my uncle said without argument. When Jame and Caleb were gone, Ray looked at Trust and me pointedly. "This, is Deputy Trujillo. You're both going with him and you'll do whatever he tells you to do, got it?"

I nodded at my uncle. I didn't hear Trust say anything, so I assume he did the same because Ray looked satisfied. And then, without another word, my uncle walked away. I watched him head to his office, feeling a little confused.

ed and abandoned before Trujillo's smooth, deep voice cut into my thoughts.

"You two, follow me. And no talking. If you talk, eventually you'll try to say my name. If you pronounce it wrong, I'll have to shoot you, and it's Saturday so no one feels like cleaning up that mess."

I found myself exchanging an uncertain look with Trust, who seemed fairly annoyed with this young officer as we stood and followed him outside. As instructed, neither of us spoke, although I for one was very interested to know where we were going. Obviously, it was away from the station because Trujillo led us to a squad car and instructed me to sit in the front, and Trust to sit in the back. The vehicle obviously wasn't used to transport prisoners because there was no cage, and I found myself feeling kind of grateful for that. Guilt over last night had me feeling like Trust should have taken the front seat.

We drove through the downtown area's narrow paved streets, past the courthouse, and a few minutes later we were turning onto Chariot Road, but not towards the lake. Instead we headed for the Hill, but turned left off a side street before we reached it and into a cluster of small businesses that seemed charmingly secluded by tall shade trees, the road that I used to get home leading up the hill behind us. I knew the area well. The dance studio where Leanna worked was in the area. I had no idea why we were parking in front of the white brick building with the pink sign that read A Woman's World, though.

"Okay, go in there," Trujillo ordered, pointing at the door. He didn't even bother to unbuckle his seatbelt. "Ask for Brenda. Give her a hard time--and I shoot you." He paused and looked at me. "You're going to have to open the back door for him because it won't open from the inside."

I just stared at the officer for a long moment, not really getting any of this.

"That's it?" I finally asked.

"That's it," he responded. "Now get out. I'll see at three o'clock. If you're not out here waiting for me, I'll find you, and..."

"Shoot us?" I heard Trust Junior's voice come from the back seat and bit back a smile when Trujillo turned his head to glare at him.

"Just get out of my car," he ordered, and I did this time, remembering to open Trust's door for him. I was met with a glare coming from emerald eyes when I did this, his way of telling me that he objected to my very existence, I suppose. I ignored it.

"Look, Tommy," I said reasonably. "We're going to be here all day, so..."

"Don't call me Tommy," he cut me off, and I frowned.

"Isn't that... your name?" I tried to smile. I hoped it would make me look friendly. He did no less than scowl at me. He was cute when he smiled.

"Milo. My name's Milo."

Oh, good. Milo. I liked Milo. When he said his own name, his mouth was fun to watch--the "l" curled off his pink tongue smoothly and by the time he got to the "o" it looked like he was blowing me a kiss with those pouty lips.

"I'm Nelson," I replied. I'm sure I didn't look as sexy when I said my name. Milo certainly looked unimpressed.

"I don't care," he responded coldly, and I frowned to myself as he moved ahead of me into the building while I closed the door to the squad car and Officer Trujillo drove away.

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I'd never actually been inside A Woman's World before, but it was a clothing store. Obviously, for women. Walking in, it smelled like the lilac-scented candles that my mom liked to burn at home and clothing racks were spread over pink carpeting throughout the wide main floor. The cash registers were towards the back of the store, and that's where I'd found Milo talking to the woman named Brenda, who was wearing a blue two-piece suit over her full-figure curves and a matching barrette in her big blonde hair. She owned the store, and seemed to be under the impression that we were there volunteering to help her sort through the shop's storage because she'd be donating to an upcoming Heywell charity drive.

The storage, was actually a basement that had plenty of water damage. I guessed that the place had been flooded a few times, given its location on lower terrain. But the boxes we were supposed to go through had been on the many shelves throughout the room, which was about the size of my living room.

We were supposed to sort everything there by size and bottom, top, or dress. But first, Brenda explained, anything too wrinkled from being in boxes needed to be ironed, and as I started sorting, she showed Milo to the ironing board. He didn't complain about his task, but I got more dirty looks when practically everything I found in the boxes needed to be ironed. Milo wasn't very sociable. I tried to talk to him again a few times, pointing out funny-looking clothes, or asking what he usually did on Saturdays. I was adamantly ignored. I was getting bored, too, feeling alone and isolated because he didn't feel like talking to me. Hell, he didn't even buy my attempt to make him laugh by putting on hot pink dress with yellow polka dots. Far be it for me to be a pessimist, but I was beginning to think that Milo Trust didn't like me.

I got so bored with being trapped in a room with someone who wouldn't talk to me, I found myself flirting with Brenda when she came to check on us, just so she'd stick around longer. This earned me no extra points with Milo, though. In fact, I think he was rather disgusted with me after that. By the time Brenda insisted that we go get something to eat at little taco shop across from her store, I'd completely given up on trying to talk to Milo. He left straight for the restaurant while I followed two minutes later after calling

my uncle to make sure we were allowed to take a lunch break. He told me we had thirty minutes.

The small shop had a maximum occupancy of thirty people in the dining room, but that didn't seem to be a problem because it wasn't crowded at all. Which meant that there was really no excuse to sit with Milo, who was already picking apart his taco salad as he sat at one of the orange booths in the corner. I chose a table that had someone else at it. Peter Forest. He was in my year at school, and one of my mother's piano students. He'd been at my party the night before and spent a good fifteen minutes telling me how great it was as I ate my chicken tacos before he had to go back to his summer job at the video store across the street.

After Peter left, I found myself looking around for someone to talk to, but I didn't recognize anyone else, which sucked, because I really hated eating alone. I hated doing anything alone. I saw a few girls at a corner table near the door, one of whom might have gone to my school. I thought about joining them for a minute. They wouldn't have minded. But instead, I found myself looking at Milo again. He was sitting with his elbows on the table, silently staring out the window at traffic slowly passing by, as if he wasn't quite aware of anything else around him. In a moment of determination, I lifted my tray of food and my cherry soda, and promptly placed myself in the booth across from him. It didn't take him long to turn his head and glare at me, almost accusingly, as if I were committing a crime just by sitting there.

"Were they all ruined?" I asked, before he could object to my being there.

Milo gave me a funny look. "What?"

"Your paintings--were they all ruined?" I asked. "I mean I saw them, but..."

"Yeah, they were," he said coldly. He was looking at me accusingly again, but this time I guessed it was for a different reason. I felt like defending myself. I wanted to tell him that it wasn't my fault, but somehow, that didn't quite feel like the right thing to do.

"I'm sorry," I said honestly, but those words only earned me another hostile glare. I frowned. "Do you want it back?" I asked him.

"What back?"

"The painting--the scarecrow," I explained. "The one I got from you yesterday? I don't have it with me. It's still in my bag, I'll have to get it from Caleb. But, if you want it back, I'll give it to you. And, I'll pay you for the other ones. I mean, I probably don't have as much as they're worth, but if you want..."

Milo let out a breath as he lowered his eyes to stare at his hands, long, tan fingers spread out on the table, and I watched as his expression actually softened. Or at least, became more relaxed.

"It's not about the money. Just forget it."

I studied him for a long moment, until he met my eyes.

"Joe shouldn't have been driving," I found myself saying. "None of us should have been out there--look, it was fucked up. We were fucked up and I really am sorry. I know it's not an excuse, I just wanted to say..."

"Is it because of my last name?" he suddenly cut me off.

"What?" I didn't get it.

"My last name. Are you apologizing to me because it's Trust? Because you know my dad's the one who made sure things were kept quiet..."

"No," I said quickly, feeling a little surprised. "I mean, it's a very nice name, but it's not because... look, I wanted to apologize before I knew who you were. I really do like your paintings."

"If I was Jame would you be sitting there apologizing?" he responded, and I frowned at that. What was with this guy?

"No. He wouldn't give me a chance to apologize," I responded reasonably, and then found myself frowning at the suspicious look on his face. "I don't expect you to accept it, okay. Just... I wanted to say I'm sorry. I said it. Now, I'm gonna go iron some dresses." I stood up, taking my tray and drink again. Milo didn't object, but I still paused and looked back at him. "Just let me know if you want the painting back, or if I should pay you for the rest, okay?"

I didn't get a response. Just another glare. Milo Trust was really good at glaring. He just wasn't good at making it look intimidating. Just sexy. Green eyes and dark, thick lashes. I'm sure he didn't get it when all I managed to do was smile at him before I walked away. He kept glaring.

Milo glared at me for the next two and a half weeks. We weren't working together every day. Ray had decided that it was a bad idea to keep Caleb and Jame together the very next morning when they'd disturbed the peace at a retirement home where they were supposed to be helping out. They each had to stay an extra hour that day because of the incident. So, Ray kept Caleb and Jame separated, except for when he had the four of us picking up litter off the highway, or other places around town--mostly places where tourists frequented. He had us doing that a lot. The rest of the time, we were broken up into two, or just by ourselves, helping out around local businesses or charities. A couple times I ended up in someone's barn cleaning up after horses or at the Humane Society getting scratched to hell by cats that needed baths. The chores weren't so bad, I guess. And, it only took me a week to get used to the early schedule. Most days Caleb and I would get there together, Ray would tell us what we were doing, and Officer Trujillo would threaten to shoot us. Most of the time, Milo and Jame simply wouldn't speak to Caleb and me, and we didn't speak to them unless it was required. I tried to be friendly, though. Caleb didn't seem to understand this, but he tolerated it--to a point. One day when it was particularly windy, Milo was faced with a knocked-over trash can near the campground and when I went to help, he'

d told me to fuck off. I helped him anyway, when he made no further objection, but Caleb had heard what was said and the next thing I knew he was with us and threatening Milo with all sorts of bodily harm before Trujillo, who was babysitting us that day, told us to knock it off, or he'd shoot us. Caleb's outbursts only earned me more dirty looks from Milo. It was becoming discouraging.

I wouldn't say that I was trying to be friends with Milo Trust. It would have been a futile task to attempt something like friendship. He hung out with Assface. According to Caleb, befriending Assface or anyone who liked Assface would be like a crime against the human race as we knew it. But, I couldn't help being a little drawn to Milo. Caleb had given me my duffle bag back that second night when I dropped him off at his house and I'd hung Milo's painting on my wall, so it was the first thing I saw when I walked into my bedroom. My mom had said that she really liked it. I told her I did, too, but I didn't say that every time I looked at it I thought of the artist, and spent most of the time I usually spent sketching up goofy comics of my friends, sketching images of that night, at least the ones I could remember. But, everything was of Milo. Milo at the beach, selling Haily and I that painting. Milo kneeling down in front of his car to change the tire, Milo over me, ready to rip my head off...

I did a lot of thinking about Milo. As the weeks passed and everyone's parents let up on their punishments, Joe and Haily began to come visit Caleb and me at whatever one of the four bakeries we worked at on the weekends; and as my friends and I were able to schedule more visits with each other, meeting for a short time at someone's house, or even meeting at Hangman Cove after Caleb and I were finished with our community service for the day, things began to feel normal again. But when I was home, and by myself in my room, I was always thinking about Milo. When it came to his painting, I thought about returning it every time I looked at it, but he never asked me to, so it stayed right there on the wall in room, and continued to be the first thing I saw when I walked in. Until four days before our community service was supposed to be over.

Uncle Ray had decided to let the four of us off two days early, giving us a free weekend before school started again. Four days before, on a Tuesday morning, once again I'd found myself picking up litter near the highway as I listened to Caleb bitch about how he wanted to get laid at least one more time before summer ended, preferably at Hangman Cove because this year, he wanted to hang a bra next to the scarecrow. I wasn't to tell Haily this because according to Caleb, she'd slap him. He was likely correct in his assumption.

"So you wanna go to Hangman this weekend?" I asked him.

"Hell, yeah. But Joe's not fucking driving. You think Haily will agree to be

designated?"

"I'll do it," I replied.

Caleb gave me a funny look. "You sure?"

"Yeah, it's no problem," I insisted.

"Yeah, you guys missed a spot!"

I frowned, wondering why Assface took it upon himself to provoke Caleb. I found myself grabbing my best friend's arm, just in case he decided that he was in a bad mood. But instead he looked at the empty soda can amongst a tangle of tumbleweeds on the side of the road, picked it up, and threw it in Jame's direction. Jame laughed, and I saw Milo smack his arm and tell him to just get back to work. Caleb turned to me, shaking his head.

"I'm so tired of those fuckers," he remarked. "I can't wait 'til this shit is over and we don't have to deal with them anymore."

It was those very words that had me pausing to look towards Milo, and suddenly, our community service being over didn't sound like such a good thing. Summer was almost over. I'd be starting school, at a school that Milo Trust didn't go to. I felt a little sad about that. Maybe we weren't exactly friends, but I was pretty sure that I'd miss seeing him. I'd even miss the way he glared at me, or the way he told me to fuck off when I tried to do something to help him. It was kinda pathetic, actually, this sense of loss I felt. But that night when I went home and looked at Milo's painting, a strange sense of closure came over me as I finally decided that I needed to return it. He'd lost all of his work that night, except this, and since I was partly responsible for destroying the other paintings, I'd convinced myself that I didn't have a right to have this one, no matter how much I'd grown to love it.

Only, returning it was easier said than done. I took it with me to the Police department the next day, but when I tried to return it to Milo, he rolled his green eyes at me and walked away. Now, I understand that a normal person would have figured that he didn't want it back, and likely would have left the situation alone, but I didn't do that. Instead, that afternoon, I looked up the Trust's phone number in the phone book. Of course, it wasn't listed.

So, on Thursday, I did something incredibly stalker-ish. I followed Milo Trust home. Actually, first I followed him to Assface's house when he dropped off Jame, and then I followed him home. I was actually really surprised that he didn't see me, even though I tried to stay a block away from him at all times. But even then, I was really surprised that he hadn't heard me, since Caleb was in the car, and adamantly objecting to this behavior.

"Please tell me we're doing this so we can egg their houses later," he'd said.

"I just want his address so I can mail that painting back," I explained, at which point Caleb rolled his eyes at me and insisted that if it were him, that stupid painting would be in a million pieces and floating across the lake. W

e were on our way home shortly after that, after I'd seen Milo pull into a long driveway, only a block or so away from where all of our troubles had started three weeks before.

.....

I'd never planned on mailing that painting back. I'd planned to do something much stupider, actually. But on Friday morning, our last day of community service, I decided to give myself one more reason not to do it as I brought the painting back to the police station and presented it to Milo while everyone was waiting for Ray. Fortunately, Caleb happened to be using the restroom, because he would have disapproved of this. Jame was there, though, standing up with Milo as I approached them in the bolted-down chairs that we always waited in. Milo's eyes were on the painting, his expression cold and blank.

"Will you just give it up?" Assface remarked, rolling his eyes at me.

I ignored him and held out the painting for Milo. "It's yours; you know you don't want me to have it, so please just..."

"I don't care about it, okay?" he responded firmly, right before he went to wait by the doors with Assface. As for me, I felt a little hurt, wondering how he couldn't care about such a beautiful piece of work that he'd obviously put a lot of time into. Definitely more than twenty-five-bucks worth, if you asked me. He had to care about it. I refused to believe anything else. That's why, as soon as we were done for the day, I told Caleb, who'd brought his jeep again, that I'd call him, and I drove to the north side of town, trusting that Milo would drive Assface home before he headed to his own house. I parked my Buick across the street from the Trust residence, and took it in for a moment, something that I hadn't given myself time to do a few days ago. There was a tall, black gate around the property, which was located on its own little hill. The yard didn't seem very big, but then again, no one's yard seemed big compared to what I had at the back of my house. The Trust's seemed to have more gardens than grass, too. It looked like someone had raided a seasonal flower shop and dumped it all around their house. The house itself, was definitely much larger than ours. The molded stone entryway that shaded the front door looked more like something you'd see on a castle, and the house itself was as tall as it was wide, grayish blue, with plenty of windows.

As I left my vehicle with the painting, which I'd wrapped carefully in paper, I turned my attention to the gate. It was open at the driveway, where a black Mercedes was parked close to the closed, black garage door. It wasn't Milo's car, so I decided that I was safe. I planned to be quick, anyway. I walked up two steps, cement painted and stamped to look like dark stone, and moved under the entry where I looked at the wrapped package in my hands, imagining the painting of the scarecrow at sunrise, and the initials of MT

one more time before I carefully placed it against the wall, wanting Milo to see it when he came home.

I was on my way down the steps, ready to get back to my car and out of there before Milo did get home, when the sound of the door swinging open behind me had me spinning around, feeling startled as I came face to face with a woman who looked to be in her early thirties, and looking equally surprised to see a strange boy with torn jeans and a dirty t-shirt standing on the front porch.

"Can I help you?" she asked, pushing her shoulder-length black hair behind her ear, taking a moment to touch the diamond earring hanging from it as she narrowed her dark eyes on me.

Feeling entirely taken off guard, I pointed at the package I'd just left on the porch.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't want to bother anyone. That's, um, Milo's. I was just returning it."

Her pretty face brightened at that as she held down her simple black dress as she knelt down to lift it up.

"Oh, are you a friend of Milo's?"

"Um... yeah," I lied, not sure what else to say as I fidgeted on my feet.

"I haven't seen you before, what's your name?"

Name? She was taking names?

"Bobby," I blurted, before I could think to stop myself.

"It's nice to meet you," she replied with a warm smile. "I'm Emily Hill."

She extended her left, manicured, thin hand and my eyes fell on the shining rock that she happened to have on it. When I put the ring and the name together, Emily Hill equaled Thompson Trust's fiancé. I shook her hand quickly, and gently.

"It's nice to meet you," I said. "Um, I've gotta get..."

"Oh no!" she suddenly exclaimed, glancing down at her watch. "I am so late... here." my eyes widened when she passed the package to me. "You really shouldn't leave this out here, it could rain." Confused, I looked above us, wondering where she possibly could have gotten the idea that it would rain while there wasn't a cloud in sight and the sun was beating down on us in full force. "Juanita!" Emily Hill suddenly called into the house, through the opened front door. I looked up as a petite latina woman who looked no older than Emily Hill and wearing a black-and-white pants uniform appeared in the doorway. "I really need to go," Emily said to me, looking politely apologetic. "Go ahead and give it to Juanita. She'll make sure Milo gets it. Juanita," she called over her shoulder as she moved past me and indicated the package in my hands. "Will you please give that to Milo?"

I sighed as Emily Hill gave me a big smile and small wave as she headed towards the Mercedes parked in the driveway, and then I turned to face Juanita

, eager to get the package out of my hands.

"Milo?" she said in a thick accent, and I held out the painting.

"Yeah, could you..."

"El cuarto de Milo esta por allá, estará en casa pronto," she said, and I blinked at her.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I took Latin, and I'm not even good at that, look..

." I pointed at the package in my hands, and then shook my head when she started to actually wave me into the house.

"¡¡Apurate tonto, no tengo todo el día!!"

"No, no, no," I insisted as she placed a hand on my arm, looking entirely impatient.

"Sí, sí, sí su cuarto está por aquí."

As she pulled me into the house with surprising strength for such a tiny woman, I shook my head, feeling panicked. "Aren't you supposed to know what no means? I'm just trying to drop this off."

I released a disgruntled grunt as she closed the front door on us, and then I just stood there stupidly as she passed me, waving me into the house. I looked desperately at the package in my hands, wondering if I should just drop it and run, but Juanita was already waving to me from the bottom of the hardwood stairs that seemed to match the rest of the floors.

"¡Por aquí, Vamos! "

I made a split decision--probably not the right one, and followed her, taking in the house as I went. The vaulted ceilings around me made it seem larger than it actually was, and I had a feeling that Emily Hill didn't live there yet.

It didn't look like a woman had ever touched it, in fact, with bare white walls and masculine leather furniture in the long living room to the left of the stairs. The hallway above the stairs seemed dark, having all of the doors closed as we passed them. Juanita stopped at the very last door at the end of the hall and opened it, stepping aside to let me in. I didn't budge. I just stared at the full-sized bed with the plain maroon comforter that was directly in my line of sight.

"Milo estará en casa pronto," Juanita said. "Esperate aquí."

I looked at her, wondering if she knew that I couldn't understand anything she was saying. But she was waving me into the room, and wanting to get the painting out of my hands, I moved in, intending to leave it and get out of there. But, as soon as I'd stepped onto one of the many assorted rugs covering the entire bedroom floor, Juanita was walking off down the hall.

"Hey!" I called after her, and when I got no response I frowned to myself. "

I'll show myself out," I muttered, and then quickly headed to the bed. I placed the package right on the end of it, where I was sure Milo would see it, spun around, and stopped in my tracks.

I was in Milo's bedroom.

I guess you could say that curiosity hit me then. After all that time thinking about him, wondering what he did with his spare time, wondering where he slept or whether he brushed his teeth before or after he showered, prevented me from fleeing right away. Instead I took a moment to take it in, and I found that I liked very much what I saw.

There was a wide window to the left of his bed and the dark curtains were drawn open, leaving the view unobstructed. As I slowly approached it, I could almost see a large portion of the lake, most of the town, and even the hill in the distance. In fact, I felt like I was driving down it, only facing the opposite direction. And Milo's room smelled like paint. There was a reason for that, I noticed as I looked around. There were easels scattered around, each one holding a different canvas with a different painting. None of them looked finished, but I immediately decided that they were all beautiful. Everything in his room was beautiful. He had paintings everywhere, some hanging on the walls, along with sketches of various objects, and there were more paintings, stacked against the walls, over the bookshelf and even a computer desk; and as I slowly walked around, looking at various landmarks and buildings--sometimes even faces that made up Heywell--I found myself studying details, holding my fingers above the initials MT that showed up repeatedly around the room, and wondering why I didn't see anything that looked like the view out his bedroom window.

Everything was perfect, though. Every single painting, all of the little details, like the cracks in the roof of the courthouse, or the blue-and-white tennis shoes hanging on the phone line above Chariot road at the stop light where I turned left to get to the lake. It seemed almost like Milo had the whole town in his bedroom. I even decided that I liked the paint splatter on some of the rugs as it occurred to me why he had so many of them.

As I looked around, I noticed more paintings next to closed closet door, only these were covered by a paint-splattered sheet, one end of the cloth hanging off a large painting which caught my eye. I went to it, pulling the sheet away curiously and smiled at the very view that I'd spotted out his window.

He'd used a large canvas for this, and I couldn't blame him. It really was a beautiful view. But, my curiosity didn't stop there as my eye caught more paintings behind it, these being portraits of people. Some I didn't know, some I recognized. As I went through them, I found Assface, and actually laughed out loud. It was the only cartoonish figure I found in Milo's room, and he'd made Jame's cheeks comically big. I also found one of Emily Hill, and became interested in the way Milo portrayed her. She had an alarmingly stern look to her, set in a flaming background and her eyes were tinted a frightening red.

It was Juanita moving around in the hallway that snapped me out of my snooping, as I remembered where I was, and how I wasn't supposed to be there. I li

fted the sheet, wanting to put it back exactly as I'd found it, but paused a gain when I noticed one more painting, the image facing the wall. I reached for it, turning the thin frame towards me so I could better see it, and then froze as I came face to face with myself.

I didn't know how to react to this. All I knew, was that I was blushing furiously--not in the painting but standing there in the room, looking at it. It was as a black and white image, except for my eyes. He'd made my eyes so blue that they glowed back at me, and he'd made me look handsome, I thought. It wasn't exactly what I saw in the mirror, but... it was me, with a little smile on the right corner of my mouth. Flirty smile, if I had to describe it. Me. But, just seeing myself wasn't what had me blushing scarlet. Nope. It was me, naked, that did that. The me in the portrait, or painting or whatever the hell he wanted to call it, didn't have a stitch of clothing on his body as he sat cross-legged. And I was anatomically correct. But, that wasn't all. I was anatomically correct and completely hard--penis sticking right up. Yep. And he definitely hadn't attempted to make that according to scale because no one is that big! Just right there, a thick long penis sticking up between my legs like something a pornstar would kill for.

I stuttered incoherently to myself, my head spinning over this discovery as I quickly turned the painting around and threw the sheet back over all of them. I didn't even take the time to wonder why Milo had decided to make art out of me and my... parts. Or in this case, absurd parts that I just didn't have. I just needed to get out of there before he got home and I decided to ask why he hadn't bothered to circumcise me.

Once the sheet was in place, I fled, ignoring the way that Juanita shouted after me as she put matching red towels away in a hallway closet near the stairs. I made it down the stairs and to the front door, my hand on the knob before it suddenly turned on its own and the door swung inwards at me; and as the force of the thick cedar hit my shoulder I lost my footing and fell backwards with a dull thump, thoroughly bruising my ass on the hardwood floor.

Chapter 3: Looking for a Chance

by DomLuka

Thanks to Jim for editing!

I must have been out of my mind. I never should have been at the Trust's house, let alone in it. And Juanita must have recently waxed the hardwood floors because she was now standing halfway down the stairs with her hands at the hips of her two-piece black suit, shaking her bemused head at me, her long, dark hair shaking with it, as I attempted to get up before the door opened any further, but slipped and landed right back on my ass.

I was caught. Terrified. Caught. In shock. I was fucking caught, and in my panic, I lifted my foot and kicked the door so hard that it snapped shut again. Juanita's jaw dropped, and I found myself looking back at her as she rush

ed down the stairs, yelling a whole lot of things that I'm sure meant, very, very bad. I was so preoccupied with the way she was shouting at me, that I failed to get up on a third try. I really didn't remember the floor being so slippery when I'd entered the house.

"What is going on?" It was a distinctly male voice coming from the other side of the heavy, dark door and it gave me pause, just as I made it to my knees, grunting when Juanita grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the way. She was still shouting at me. Or maybe, at someone else. All I knew, was that it was hurting both of my pierced ears and I was eternally grateful when it stopped. But that was only because the tall man--really tall man, who not only towered over me, but would likely tower over Caleb, too--with piercing green eyes--currently narrowed--and a set jaw, stepped through the door, held his long, index finger up to his full top lip, and shushed Juanita while I stared at him.

I suppose shining was the word that came to mind. Even when there was no radiant smile to show off his curvy lips and white teeth, the man still had a presence about him. His wardrobe might as well have been perfectly tailored to his body because there wasn't a sleeve out of place or a waistline too high on his baby-blue dress shirt or black dress pants. Even his tie looked like it had grown on his neck. His shoes shone, and so did his dark hair--in the same soft, subtle way that Milo's did. He looked a lot like Milo, just like in the poster at my bank. But in person, it seemed that he glared like Milo, too.

"Who are you?" he demanded, looking at me before he looked at Juanita and addressed her. "¿Quién es?"

I actually groaned, not at all happy that now there were two people blocking my way out the front door who I couldn't understand, when Juanita moved around me to join Mr. Trust as she started chattering again.

"No sé. La SeZora Hill me dijo a llevarle al cuarto de Milo, pero anda como un loco! Creo que está borracho," she finished, regarding me suspiciously.

I had a feeling that whatever she was saying, wasn't exactly flattering towards me, the way that Thompson Trust was suddenly regarding me cynically.

"I'm sorry," I cut in, deciding that it was a good idea to interrupt before I got arrested again. "Mr. Trust? I'm sorry... I'm just going to leave now." I took a brave step forward, meaning to reach the door, but Mr. Trust also took a step forward, his proud posture blocking me in as his green eyes fell over mine.

"What were you doing in my son's bedroom?" he demanded, looking me over from head to toe, as if he fully expected to find something pillaged from his property on my person.

My eyes widened at the question and I pointed a shaky finger at Juanita. "S

he took me there!"

Juanita released an outraged gasp as one hand went to her hip. "No, no," she said firmly. I wondered if she even knew what I was talking about.

"Yes, yes," I retorted, before turning the best blue, pleading eyes I could on Mr. Trust. "Look, it was all a mistake," I insisted. "Someone else... someone else... someone else..." I groaned as I tried to remember the name of the woman who I'd originally run into, and Mr. Trust frowned at me. "Emily Hill!" I blurted, stoked that I remembered. Mr. Trust seemed unimpressed, but his shoulders did seem to relax at the mention of the name. "I was dropping something off for Milo. Painting--it's his." Mr. Trust crossed his arms, still looking rather stern so I rushed the rest of my explanation. "She thought you were her housekeeper..."

Juanita gasped again. I was beginning to see her as a very overdramatic individual. "Housekeeper?" she repeated in her very thick accent, looking entirely insulted.

"Juanita is not a housekeeper," Mr. Trust informed me, sounding somewhat snotty.

"Okay," I responded, becoming exasperated quickly. "Your... Juanita should take it to Milo's room. But, she misunderstood and took me there instead. I was just trying to return the painting. Honest. Can I please go now?"

Rather than responding to me, Mr. Trust turned back to Juanita, and once again they involved themselves in a conversation that I didn't understand. But, I did hear the name Tommy mentioned several times. I sighed, feeling rather stuck in this situation, but straightened immediately when Mr. Trust looked at me again.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Bobby," I lied, for the second time in one afternoon. Unfortunately, just as I said it, the door behind Mr. Trust and Juanita opened again, and this time Milo walked through it, carrying a handful of mail, innocently flipping through it until he bothered to look up, his eyes widening as he saw me and stopped in his tracks.

"Nelson?" he practically spat out, and now I had two members of the Trust family glaring at me.

"Nelson?" Mr. Trust repeated.

"Bobby Nelson," I said quickly. "Most people just call me Nelson."

Feeling caught, and completely desperate, I looked at Milo Trust, who had raised a perfectly arched eyebrow at me, pleadingly. It was all I really could do. He definitely had no reason to, but at the moment, I could only hope that he'd take pity on me. I threw a nervous but friendly smile in his direction.

"Hi, Milo, I was just here... returning that painting." For this, Milo Trust rolled his eyes at me.

"You can't be serious," Milo mumbled.

"Tommy, do you know him?" Mr. Trust asked.

"Unfortunately," Milo remarked.

"Hey--I really have to get going," I insisted, cautiously stepping between Mr. Trust and Juanita. But, as I passed Milo, I made another mistake. "That painting's on your bed," I told him, and suddenly Milo was glaring at me again, his hand suddenly latching onto my arm, just above my elbow, so tight that I thought it was going to bruise. I met his eyes, feeling a little startled, and completely taken aback by the forced smile on his face that actually appeared frightening.

"You don't have to leave," he said, faking nice. "Stay a while."

I studied him for a moment, suddenly wondering if he had a basement and intended to bury me in it as I put on a fake smile of my own.

"I really need to go," I told him.

"It'll only take a second," he countered. "I want to show you another painting."

With those words, I felt my stomach rise into my throat, wondering exactly what painting he intended to show me, but managed to keep a straight face as I bit at my top lip.

"Fine," I replied quietly, and Milo suddenly released my arm, and looked away from me altogether, to face his father.

"Will you be home for dinner?" Milo asked.

"No," Mr. Trust started. "I'm meeting Emily at..."

To my surprise, that's as far as Mr. Trust got before Milo cut him off. "See you later, then. We'll be in my room."

Milo nodded for me to follow him, and reluctantly, I did so as he passed Juanita, smiling at her as he handed her the mail. But instinctively I stopped in front of the shiny wood stairs, even if Milo didn't, when Mr. Trust called out again. "Tommy, I want to talk to you before I leave."

"I have homework, Dad," Milo responded, still not looking back.

"It's summer!" Mr. Trust responded. He looked irritated when his eyes fell on me again, and as soon as he frowned, I was quickly following Milo again, and as I caught up to him, I found myself explaining in a hushed tone, about how entirely none of this was my fault because Juanita had misunderstood Emily Hill. Not that my excuses even mattered. For all I knew, Milo wasn't even listening to me. He didn't look at me or acknowledge my presence at all as we moved down the empty hall and I came to a stop with him in front of his opened bedroom door.

"Don't come in," Milo said simply, and I frowned at him as I watched him move into his room, while I obediently stayed put--for about two seconds, before I remembered that I wasn't his dog. I still stopped one step into his room, though, looking down at the corner of a blue rug and the center of a green one beneath my feet. I suppose I was just waiting, not really sure what

t I was doing there. When I looked up, however, I frowned again, to see Milo moving around his room very slowly and suspiciously, looking at many of the paintings that I'd stopped to take the time to look at with only quick glances, as if he were taking inventory. He was also looking at me every few moments, as if he expected me to give something away, which is why I did everything in my power to avoid looking towards the paintings covered by the white sheet near his closet.

"Fuck," I finally cursed, more exasperated than anything at this point, and when Milo looked at me I lifted my arms. "Wanna search me?" I remarked. He narrowed those emerald eyes of his without comment before turning towards his bed, and I watched him lift the package I'd left from the burgundy comforter. With his back to me, he tore the paper rather carelessly, dropping it on the paint-splattered rugs covering the floor before he held up the painting, inspecting it for several long moments.

Milo slowly turned around, once again meeting my eyes. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Me?" I asked, surprised. "I wanted to go home, remember? You're the one who wanted to show me something," I added, preparing myself, just in case he was brazen enough to show me the only painting in his room that was hard for me to look at. But, as much as I was terrified of him doing just that, I was also curious, wondering what his intentions were. My instincts told me that he wouldn't dare try to show it to me, not that painting. But I was also questioning why he painted it. Fantasy, and a little common sense told me that Milo Trust didn't have a girlfriend, and he'd probably never be looking for a girlfriend, and that was an interesting and severely appealing thought to have. Caution, however, told me that his intentions were much more malicious than that, and for all I knew, he could be planning to hang it out in front of the post office as a practical joke, in which case, I'd have to kill him. That paranoid thought also had me wondering if he'd shown it to anyone already, like Jame Graham. That, I was afraid, would also warrant homicide.

Milo didn't show me that painting, though. Instead, he moved forward and held out the scarecrow portrait that I'd just tried to return to him, watching me carefully as my eyes fell over the detailed image set in front of the sunrise.

"Take it," he said.

I continued to stare for a moment, but did no such thing. Instead, I lifted my eyes, facing him reasonably.

"I don't feel right about keeping it," I said honestly.

He cocked his head at me. "You bought it. It's yours."

"Your other paintings..."

"You don't hear me offering to buy your jackass friend a new window, do you?"

he cut me off. "Just take the painting, and go away. Stay away this time, alright?" I just frowned, still refusing to take it. "If you don't, I'll burn it," he challenged, and I looked at him, a small amused smile curling my lip. "No you wouldn't."

"Try me."

I frowned at that, his threat bothering me more than I wanted to let him know as I looked at the painting that I'd grown quite attached to. Burn it. That was just wrong. I watched Milo brush his soft, dark locks back behind his ear when I reached out and took the painting from him. Once it was in my hands, he regarded me expectantly with a pointed look that told me that I was to leave, immediately. I almost did just that, too. He certainly didn't want me there, and I'd already gotten myself into enough trouble. But, knowing that I'd be walking out of a room that had a painting of naked me in it gave me a pause as my mind focused on what his intentions were. For a brief moment, I thought of simply confronting him about it. Chances were, he'd be more embarrassed about it than I was, even if he had malicious intentions. But, I realized, I didn't want to embarrass him. Despite his blunt resistance to any effort I made to fall in his good graces, I still liked him. Plus, he was the only guy in this town, besides the flamer at the bookstore, who I'd met that could actually be gay. This wasn't exactly something that I was eager to walk away from.

"How long did it take you to paint this?" I asked conversationally, looking down to inspect the painting in my hands, once again appreciating the warm colors behind the tree as much as I appreciated the image of the ugly, dark scarecrow hanging from it.

"I don't remember," Milo responded tiredly. "Do I need to walk you to the door?" He made even the idea of it sound like a chore.

I smiled at him. "That would be great. Your housekeeper kind of freaks me out."

"Juanita's not a housekeeper," he responded hotly, passing me to move out his opened door.

"Then... what is she?" I asked nosily as I followed him into the hallway. "Because, she was doing your laundry, and I'm pretty sure she waxed the floor--right in front of the door, like..."

"She does a lot around here," Milo cut me off, abruptly stopping as he rounded on me. "She's family, and she doesn't... freak people out."

"She freaked me out."

"Well, you're a fucking idiot."

Milo turned to keep walking, but stopped and spun around again, looking annoyed as hell when I touched the short sleeve of his forest-green shirt, which was as dirty and wrinkled as mine from all of the work we'd done earlier.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I asked calmly, just like I'd ask any normal person who wasn't entirely bothered by my general existence.

"What?" Milo snapped. His eyes were narrowed and there was a frown in his brow as he lifted his hand, once again pushing his hair back, giving me a better view of his handsome, yet perturbed face.

"What is it about me that you can't stand?" I asked. "I mean, I apologized for what happened with your paintings. I offered to pay for them, and I understand how fucked up the whole thing was in the first place. Why don't you like me?"

"I don't even know you," Milo responded as he turned for the third time and headed down the empty hallway, leaving me to follow in his wake.

"So, why not get to know me?"

"Because I don't like you," he replied, matter-of-factly.

"Which, brings me back to why not?"

"Why do you even care?" he retorted, his green eyes flashing at me as he glanced over his shoulder before facing ahead, just in time to move down the stairs.

"Don't you like to know why people don't like you when... you know, they don't like you?"

"No."

"Why not?" I asked, finding him quite impossible.

"Why would I if they don't like me, anyway?" he said, stopping in front of his front door and opening it for me. I didn't quite realize how dim the lighting in his house was until the sun from outside poured over me, causing my eyes to squint in Milo's general direction. "Are you leaving yet?" he asked impatiently.

I frowned, and stepped through the door, but only halfway, just in case he planned to slam it on me once I was on the other side. I turned to face him, still cradling the painting in my hands.

"I'll probably be at Hangman Cove tomorrow afternoon," I announced, even if it was information that he didn't care to have. "Any chance you'll be there?"

"Not anymore," he said flatly, and suddenly I had to step back because apparently, he didn't need to wait to slam his door before I was on the other side of it.

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I lay face down in my green swim trunks on Leanna's long, pink beach towel, propped up on my elbows as I lifted a hand full of warm, white sand and watched it drain through my fingers. The temperature had reached the low nineties today. I couldn't even see any clouds set against the blue sky, just plenty of sun reflecting off the water and beating down on my bare back, which Haily had recently applied an extra coat of sunscreen to for me, the scene

nt of it flooding my nostrils as much as the scent of the lake and the food being sold all around it.

Hangman Cove was just as busy as it was every other Saturday, but it was the snow-cone vendor who was making a fortune. From where I was resting behind my brother, who was stretched out on a blue towel with Leanna straddling his back, braiding his shoulder-length pink hair, I could see Haily and Joe in line. They'd promised to bring me back a grape snow cone, and Leanna and Chad--who was fronting the bill--strawberry. Caleb was there, too. Somewhere in the water, I guessed. That's where most people were today because of the heat. Caleb, Joe, Haily, and I had come around noon, ready to relax over the last weekend we had to enjoy before school started, and we'd unexpectedly run into my brother, something I was happy about, since he hadn't answered his phone the night before when I wanted to talk about Milo Trust.

"Are you sure it was you you saw?" Chad asked, moving his fist to prop up his chin as he looked over at me from behind purple sunglasses. I'd told him all about what I'd done after community service the day before, including how I'd found that painting in Chad's room. It had been hard not to think about, and I was hoping that Chad would have a helpful opinion on the matter.

"I don't think you understand just how good this guy is," I replied. "His paintings are... fucking amazing. They look real. Did you see the one of the scarecrow that's in my room?" Chad shook his head. "Well, it's good. And, yeah, I'm sure it was me. Naked. I mentioned naked, right?"

"You mentioned naked," Leanna said, pulling one of Chad's braids tighter, causing him to wince.

"So what do you think?" I asked. "I mean, do you think I should worry? I don't want to think about fliers of that floating around town."

"He doesn't like you?" Chad asked, taking an interest in picking the dirt out of his thumbnail.

"Hates me," I stated, frowning. "Pretty sure of it. Like, I think if I tried to be any nicer to him, he'd take it as an insult and spit on me."

"Maybe he's still pissed about what happened when you got arrested," Chad said. "I guess this could be revenge. Have you heard anything... I mean, do you think he's shown anyone?"

"I haven't heard anything--but I only saw it yesterday."

"He could be gay," Chad suggested. "He doesn't have to like you to have a thing for you."

"Why can't he like me and have a thing for me?" I complained.

"I like this theory better," Leanna spoke up as she looked at me. Without her thick glasses, her features didn't seem as tiny, but in her one-piece black suit with a butterfly pattern on it, and her light, short hair parted into pigta

ils, she looked a lot younger than she was. "You said in the painting you were ..."

"Yes, naked," I said.

"No, besides that," she responded, turning back to face Chad's hair as a pink blush colored her cheeks. "You know, that you were..."

"Saluting the chief," Chad finished for her.

"Saluting the chief?" Leanna repeated, rolling her eyes. "Who ever says that?" She paused and looked at me again. "My point is, he gave you a big pecker, right?"

Chad laughed. "Pecker?"

"Oh, Christ," I muttered, running my fingers through my short hair and wishing that I had a hat because my scalp was actually starting to hurt under the sun. "Yes, I was saluting the chief with my big pecker--not me, the painting. But... you get the picture, so to speak."

"Don't you think that he would have given you a small one if he wanted to embarrass you?" Leanna replied, ignoring the way that Chad was now laughing hysterically beneath her.

"I don't know," I said reasonably. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before." I paused and looked at Leanna. "I like this theory better, too."

"So you like him?" Chad asked me. "Thompson Trust's kid?" My brother sounded a little skeptical.

"He's kind of a jerk," I admitted. "I mean, to me. Not hard to look at, though."

"So you've chosen to be completely shallow about this?" Leanna remarked.

"Mostly shallow," I admitted, cracking a small smile. "But, someone who paints like he does can't be all bad. Seriously, the next time you're over you'll have to see the one in my room. It's perfect."

"I think I'd like to see it," Leanna replied. "Remind me." She smiled as she finished off another tight braid in my brother's hair, and regarded me curiously as she got the next strand ready. "So you met Thompson Trust?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," I replied, dusting off Leanna's towel where I'd spilled some sand on it.

"I've only seen him once," she said. "I was at the park with my mom and he was across the street at the library, getting into his car. I didn't really get a good look at him. Does he look as good as he does in the posters?"

"Baby," Chad whined, looking over his shoulder at his girlfriend. "I'm right here!"

Leanna rolled her eyes and leaned forward to kiss my brother's cheek. "I know you are," she promised, right before looking at me again. "So is he?"

"At least as good," I replied, and then smiled. "But you should see Milo."

"You're both pathetic," Chad commented, before turning his attention in my

direction more seriously. "I don't know, Nels. Have you tried talking to him? Like, make a fresh start. Maybe he'll come around if you really try to introduce yourself."

"Introduce yourself to who?"

The three of us looked up at the sound of Haily's voice to find her and Joe standing over us, their hands filled with assorted snow cones, already dripping, from the look of purple and red streaks of color running down Joe's tanned, toned chest and into the waistband of his red suit.

"Mr. Danner," I said smoothly. "Just in case I get him for History again this year. He doesn't really like me."

"That's because you and Caleb replaced his midterm with that stupid test you guys made up," Haily responded, whipping her head around to get her long braid behind her as she sat next to me, cross-legged and started to pass out snow cones.

Joe laughed. "I remember that. Name four alternative words for breasts."

Chad chuckled, while Leanna raised one of her thin eyebrows at me.

"That one was Caleb's," I said. "Plus, Danner never proved it was us."

"That doesn't mean he didn't figure it out," Haily insisted. "I wouldn't worry, though, Nels. He'd never let either of you guys back in one of his classes."

That was probably true. But, I had a feeling that I had a better chance of getting into one of Mr. Danner's classes than I ever had getting back into Milo Trust's house.

.....
Leanna and Chad didn't stay past three on Saturday. They'd told my mom that they'd be over for dinner, something that I was going to skip. The last weeks of my summer had been spent on community service, and regardless of whether I'd deserved it or not, I felt like those days had been wasted. Summers were very important. They were right up there with spring break and Christmas vacation. Sure, there were parties and events and otherwise suitable occasions to get together with friends and completely forget about having a single care in the world. But summer was not meant to be wasted. I had a day and a half of it left, and while it was so hot outside that even Caleb was willing to decline the beer that a few girls offered to us, and I was almost out of sunscreen, I was determined to have fun before I went home. I started with swimming with Joe. Usually when Joe Douglas wasn't wasted or otherwise impaired, he could come off as a very serious individual. He'd never be caught wrestling with me and Caleb in the middle of the halls at school, or hawking giant loogies with Haily. But when he got in the water, Joe could be as rambunctious as the next, and given the attraction I'd always had towards him, I never turned down a swim with Joe. There was splashing and shoving and full body contact every time he got his arms around

me. The highlight of last summer was in Teresa Milldrum's swimming pool when his hand had actually slipped up my shorts. Completely accidental, of course. But, it had been memorable for me.

Only today, I didn't feel the normal thrill that I would while wrestling around with Joe in the cool, teal water that came up to our necks. But, it wasn't the first time that I'd felt a lack of interest in him over the last few weeks. Ever since we were arrested my interest had been dwindling, but I reasoned that that was because Joe was just a crush, and now I seemed to have a new one in Milo Trust. Too bad that unlike Joe, Milo Trust couldn't stand me. There was still that painting, though. That explicit painting hidden in his room had my interest piqued. Perhaps I saw it as a sign of hope. Hope that I'd meet another gay guy before I turned fifty. Hell, it was possible that it could be even longer than that. The flamer who owned the bookstore was in his forties, and as far as I was aware, he was still alone.

I guess in all honesty, I wanted what my friends could have. Last year, Haily had two boyfriends. Neither of them had lasted beyond a week, but she'd still had them. She held their hands in the halls, she'd skipped out on hanging out with us so she could go out with them. Joe had done the same thing with the last girl he was dating. That relationship had been two months long and for at least half of it he'd walked around with a dreamy look in his eyes, and couldn't even mention the girl without smiling. And Caleb--well, Caleb was different. But, he had the option of having... someone. I wanted that. I'm not saying that I needed it. I could deal with being on my own, or with simply being happy for my friends. I wanted it, though. I was seventeen, and I'd decided that it was at least time to experience something more than I knew. The prospect of Milo Trust being gay was an exciting one. I just wished that there was a way of knowing for sure.

By the time that the sky had turned crimson and orange with sunset over Hangman Cove, most of the vendors were packing up for the day, and the crowd was thinning; but for many, the day was hardly over. In fact, some people were just arriving, mostly couples looking for a private place to enjoy one another's company. My friends and I, having been there most of the day, were able to claim a coveted spot beneath the old oak holding the scarecrow, close to the water; and as Joe tried to convince us to leave to go to a party not far from where we lived, on the Hill, Caleb finally made himself comfortable with a six pack. He offered Haily a beer; but not me, because I was designated; and not Joe, either, I noticed. Ever since we'd been arrested, Caleb had refused to give Joe anything. I suppose it was Caleb's way of letting Joe know that he wasn't forgiven for betraying everyone's trust, but Caleb otherwise treated him as he always treated him.

"It's dead here, anyway," Joe insisted. "Come on, Caleb, you know you want to get out of here. There's gonna be more girls at the party."

"Don't want to," Caleb said simply before he tilted his head back and guzzled down his drink. Haily and I exchanged glances, and then regarded him curiously.

"You don't want to go?" I asked Caleb.

He frowned at me, scratching at his head of wavy hair. "Do you?"

"Oh, great," Joe mumbled. "You'll go if he wants to?"

Everyone ignored the remark.

"No," I admitted, still facing Caleb. "But you don't want to?" It wasn't like Caleb to turn down a party.

"Nah," Caleb replied, shifting so that he was cross-legged as he dipped his fingers into a yellow bag of raisins that Haily, the only one of us who'd bothered to get dressed in her brown flannel shirt and jean shorts, was holding as she sat next to me. "There'll be more people here later. Plus, we hardly ever come here when school starts. I kinda just wanna hang out."

Joe rolled his eyes. "We come here all the time when school starts," he insisted, and technically, he was right. Generally we'd stop going on the weekends and start going in the afternoons, after school. A lot of kids did, especially after dances or even sport events, Hangman Cove was the place to be before winter came.

"Whatever," Caleb responded. "I don't feel like leaving right now."

"Me neither," Haily said, and Joe regarded her as if she'd betrayed him before he looked to me.

"You're driving, Nelson."

"I want to stay, too," I responded, and his handsome face pouted as he stood above all of us.

"Just sit down and relax," Haily insisted, grabbing Joe's hand to pull him down, and once he was seated with the three of us, Haily gave him a drink and as Joe relaxed the four of us started talking about what we thought of school starting on Monday.

Haily could have done without it, she said. She was pretty much bummed that summer was over, and insisted that Caleb and I having community service was lucky compared to the way that she'd been grounded, and she was nervous about whether or not any of us would have classes together this year, or even the same lunch, since there were two different periods for it at our school. Caleb had assured her that if she got stuck in a lunch period without any of us, he'd cut class and go hang out with her. Since all of us knew that he'd actually do it, too, his offer seemed to calm Haily's nerves.

Joe was appalled over the prospect of returning to school without his '99 white Ford Mustang, all because he was likely going to lose his driver's license, and his parents refused to let him drive anywhere until then. All four of us lived on the Hill, but since Caleb was closer to Joe and Haily, he'd agreed to drive them to school every day, too. They owed him for this, since i

t meant no riding on the gum-stained orange school bus that on most days had a suspicious odor coming from the plastic covered seats.

As for Caleb and me, we generally had the same opinion about school starting. We didn't necessarily want summer to be over, and the fact that we'd have our noses buried in books soon enough wasn't quite appealing, but we didn't mind having to go back. We were both social people in our own ways, and I for one was looking forward to getting back to catch up with people I'd either forgotten about, or missed over the summer. Besides, my friends and I only had two years of school left before life would take us wherever it planned to take us, and personally, I planned to enjoy life now, just the way it was, for as long as it lasted.

As our conversation continued, we turned to brighter topics, like homecoming, and who everyone wanted to go with. Joe had declared that he planned to have a girlfriend by then. I told him that if he didn't, I'd be his date. I even offered to look real pretty if he promised to put out. This had gotten a good laugh, but I was only half joking. Caleb insisted that he wanted to see what the freshman stock brought in this year before he made his decision, and Haily said that she didn't know yet. But, when she'd looked at me pointedly, Joe started teasing her about wanting to go with me until I elbowed him and jokingly told Haily that we'd have to approve any guy who wanted to take her out, just to break the tension.

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Caleb was right about more people showing up at Hangman later on. It wasn't the large crowd that was present during the day, but there were several groups of people there that had chosen the location to party, and as my friends and I spotted people we knew, we began to drift again.

When Hangman Cove got dark, it got dark. It was so secluded that there were no street lights or even safety lights. The scarecrow became nothing more than a phantom over the lake while the white sand which shone during the day became unseen terrain. Most people wore shoes after dark, including me, and following the trail back up to the car was a delicate task with the poison ivy thriving. But, there was the moon. It only ever seemed to shine on the water, which glistened black, looking peaceful from the cove, all the way out to the lake itself.

Unlike others around us, my friends and I hadn't bothered to bring a flashlight. I had one in the car, though. My dad made me keep it in there in case I ever needed to change a flat tire in the dark, and as Joe and Caleb went to talk to a group of girls and Haily abruptly decided to go for another swim, I decided to get the flashlight. It would at least come in handy when we left. Haily sometimes managed to wander off the trail, and I wouldn't want her starting school in a couple days with a contagious rash.

On the way to the car, I ran into Peter Forest again, surprised to find him

with his girlfriend. Actually, it was who his girlfriend was that surprised me. Teresa Milldrum. Every time I ran into her and she batted her big blue eyes at me, I thought that I should at least feel something after losing my virginity to her, whether or not she was a girl. But there was nothing, not even awkwardness. Sometimes, I wondered if she even remembered the event. Peter and Teresa told me that they'd just come from the same party that Joe had been so bent on attending. Apparently it wasn't that great, which is why they were here. Given the way that Peter was looking at Teresa, I almost wanted to ask her what color her bra was. That way, when it was hanging up next to the scarecrow tomorrow, I could point it out to Caleb.

After retrieving the flashlight from the car, I only used it to make my way across the bridge and down the trail, turning it off again when I reached the beach and started walking. Our cooler and backpacks were still beneath the old oak, but my friends were still scattered, and I figured that I'd run into someone eventually.

That someone was Caleb, sitting a ways down the cove, snuggled up to some dark-haired girl that I knew went to our school, but I couldn't remember her name. She was one of the ones who was always hanging around when Caleb was present, even though her more forward friends were the ones that received his attention. Pretty, slender, with glasses; the shy type who would blush at almost anything, and wore clothes that were a little too baggy for her body. Not Caleb's type at all. I guessed that he was currently making her weak. He was leaning in close as they talked, his hand on her back. I didn't want to interrupt, and planned to pass by, but Caleb spotted me, anyway. "Nels! Whatcha doing?" He'd turned his head to face me, and I altered my direction, taking in the goofy smile on his face above his cleft chin, and wondering if he'd had anything to drink since that six pack.

"Walking," I replied, smiling at Caleb and nodding in acknowledgment at the girl he was with.

"You remember Ronnie, right?" Caleb asked.

"Sure," I replied politely. "Hi."

She returned my greeting with a shy little wave.

"She just pulled a big fucking splinter out of my hand," Caleb announced, holding his hand up. In the dark, I could hardly tell if anything was wrong with it.

"Why'd you have a splinter in your hand?" I asked, and Caleb pointed somewhere behind me.

"I was climbing that tree."

My brow went up, but Ronnie giggled, and Caleb smiled at her, so I simply shook my head and waved at both of them. "I'm gonna go try to find Joe," I said. "I think Haily's still in the water. You wanna get out of here in about an hour? I'm getting kinda hungry."

"Yeah, sure. I'll find you," Caleb replied, his focus returning to his new friend.

People looked like shadows to me as I continued to walk, making it somewhat difficult to find Joe, but then, I'm not even sure if I was really looking for him. I stopped to talk to a few people, and once to stop and get in the water when a girl who'd probably be starting her first year of high school in a few days lost her shoe in the lake. She followed me for five minutes after I retrieved it for her, but eventually went back to her friends.

I never did find Joe, so I headed back to the tree we'd left our things under, meaning to raid Haily's raisins and possibly run into Haily. The temperature had dropped to a comfortable degree accompanied by a soft breeze, and it was even darker by then, so I used the flashlight on the way back, after nearly tripping over two people who'd made themselves comfortable on the sand.

I shone my flashlight towards our belongings as I reached the oak holding the scarecrow, expecting to find Haily there. But, as my light hit the figure sitting on the cooler I froze, staring as Milo Trust, shirtless and barefoot in his blue-jean shorts rushed to shield his eyes with his forearm.

"Um... dude," he finally said, his tone agitated, when the light didn't move. I aimed it towards the ground and he looked in my direction, but didn't see me until I shone the flashlight upwards, at my own face.

"Sorry," I said, and I heard him groan. I ignored it. "You came."

Milo was silent for a minute as I lowered the light, but still sounded irritated when he did speak. "Fuck. I'm not here because you invited me," he informed me.

"But, I didn't invite you," I replied, getting hold of myself and taking a step closer. "I just asked you if you'd be here."

"Fine. I am. Is there some reason why you're still here?"

"Yeah," I replied, laughing. "You're sitting on my cooler."

"Right," Milo responded, and even in the dark I could tell he was rolling his eyes, not believing me.

"No, seriously," I replied as I used my light while sitting down next to Haily's backpack. I opened it up and lifted out the yellow bag of raisins. "If you want a drink they're under your ass."

I set the flashlight down and the area between Milo and me was lightly illuminated, his skin appearing to glow against it, and I could make out his face better as he glared at me, his usual bright green eyes seeming dark beneath the shade of his lashes.

"Raisins?" I offered, holding up the bag when he didn't say anything. Milo blinked, and then placed a carefully set disgusted expression on his face. I smiled at him, beginning to realize why I didn't just get pissed off when it came to his attitude. The guy was completely full of shit, but cute abo

ut it. I poured a handful of raisins in my hand and deposited them in my mouth, noticing that Milo had made no move to get off of my cooler and walk away as I chewed. "So are you here for more material or something?" I asked. "What?"

"For your paintings," I explained. "You did a lot of stuff of the cove. Are you thinking about doing more?"

Milo looked away from me, towards the water. "Not really."

"Oh. That's too bad," I said. "You really are good."

"It's just a hobby," he said quietly, and I watched his pink tongue leave his mouth momentarily to run over his full bottom lip.

"A hobby you sell on a fold-out table?"

Milo shrugged, his eyes flicking towards me for a brief glance without his head actually moving with them. "Why not?"

"Do you ever think about selling more of your work?" I asked. The fact that he was talking to me was not something that escaped my attention, and I found myself wanting to keep it up. I figured I'd ask him a hundred questions if necessary. "Like, what's in your room?" I added, my mind going to one particular portrait in his bedroom.

"I don't know, maybe." He looked bored with me, but I decided that it was just for show. He didn't mean it.

I stared at him for a moment, an idea coming to me that was probably a bad one. "Hey, Milo? Do you take requests? I mean, if someone paid you to do something specific..."

"Like what?" he asked, finally turning his eyes in my direction.

"Like, anything," I replied. "I mean... we have this field behind our house, and my mom's always taking pictures of it. If my dad could give her a painting or something of it, she'd totally love it. He'd pay."

"No thanks," Milo responded quickly, but that was okay. It was true that my mom would have loved a painting of our field, maybe even the house with it, and my dad really would have gotten one for her if Milo wanted the job, but that wasn't really the question I'd meant to ask him. I was just warming myself up for the real one.

"What about something for me?" I asked.

"I don't think so," he practically laughed.

"Look, it would be a total favor," I continued, anyway. "And, I'd owe you big. Do you work with nude models?"

I did my very best to keep a straight face as Milo regarded me with interest now, looking slightly surprised.

"Not really," he replied carefully.

"But you could?"

"Maybe."

"Like, using me?" I asked. "As the model." There. I'd done it. I'd brought u

p the topic of me, naked, and there had definitely been a reaction from him. It was a little one, the way he swallowed tightly, pushing back his hair with his hand as the breeze in the air momentarily became stronger, blowing it into his face. He recovered quickly enough, though.

"You want a nude portrait of yourself?" he asked, sounding both amused and skeptical. "Why?"

"Maybe I'm in love with me," I responded jokingly. Milo didn't find it funny as his green eyes once again narrowed it on me. "Okay, I said, maybe I want to give it to...." To who? Who the hell would I give a naked painting of myself to? Not that I planned on actually going through with this. I just wanted to make him think of the portrait he'd already done of me.

"To your girlfriend?" Milo asked.

"Sure. Why not. So, would you do it?" I asked.

I was offering to take my clothes off in front of him, and pay him for it. If the portrait I'd found in his room meant anything that I'd find good, then he wasn't going to say no this.

"No."

No?

"Seriously?" I asked, frankly, a little surprised by the answer. I was suddenly frowning, expecting him to say something that sounded like I couldn't pay him enough money to force him to look at me naked. But, that's not the response I got at all.

"You don't want to give your girlfriend something like that. All it takes is one fight, and who knows what she'll do with it. Plus, one of her parents could find it. I'll let you decide which would be worse."

My first instinct was to ask Milo why he cared what my hypothetical girlfriend and her imaginary parents would do with a naked portrait of me. Instead, I pretended to think about it as I popped another handful of raisins in my mouth before returning the bag to Haily's backpack and standing up in front of Milo.

"Can you stand up for a sec?" I asked.

Milo looked suspicious, but did so and then watched as I opened the cooler's white lid and removed two soda cans. He didn't object when I handed him one, but he simply held it when he reclaimed his seat after I closed the cooler. I think what he might have objected to, was the way that I sat next to him, my elbow brushing his before he effectively moved over, looking put out and somewhat confused over my close presence. I pretended not to notice any discomfort he might have been experiencing as I approached the topic at hand from a different angle.

"So do you know from experience?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"With the nude portrait thing. Do you know what would happen from experi

ence?"

"I think it's just common sense," Milo said reasonably.

"So you've never done one before--painted one like that?"

Milo shifted uncomfortably in his seat, refusing to look at me and seeming altogether suspicious. I imagined that he was thinking about that one particular painting in his room, maybe thinking about where he'd left it, what way it was facing, and likely wondering how long I'd been alone in his room the day before. Maybe he thought I was on to him. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be on to. But maybe that's what I wanted him to think. Besides, the more nervous he looked, the less I thought that he'd ever intended to do anything malicious with that portrait, and the more I wondered about what the proper etiquette was for asking someone if they're gay and if they've been fantasizing about me.

When Milo finally reacted to my question, it was exactly like I thought he would. Rather than giving me a straight answer, he tilted his head back, shaking his dark hair, which always fell back around his face, no matter what he did, and made himself look entirely annoyed.

"Is there a reason why you're still here?" he asked. "I mean, did I do something that made you think I want to talk to you?"

"You're still sitting on my cooler," I pointed out.

"You haven't told me to get off."

"I don't want you to," I said honestly. "And... we're going in circles here."

"That's because you keep talking to me."

"I think it's because you won't stop pretending that you can't stand me," I retorted, and Milo turned his head to look at me, his green eyes shining at me, highlighted by the dim light from the flashlight at the closer distance. He was regarding me with interest. Definite curiosity. It occurred to me that in a strange, new sort of way, I was attempting to flirt with him. It wasn't the same as flirting with a girl. Girls were easy. They might laugh at you, and show their disinterest on occasion, but at least to flirt with them was expected. This, wasn't. It was a situation that called for caution, talking with Milo Trust. There were things that I didn't feel safe saying, but I was dropping hints. I didn't think that most guys would ask another guy to look at him naked. And then there was the way that we'd established that Milo Trust couldn't stand me, yet neither of us had bothered to walk away. I hadn't, because I was determined. Probably a little stubborn. I was interested in why he hadn't. Most guys would have walked away. Maybe even taken a swing at me to get their point across. I think Milo enjoyed the banter.

"I'm not pretending," Milo finally said.

"Do you wanna come over?" I asked. "To my place. Tomorrow, around noon? I'm going to barbeque. It'll be a small party, before school starts on Monday. Do you like apples? My dad makes these really good turnover things o

n a stick."

Milo raised an eyebrow at me. I couldn't tell if he wanted to laugh at my invitation, or stomp on it.

"Fucking hell, Nelson. Are you ever not harassing one of my friends?"

I frowned, grudgingly looking away from Milo's attractive features to glare at Assface. Honestly, the guy knew how to get on my nerves lately. Before, the problem had always pretty much stayed between Jame Graham and Caleb, but ever since the arrest, he'd been attempting to start trouble with me just about as much as he and Caleb got into it. Currently, I wasn't in the mood for Jame. I just wanted to keep talking to Milo. So I did, turning back to face him, I smiled. "I thought you were his only friend."

Milo rolled his eyes, ignoring me as he faced Jame. "Ready to go?" Milo asked.

Jame was still glaring at me, but responded to Milo's question. "Yeah. This place is fucking infested with assholes."

"None of them bigger than yours, right, Assface?" I remarked, before I could stop myself. Jame frowned at me, and I'd be lying if I said that I didn't take some satisfaction in that. What I didn't take satisfaction in however, was the abrupt way that Milo surprised the hell out of me, taking me completely off guard with a shove to my shoulder as he stood up.

"Dude, shut up," I heard him say. It wasn't even a hard shove. If I'd seen it coming, I probably wouldn't have gone anywhere. But, it seemed, I was already sitting on the edge of the cooler, and not particularly balanced with my head tilted back as I drank my soda. I toppled over, my drink splashing all over my face and running down my neck in the process. I coughed on it as I landed flat on my back and looked up, stunned. Jame's cluck-like laughter is what snapped me out of it, and I probably would have been angry if Milo hadn't been standing above me, looking as stunned as I did before his head went to his mouth and his eyes became wide with suppressed laughter. I sat up, wiping my arm over my face to rid myself of some of the sticky liquid I'd spilled, keeping my attention on Milo, rather than Jame. "I think that was uncalled for," I said rationally, and Milo dropped his hand, this time laughing. It wasn't a cruel or annoyed laughter. More like a sincerely amused chuckle, deep and soft, compared to his usually sharp voice.

"Oops," he responded, actually grinning at me before he turned around to face Jame. "Ready to go..." Milo stopped, and I couldn't see his face, but I saw Jame's when Caleb suddenly appeared behind him, shoving Assface aside. And as Caleb faced Milo, my best friend didn't look happy at all with his eyes narrowed and his jaw set.

"You did not just do that," Caleb growled, and as he moved towards Milo, kicking the flashlight aside in the process, I rushed to my feet and found myself between Milo and Caleb, so close to each that I could feel Caleb's breath.

ath on my face, while Milo's was on the back of my neck. I didn't hesitate to reach out and grab Caleb's muscled arms, fully aware of what usually happened when he started swinging them.

"Hey, it's fine!" I said quickly. "Caleb, it was nothing."

Caleb was my best friend. But likewise, I was his, and if there was one thing that he hated more than someone trying to fuck with him, it was someone trying to fuck with me. Even if that someone hadn't meant to knock me on my ass. At least, I didn't think he meant to. I found myself glancing over my shoulder suspiciously at Milo, wondering if I should stop trying to see a nice guy under his gorgeous face if there really wasn't one. But, the thought was short-lived as I realized just how close to me he was, his face a shadow to me in the dark. I imagined that if I even leaned back I'd find myself against his smooth, toned chest, which might have been a nice place to be, in any other situation.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Caleb demanded, as someone lifted the flashlight and shone it towards us. "I saw him..."

"You saw me fall on my ass," I cut him off.

"Yeah, ya fucking klutz," Assface remarked from behind Caleb, and I wondered why God ever saw fit to give him a mouth.

Caleb shook my hands from his arms, and admittedly, had he turned around to face Jame, I wouldn't have really been in a hurry to get between them. But to my surprise, I never even had to, because Caleb was still looking at me, appearing confused and somewhat annoyed.

"We're leaving." I turned around to face Milo when he spoke quietly. His eyes met mine for only a brief moment, and then he was passing me, his shoulder gently brushing against mine before he paused momentarily in front of Caleb so they could exchange the standard I'm-not-intimidated-by-you glare. Then, Milo was walking away, stopping to pat Jame's shoulder in a silent instruction for his ass-faced friend to follow. I watched, feeling a little confused myself as they disappeared into the dark.

"Are you okay, Nels?" It was Haily's voice coming from behind the flashlight, and I squinted in the light's direction.

"Yeah. You wanna find Joe so we can go?"

I didn't wait for her to respond. I reached down, grabbed my own backpack from the pile and walked past the oak holding the scarecrow, my feet hitting the sand as I let instincts lead me towards the trail. I'd hardly reached it before Caleb was next to me, his backpack on his back and the entire cooler in his arms. I sighed, and reached out to take one of the end handles without him having to ask me to, and together we made our way uphill, careful to stay on the rugged trail beneath our feet.

"Hey," Caleb said. "What's with you and that guy?"

I looked in his general direction somewhat nervously as I ducked under a

low tree branch. "What do you mean?"

"Come on dude, you've been weird about him for weeks," Caleb informed me.

"Like, what's with that? You go out of your way to be nice to him, then the other day you have us following him home after community service... and I saw him push you."

"We were just talking," I said somewhat shortly.

"Nels, what's your problem?" Caleb demanded, just as we reached the bridge, and I dropped my end of the cooler on the wooden planks beneath my feet so I could face him.

"Nothing, okay? I like his paintings, and don't think he's that bad. Is there like a rule or something that says I'm not allowed to talk to him? What? Because he's friends with Jame? He's not Jame, and it's stupid that..."

"Whoa... slow down. Fuck," Caleb responded. "No one said that. I'm just wondering, okay?"

I let out a breath, forcing myself to deflate as I ran a hand through my short hair and then nervously tugged at the stud in my right ear. I wished that I knew what was bothering me all of a sudden.

"Nothing. Nothing's going on. I was just talking to him, okay? And, I'm trying to figure out why everyone's instinct is to hit someone all the time. You can't just... do that."

"Hey," Caleb responded defensively, in a tone he rarely used with me. "I thought he was fucking with you!"

"I know," I said quickly. "I know. Look, Caleb... we can't go getting arrested again, alright? Not for something as stupid as fighting. You know if that happens again, Ray's not..."

Caleb laughed. "That's what you're worried about? Nels..."

"I'm serious, Caleb. I know Jame gets on your nerves, and you just had to spend three weeks with him, but..."

"Hey," Caleb interrupted, sounding more serious now. "I know. I'll forget he exists for a while if it makes you feel better, alright? His friend, too... that guy's not, your friend, is he?"

"Nope," I said honestly. "I don't really think so."

I wondered if I sounded disappointed about that, because Caleb gave me another strange look. He shrugged, and then lifted his end of the cooler again.

"Come on," he said, and in the dark I could see him smile. "Let's get this to the car so we can help Haily find Joe. We'll go grab something to eat. You're still hungry, right?"

I gave a slight nod, picked up my end of the cooler, and listened to Caleb as he started telling me about how horrible going back-to-school shopping with his older, pregnant sister was going to be in the morning.

Chapter 4: Let Me Introduce Myself

by DomLuka

A/N: Thanks to Jim for editing!

I glanced at the glowing red numbers on my black alarm clock from where I lay stretched out on my already-made bed, fully dressed in my new jeans--dark blue, and not faded in any way. I didn't care if it was in style. You'd never catch me buying a pair of jeans that looked like a car had run them over. I could make them look like that myself. And I was wearing a Dane's House black t-shirt from the tattoo shop where Chad worked. My brother only did piercings there, but Dane had designed the blue dragon on the back of the t-shirt, an actual tattoo that was on his back.

I lifted the red notebook I was holding, one of the new ones that was supposed to be for school, and looked at my own handwriting over the first page of it. Two paragraphs of... well, nothing, actually. I'd woken up at four in the morning, my fingers itching to write. But, nothing in particular had come to me. I'd taken a look at the scarecrow painting on my wall, right where it was supposed to be--hanging so I could see it when I walked through my bedroom door--and I'd thought about Milo, and how I liked him, and how he didn't like me, and how even though I thought he was full of shit, the fact that he kept saying that he didn't like me, was actually starting to bother me. I started to write about something like that. A boy who didn't like me. Two paragraphs worth. It was shit.

I leaned over my bed, dropping the notebook carelessly onto my white carpeting, and then the pen on top of the notebook before I rolled over, pushed myself up, and stood on my bed to better see out my bedroom window. From ground level, my window was facing the front yard, but I couldn't see much beyond my mom's flower bed. It didn't really matter, though. I wasn't looking for anything in specific, I was just investigating why there was no sun pouring into my room, like usual when I woke up. It seemed gray outside. Gloomy. It made me feel tired. But, I reasoned, I felt tired because I'd gone to bed at one in the morning, and woken up at four.

I was thinking about pulling back my thick, white comforter so I could crawl under it when my fire-alarm-sounding clock went off at exactly six fifteen.

I turned my head to flash it a disapproving look before I slowly climbed off my bed, turned it off, and headed upstairs.

As always on the first day of school, my dad was in the kitchen waiting for me with banana muffins that he'd brought home from one of the bakeries the day before. My mom was long gone. During the school year, my mother wasn't only a piano teacher, but also a substitute music teacher; and already, Little Creek Elementary School, located on the hill, needed one. We ate our breakfast, took a few minutes to feed all of my mom's pets, and my dad left to work the same time I got into my navy-blue Buick and left for school. The high school, named after Heywell's first mayor, James Hellver, was commonly referred to as Hellschool, and was located on the south side of town. Th

ere was no going down the hill to get to it because, I suppose, it was considered to be on the hill. If I went out my back door, and walked for four miles, I'd run right into it. Getting there in a car was a little more complicated, since I was driving through neighborhoods. But basically, it was by the city park built on the land that my dad had donated. In the same area, there was the Heywell City Library, a Foodmart, one of the two Trust banks in town, and assorted restaurants, including one of my dad's bakeries, the one I most frequently worked at.

The buildings in the area were somewhat newer than the old brick buildings you'd find downtown. The library was a two-story, long building that looked like it was entirely made of windows, while the school was void of any windows at all. Being the only high school besides the Stratfort Private School, Hellschool was a rather large structure. Sand colored, there were two stories that made up the main building where most classes were held. At the center of the building there was an open courtyard, where most of the clubs gathered throughout the day. The gym had its own building behind the school, and it was connected to our school's two auditoriums. Outside of the gym, behind the school, there were two brick-colored double-wide trailers that had been made into classrooms for the electives that the school didn't seem to have room for. Last year, Haily had gone to chorus practice there.

I parked on the east end of the student parking lot. It was a long walk to the school from there, but that put me right next to Caleb's jeep, and we always parked there. It was less crowded, and given the fender-bender rates among students, a little walk was worth avoiding the trouble.

As I neared Hellschool, the spirit banners were visible at the front entrance. We had the worst school colors ever, if you asked me. Purple and orange. Even Caleb said that our cheerleaders were an eyesore because of it. But even so, I had to admit that our school did have spirit. The first day was not only one of the biggest social events we had all year, it was also the day that clubs were out in full force recruiting new members. The same applied for the football team, the cheerleading squad, and girls' softball, which always started a month before baseball. There were no actual classes on the first day. The first few hours of the day were spent in long lines acquiring classes and locker assignments, while the second half was spent introducing yourself to whatever teachers you happened to have that quarter. We were given a day-one temporary schedule and required to go to twenty- to thirty-minute classes starting just after a lunch break at noon. The classes on the first day usually only lasted a couple hours total. After that, everyone was divided into the auditoriums by year and we were all addressed by either the principal or the vice principal. But I wasn't exactly in a hurry to get to any of this, and it didn't look like Caleb was, either, when I found him waiting for me, sitting at the bottom of the four concrete stairs that led up to the b

uiling. He was staring at the sky accusingly, as if he fully expected it to drop something vile on him at any moment; as I took my seat next to him, sliding my backpack off my shoulders, I looked up, too.

The sky did indeed, seem gray today. Overcast with thin clouds, covering any sign of blue as far as we could see. It wasn't cold, or even hot; and without so much as a light breeze in the air, everything seemed quiet, even among the static of mixed voices belonging to the masses. The atmosphere could be described as ominous. Normally, I liked to be more positive than that, but it was true. Mid-August in Heywell was generally sunny and warm, our fall not making its presence truly known until around mid September. There were only a few trees around town that had turned already, lending colors of red, purple, yellow and orange to the otherwise green landscape.

"What's with this shit?" Caleb finally remarked, without looking at me. I didn't have to ask to know that he was as put off by today's gloom as I was.

"Maybe it'll clear up later," I suggested.

"Maybe," he agreed. "This is just like that dream I had."

"Which one?"

"The one with the talking pizza."

I shook my head. "No. That was a movie."

"Whatever. It's still like a dream I had."

I finally looked away from the sky to face Caleb, noting the product in his hair he'd used to make his waves seem tighter, cleaner. His hair hadn't looked that neat all summer. "Probably," I said. "Where are Haily and Joe?"

Caleb yawned, pointing behind us with his thumb, in the direction where most people were passing us and entering the school. "Saving our places in line."

"Dude, it's an alphabetical system," I responded. "The only two of us in the same line are Haily and Joe." Caleb looked confused by that. I just laughed at him. We seemed to have that same conversation every year. He never seemed to quite grasp the fact that he actually had to stand in line on his own. "Let's go," I said. "I wanna know what our schedules are gonna be." I stood, grabbing my backpack and heading up the stairs with Caleb right next to me. "What electives did you sign up for?"

"I don't remember," Caleb said. "My dad filled out my requests last year."

"You let your dad do it?"

"I was busy," he replied, shrugging. "Plus, the whole thing's stupid, anyway. In two years I only got one class I actually wanted."

He had a point there. Our school's more desired elective classes were limited. I'd been trying to get into basic art since I was a freshman, and it hadn't happened yet. Of course, the school had their own alternative electives that they were happy to place us in. Cooking hadn't been that bad during my freshman year, but last year the knitting club was something that I could have gone

e without. I probably wouldn't have signed up for any electives if our school didn't require two a year, just like they required physical activity for at least one semester a year. If someone couldn't participate in gym because of a disability, they were required to study and take written tests all term.

Caleb and I made our way through the school, once again becoming familiar with the worn white linoleum floors, fluorescent lights, orange doors and purple lockers. A few teachers that my brother had last year stopped us to chat, mostly interested in how Chad was doing. We stopped at the vending machines near the school offices for some sodas, and Caleb complained about how they didn't have the big peanut-butter cookies this year that everyone liked. On the way to the courtyard, we ran into random people heading in the same direction. Most of them were from our year, and many of them we'd seen over the summer, or even more recently, like Peter Forest and Teresa Milldrum.

When we did reach the courtyard, it was chaos. The school-endorsed clubs had gathered around several of the round, stone tables decorating the brick outdoor flooring along with the three large planters filled with freshly planted seasonals that looked pretty now, but would likely wither up and die in a month's time. Coach Don, with his cropped black hair and hooked nose was out with his clipboard and had a whole line of guys waiting to get their names on it as he told them football tryouts started next weekend, on Saturday, at seven in the morning. Just like every year, Coach Don waved to Caleb and me, and told Caleb that they could sure use him on the team.

And just like every year, Caleb said no thanks and kept walking. Just like he couldn't understand why he had to wait in line, he didn't understand why anyone would want to spend their spare time tackling other guys and playing with a ball--which in Caleb's opinion, didn't even look like a real ball--when they could be out tackling girls. Caleb didn't buy all of the fuss about girls liking sports players more, either. Last year when our school's best wide receiver, Brandon Sholer, decided to tell Caleb that he could get more girls than Caleb because he was on the team and girls liked that sort of thing, Caleb stole Brandon's girlfriend, just to prove a point. I'm not sure if he actually knew what his point was, though. He seemed more interested in pissing Brandon off at the time than anything else. There were simply some things I'd never understand about Caleb.

The courtyard was rectangular in shape, and besides the door we came through, there were four more orange doors, all open where people were dividing into lines according to their last names. I spotted Haily and Joe in one line. They were almost inside, and I waved at them before I pointed Caleb towards his line and headed for mine. It took about thirty minutes to get into the school and down the hall to a classroom where teachers were handi

ng out our schedules. It only took me five seconds to strike up a conversation with two nervous freshmen who wanted to know if there was any truth to the freshman-hazing horror stories they'd heard about. I assured them that at the worst they'd have to endure was having frosh stamped on their foreheads; and then explained how it had happened to Caleb, Haily and me our second week of high school at the hands of my brother, who'd made the whole thing feel more like a welcome party into adolescence than a hellish experience. When I first received my schedule, I was actually happy with it for once. Other than biology and world history, I got English three, which was more or less a creative writing class. I also finally got basic art. I didn't expect to learn in that class as much as I expected to have a free period where I could practice one of my favorite hobbies. It was well known that Mr. Allen was interested in free expression. As long as you were creating something in his class with the materials provided for the day, he was happy. But, my joy over getting a class that I actually asked for was short-lived.

I was settling into my locker, unpacking my bag after collecting my book assignments from the library, and planning on finding my friends when I was finished, when they found me instead. Haily, at least, got my attention when she stopped next to me and started unloading her books into my locker.

"Um... Haily? What are you doing?"

"I need to use your locker until I can get another one," she informed me, looking somewhat agitated. I just shrugged and continued to unload my books, but grinned when I glanced behind me and saw Caleb just across from me, opening a purple locker next to the drinking fountain.

"What's wrong with your locker, Haily?" he called over.

"I'm next to Assface," she announced, and both Caleb and I paused to look at her as she continued to unload her things. "It wouldn't be so bad if I could get him to stop talking. And smiling at me. All the fucking time. I was trying to put away my things and he kept asking me out--and then, he kept talking about you," she said, stopping to look at me.

"Whatever," I replied, shrugging. "Just ignore him, okay? I don't mind if you use my locker."

"Thanks, Nels," she said, and I watched her push her braid back over her shoulder as she continued to occupy the two bottom shelves in my locker. "It's just, he gets on my nerves, you know?"

"He gets on everyone's nerves," Caleb called, but then flashed me a smile when I looked back at him. "And we're pretending that he doesn't exist, from now on."

I smiled at that, appreciating that he remembered our conversation from Saturday night.

"Well, it's hard to pretend he doesn't exist when he's in my ear saying that Nels is talking to that friend of his so much that he must want to fuck him. I

swear to god..."

"What did he say?" Caleb demanded, as I went rigid over Assface's remarks. It was definitely disturbing to hear, but that could have been because there was a certain amount of truth in it. I forced myself to recover quickly, and I turned to face Caleb as he joined Haily and me on our side of the hall.

"Fuck what Assface said," I insisted. "He's not even worth talking about."

"I guess..." Caleb replied, looking a little uncertain.

"It doesn't bother me, okay?" I assured him. I lifted my schedule out of the back pocket of my jeans and held it up. "What lunch did you guys get?"

"Second," Haily answered.

"Me too," Caleb said, and Haily smiled at him.

"Second." I looked up when Joe appeared behind Caleb, holding up his schedule. "But my locker's on the other side of the fucking school. I'm surrounded by freshmen."

"Don't look at me," Caleb informed him. "You're not moving in."

"What lunch do you have Nels?" Haily asked me, probably because I was frowning down at my schedule.

"First," I said, drawing everyone's attention because clearly, they thought, I meant to say second. "I have first."

Something as trivial as the matter of when I would be eating my lunch probably shouldn't have seemed like a big deal. After all, at least I was having lunch. It didn't really matter when I ate it. Except, I was in high school. And, this had never happened before. Freshmen and sophomores generally had first lunch, while juniors and seniors had second. Of course, there were exceptions to this. Like, a large freshman class generally meant that a few lower classmen would end up with a second lunch period. Or, because of scheduling conflicts. I discovered that I had one of those when Caleb insisted that we all go wait in the line for people who hated their schedules. He was also the one who explained to the very tired-looking school counselor behind the computer that I had to have a second period lunch. I agreed. Unfortunately, it was my art class that was getting in the way. I had to call off all three of my friends when Joe stepped forward and insisted that the counselor change all three of their lunches to first lunches instead of changing mine to second. It was touching and all, but the counselor refused to do it. I decided that I could practice all the creative expression I wanted at home, and decided to have lunch with my friends. Of course, this meant a new elective, and there was only one left, I was told. Parenting. A class that covered pregnancy, childbirth and child development up to age five. It didn't sound half as bad when I discovered that Haily was taking the same class by choice--at her mother's request, she said.

The four of us spent some time walking around, getting to know where each other's lockers were, and helping each other figure out where certain classrooms

ms were. Haily and I couldn't find our parenting class until Joe pointed out that it was in one of the trailers behind the school; and as we continued to compare schedules it seemed that the only class I had with Caleb was gym, directly after lunch, but I had world history with Joe.

The first bell of the day rang at noon, indicating that the cafeteria was open. But, like most juniors and seniors, we left for an hour. We took Caleb's jeep and went to Hollander's, one of my dad's bakeries, all of which were called after his grandmother's maiden name. It was close to the school, and while he wasn't working, we still got a free lunch. The bakeries had recently started serving sandwiches, and the one next to the school was likely going to bring in all sorts of business because of that. It already seemed to be, as we sat at a white booth in the western-style establishment with a glass counter filled with goodies dividing the tables from the kitchen, and watched the place fill up.

The clouds hadn't disappeared by the time we headed back to school, but the air was no longer still. It became windy, and cool. Not so cold that a sweater was required, but the wind was strong enough that tree branches began to sway as leaves rustled together above us.

For the first day, classrooms were crowded, so much so that there weren't enough places to sit as teachers took a short amount of time to introduce themselves to more than one class at a time. Some of them would make a small speech and then ask everyone to introduce themselves as they left; and some would spend all the available time going over what would be covered in the class, and what would be expected from their students.

It was around two o'clock when everyone was called into the auditoriums to listen to the principal's speech; but as I met Caleb on the way there, we decided to skip it. We found Haily and Joe, and like so many other students, we went straight to Hangman Cove where we stayed until four thirty, when the clouds above us turned dark and unexpected cracks of thunder brought large drops of rain, bouncing off the lake and muddying the sand.

That night, Chad and Leanna came over for dinner with me and my parents. Chad recalled some of his high school experiences while I told my parents about my first day, and my mom was excited about being needed at the elementary school for an entire month. Before Chad and Leanna left, I showed them both Milo's painting. Leanna was impressed. I told them both about my encounter with Milo Trust the night before, and explained that I probably wouldn't be seeing him again anytime soon and complained about the overpopulation of straight people in Heywell. Chad laughed at me and insisted that there were plenty of people like me lurking about, and that I simply wasn't looking for them hard enough. But, he couldn't exactly point any of them out to me, either. As for me, only one name came to mind. Too bad the guy who that named belonged to couldn't seem to figure out whether

r or not he liked me.

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The second day of school, was more like an average first day of school. It wasn't too bad, if I didn't think about how I ended up with a mountain of homework from every single one of my classes. I particularly despised the ones that handed out tests the first day covering material that we wouldn't be studying until later in the year. At lunch, Caleb surprised us all when he wanted to go talk to Ronnie, the girl he'd been talking to on Saturday night at Hangman. He'd seemed particularly happy when he saw her. I'd gone to my dad's bakery again with Haily and Joe, along with an entire group of people from our various classes. The first week of school, I always tried to set a goal of making one new friend a day. After lunch on day two, I was pretty sure that I'd filled my quota.

My last class of the day was parenting, and I'll admit that by then I was ready for a long nap. I hadn't exactly exercised my brain a whole lot during the summer, and jumping right into my studies again felt like a long, tedious task during my classes. I was simply looking forward to getting the last one of the day over with, even if that meant going home to do homework, because I had way too much of that to do before I could even think about going out with my friends tonight.

I'd never actually taken a class in one of the trailers before. I could already tell that it wasn't going to be the most pleasant experience. Yesterday during orientation, I'd learned that it took ten minutes to get there from my locker, and we only had eight minutes after the bell rang to get to each class. That wasn't a major problem, though, because also yesterday, my teacher, Mrs. Bates, explained that she knew how far the trailer was from the school and she was willing to give us a five-minute grace period. Since I had gym directly before her class, I'd made a deal with Haily since we were sharing a locker, and she'd agreed to grab my book, too, before she came to class.

I'd actually arrived a little early. But, that only meant sitting in the room longer. It was cold, with the swamp cooler running at full blast--especially with my hair being damp from a recent shower after gym--and the room had a musty smell to it.

As I sat down in a red plastic chair at one of the four round wooden tables substituting for standard desks, I watched more people come in, and realized that the class was much smaller than it looked yesterday. By the time Haily sat next to me and we started discussing the possibility of getting everyone together to study at my house, there were only sixteen students in the room, including us. Two of them, I noticed, could probably use the class. Both senior girls with full bellies on them. I found myself hoping that we'd just be learning about childbirth, not experiencing it.

As promised, Mrs. Bates didn't clap her hands to get our attention until ex

actly five minutes after the bell rang, at which point Haily and I turned a way from each other to focus on her. Mrs. Bates was a short woman, probably in her late fifties, with short, straight gray hair that reached her chin and a pleasant, round face. She was wearing the same black boots she'd worn the day before, and today, she was wearing our school colors--a long purple skirt and an orange sweater that would be better suited for Halloween. She was one of those people who always looked like they were about to give someone good news. Even when that wasn't always the case.

She looked her class over for a moment, making eye contact with each of us, all the while maintaining a friendly smile on her face. Haily and I watched as she moved to stand in front of the two tables on the far side of the room, opposite where we were sitting, and held up her hand.

"Will everyone stand up, please?" Mrs. Bates asked. There was a small rustle as we all did as she asked, waiting patiently when it took our two expectant mothers a little longer to stand. "Good." Mrs. Bates smiled approvingly. "Now, boys, please come sit at these two tables. Girls, you're on the other side."

Haily and I exchanged perplexed glances. Being separated by sex wasn't exactly something we'd encountered in our other classes. But, assuming that Mrs. Bates had a reason for it, I tweaked Haily's braid, flashed her a smile, before I collected my things and moved to the two tables near the far wall, covered with posters of children and illustrations of infants still in the womb, and sat down with the other six guys in the class. There seemed to be a lot more room at our tables than there were at the girls' tables.

"That's better," Mrs. Bates announced. "Now, I want everyone to take a moment to get to know each other, and then you'll need a pencil, and a single sheet of notebook paper. We're going to play a little game."

With that, the girls immediately turned around to talk to the guys at the opposite tables, and Haily turned around and looked at me. I'd sat on the side of the table farthest to the wall, so I could see her better.

"I don't like you way over there," she commented.

"Me neither," I agreed, and then we were promptly interrupted by Mrs. Bates, clearing her throat.

"Please, only speak to the people at your table. Girls. Turn around."

This instruction, and Haily and I exchanging a perplexed look before we did what we were told and I looked over the faces at my table. I was guessing that the guys with me were all freshmen, because I didn't know a single one of them. It didn't take long to fix that, though, as I initiated introductions. I'd just figured out that a fair-haired freshman who had probably been the king of his last school, was one of the two guys who'd I'd talked to yesterday morning while waiting in line for my schedule, when the trailer door opened and we were met with three late arrivals. There were two more girls, but

h apologizing because they were late, and then there was Milo Trust. I had to look twice, because in no way had I ever expected him to walk into one of my classrooms. He was dressed in dark shorts and muscle shirt, suitable for the weather because the sun had decided to join us again after yesterday's rain. He had a black backpack slung over his right shoulder and as usual his dark wavy locks framed his face in a flattering way. I might have thought I was hallucinating him, if it wasn't for the fact that every single girl in the class began to whisper about him. Except Haily. She just looked back at me with a disgusted look that suggested she didn't approve of him being there at all. I turned my head, frowning when I heard one of the guys at my table commenting that every girl who thought Thompson Trust and his offspring were anything special should be shot, but I redirected my attention when Mrs. Bates instructed Milo to sit with the "boys."

Milo turned around, looked at the two tables where he could sit basically anywhere he wanted because of all the free chairs, moved forward, and paused when his emerald eyes fell over mine. He appeared oddly neutral over seeing me there, not at all as shocked as I was. As I gathered myself, I gave him a slight nod, my way of saying, yeah, I see you too, I suppose, and then I reached over and pulled out the vacant seat next to me. I never really expected Milo to sit there. I just wanted to give him the option. Though, that didn't change how disappointing it was when he walked around the other side of the table, instead. It also didn't change how surprised I was when he passed behind me, and suddenly seated himself in my offered chair, pushing his bag under the table in the process.

And... I stared at him. Couldn't think of much else to do, really. If I had a crush on this guy, it seemed to be a bad one, because I found the way that he neatly laced his fingers together on the table and stared straight ahead quite fascinating. When I did look away I caught Haily regarding me inquisitively. It was a lot like the look I got from Caleb, right before he asked if someone was bothering me. I shrugged at Haily, and she turned back around, her long brunette braid falling over the back of her seat. I looked at Milo again. Mrs. Bates was talking again, but I could have cared less about what she was saying because now Milo was moving, and I was enthralled in the way that he was scooting back his chair and leaning down, his long, toned arms reaching into his backpack. Even under the unflattering fluorescent lights his tanned skin had an appealing glow to it. I watched him retrieve an orange notebook and a ballpoint blue pen before he paused, turned his head, and caught me watching him. He met my eyes for a brief moment before he continued sitting up, placing his materials on the table in front of him, which made me remember that Mrs. Bates had requested a piece of notebook paper and pencil for the game she wanted us to play. Tearing my attention from Milo, I reached to get mine, aware of the way that he was throwing sid

eways glances in my direction every so often.

"I didn't sign up for this class," he suddenly whispered, somewhat defensively, and as I placed my sheet of paper and a pencil on the table I actually wanted to clap my hands because Milo Trust was initiating conversation with me.

"I don't think most of us did," I replied. He gave a slight nod, and holding his pen in his hand he looked straight ahead, focusing on Mrs. Bates. "I thought you went to Stratfort," I said after a few moments of deciding that I once again wanted to keep up conversation. "What are you doing here?" "I wanted to try public school."

"Oh. Do you like it so far?" I asked him.

He looked at me then, and seemed to consider his answer. "No," he said genuinely, and I found myself grinning at him. For a very brief moment, I could have sworn that I saw a very faint smile on the corner of his full mouth before he turned his attention back to Mrs. Bates as she began to talk again, and I was forced to do the same because she was explaining what she wanted us to do. It sounded more like an assignment than a game to me.

Mrs. Bates began by explaining what a large responsibility it was to have a baby, and I felt sorry for the two mothers-to-be when she seemed to be directing her speech towards them a few times. She began to explain that besides caring for a child, there were several things a new parent needed to have before they even thought about bringing home a baby, and we were to write down everything that we thought belonged on that list of items over the next fifteen minutes.

"No talking, please," Mrs. Bates had said, and then we began.

I only found it mildly distracting with Milo right next to me, scratching a way at his paper. Like me, the other guys at the table seemed to be having a hard time knowing where to begin. I had no idea what a baby needed. But then as I thought about visiting Uncle Ray's family, and my cousin Jay, several things came to mind and before I knew it, I had a decent list, including bedding and towels, because I remember my mother giving that kind of stuff to my Aunt Patty for her baby shower.

When our time was up, Mrs. Bates went on to talk about how it took two people to make a baby, and how in an ideal world two people would take care of the baby. She instructed us to put our pencils away and split up into pairs with our lists. The idea was to see if two lists combined would be enough to take care of a baby. Haily turned around after the instruction, her obvious choice in partner being me, but once again Mrs. Bates separated the girls from the boys by instructing us to choose a partner from our own table. I quickly looked at Milo, and he surprised me again by sliding his paper over without me even having to ask him to be my partner. I exchanged lists with him, and found myself staring down at his handwriting, which looked as b

beautiful as his paintings to me.

Mrs. Bates next instruction was for us to go around the room and read our combined lists. This took a while, because after each group read she explained what they were missing and why it was so important, constantly reiterating that no one present was ready to take home a real baby. I did the reading when she reached Milo and me, and we managed to impress her. Milo was the only one in the room who'd come up with things on his list like a good paying job, college savings, and safety equipment for around the house.

I came up with a nanny. Mrs. Bates looked nicely impressed by the time I was finished reading.

"Very good, boys," she commented. "It looks like all your baby is missing is diapers."

Milo and I exchanged glances, and I watched him roll his eyes.

"Our baby doesn't have diapers," I told him.

He smirked. "I'm sure you have a few favorite shirts hanging around."

For the rest of the class, Mrs. Bates mostly talked, and we started to read the first chapter of our Introduction to Childcare books. I didn't talk to Milo, but I did find myself comfortable in his presence, and once again I wondered about him, and hoped that by the time class was over he wouldn't be asking me why I was sitting next to him.

He went to my school. This was a situation that I hadn't quite imagined. And now that I had a class with him, it meant that I'd get to talk to him. I didn't exactly have a good track record when it came to talking to him. All of our conversations seemed to end badly, and I was hoping to change that.

I thought about what Chad had told me to do. Really introduce myself to Milo. Let him know that I wasn't a complete asshole. Of course, in order to do this I'd need a reasonable amount of cooperation from him.

I decided to say something to him after the bell rang, and everyone began to gather up their things as Mrs. Bates instructed us to read the first chapter in our books overnight. He had his backpack in his lap, and was zipping it up when I turned to him.

"Hey," I said, and he lifted his eyes long enough to let me know I had his attention. "Listen, I know we haven't exactly gotten off on the right foot..."

"Don't bother doing that," he cut me off, but I refused to be discouraged. I smiled at him instead.

"I'm Nelson," I continued. "And I like the way you paint."

Milo cocked his head at me, looking somewhat amused, but said nothing as I stood up and went to meet Haily so we could walk out to the parking lot together.

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Parenting quickly became my favorite class of the day. From the moment I stepped foot in the school, I looked forward to getting there all day long. M

ilo was in that class with me. We didn't exactly talk. It became very clear very quickly that Mrs. Bates was a lecturer who didn't want boys socializing with girls while in her class. Haily wasn't very happy about this. She probably thought that I should have been more upset, since it meant that I could never talk to her. But, I was too preoccupied with Milo for that. There were no assigned seats, just tables, and every day he sat next to me, and every day before class I'd... introduce myself. On Wednesday, as soon as he'd sat down I'd told him that I was Nelson, and that I liked to draw comics. After school, when class got out and we were packing up, I'd told him when my birthday was. I'd only smiled when he said he already knew, because Haily had mentioned it when she bought me the painting, which I'd reimbursed her for since.

I think by the end of the week, Milo found my new hobby of introducing myself to him and giving him any little fact I could think of, as funny, and maybe a little irritating. He'd been rolling his eyes at me by Thursday. But, at least he wasn't flat out telling me to go away anymore.

I never saw Milo outside of class. I guessed that he had a first lunch, because I'd looked for him, but never saw him. I could have been wrong, though. My friends and I left campus to eat almost every single day. I never saw him in the halls, either. I saw Jame, though. Twice a day on the way to and from world history. He'd started aiming his smile--the one meant to annoy Caleb--at me. And truth be told, I was beginning to understand why Caleb wanted to hit Assface all the time. But lately, Caleb wasn't even mentioning him. Like the rest of us, he was settling into the new year easily, and helping me with my English assignments. I'd been interested in creative writing, but I'd had no idea that I'd be expected to read my assignments in front of the class. I didn't share anything I wrote. Caleb had been helping by forcing me to read my assignments to him before I brought them in to class, and I had to admit that it was helping, just like it helped for the four of us to get together every other afternoon to study. It seemed that we had a lot more homework this year than last, and that made finding time to stop using the more intelligent part of our brains a little more difficult. Of course, we still made it to Hangman with our classmates every once in a while after school, and on the weekends. Although, the first weekend after school started was used to go to parties people were throwing as a back-to-school thing. The second weekend, though, it was back to Hangman.

The first week of September, we'd made it through three weeks of school and the beginning of fall seemed to come a few weeks early as blue skies clouded and the trees began to turn. People were finding more leaves on their lawns than in their trees, and Caleb and Joe were beginning to talk about charging people for cleanup services. I helped my dad cut down a good portion of the field one last time for the season, and the vendors at Hangman Cove

began to thin out.

It was Sunday, an hour after I got home from church with my family, Grannie Tenny, and Mr. Hoover, and I was in my Buick, still dressed in my black slacks and green dress shirt, on my way to pick up Caleb from the city park, where his older sister had left him when she thought she was having contractions and drove herself to the hospital without warning. It had turned out to be a false alarm, but Caleb was still stranded, and from the looks of it, entirely insulted as I picked him up across the street from the library in the park's little round-about parking lot, right across from the jungle gym, swingset and larger of the three yellow slides.

Caleb had a downcast expression as he moved into the passenger seat of my car. His blond waves were windblown on his head and he looked somewhat disheveled in his baggy jeans and the black jacket, torn at his left shoulder

“You wanna come over for a while so you don't have to kill your sister?” I asked him.

Caleb nodded, his bottom lip pouting beneath his cleft chin. I waited for him to close his door before I started driving. When I noticed smoke in my car with a distinct scent, I looked over at Caleb and the packed red pipe in his hand.

“Run into Sam, did ya?” I asked, and then waved Caleb away when he offered the pipe to me.

“I'm having a really bad day,” he said glumly.

“Come on, Caleb,” I insisted, cracking my window. “It's not that bad, and Julie probably didn't mean to leave you. She's eight months pregnant. I'm not taking her side. But give her a break.”

“I don't care about Julie,” Caleb responded. “She's always crazy, pregnant or not. But it was really fucked up of her to leave me. It's just this stupid dream...”

“Another one?” I asked, not surprised at all as I glanced in his direction, trying not to laugh at the way he looked incredibly serious while hitting the pipe again.

“No, not just another one,” he stated. “The same one. I mean, the same, but different... but they're all the same. Dude, I'm dreaming about a girl.”

And that was enough to make me laugh. “And this is new to you, Caleb?” I remarked. “Do I need to have the talk with you, because...”

“I'm serious, Nels! It's the same girl, all the time. What do you think that means? Like, I should ask her to homecoming or something?”

“You mean it's a girl you know?” I asked, sobering. Usually Caleb's dreams were either weird, or full of sex with random women from magazines that I had no fascination in looking at.

“Yeah, I know her,” Caleb replied. “It's kinda freaky, I think. Like, do yo

u ever have any really, really hot dreams about someone you know?"

I had to pause and think about my answer for a moment. "Not really." Caleb probably wouldn't want to hear about my most recent recurring dream, where Milo Trust invited me over to his house and asked me to take off my clothes. Then, he'd paint my portrait and tell me to go away. "Who's the girl?" I asked.

"Ronnie, something. I don't know her last name. Do you think that's bad? Shouldn't I know her last name?"

"Caleb, they're dreams, and you don't even know most of the girls' last names that you've fucked around with in reality--and Ronnie... isn't she that one girl..."

"Glasses, brown hair, really cute nose, nice little ass..."

"Ask her to homecoming," I cut him off.

"Really?"

"Yeah," I said as we turned onto my street. I followed the road down until I reached the long dirt driveway and followed it all the way up to the white brick house where I parked in front of the garage and leaned back in my seat, not getting out. Caleb offered me the pipe again. I took it this time, and after nearly choking myself on some particularly strong shit, I handed it back to him.

"What if she says no?"

I laughed. "Dude, when have you ever worried about a girl saying no?"

"I don't know," he responded defensively, and I studied him for a long moment. He actually looked nervous, and fidgety as he brought the pipe back up to his mouth. This really wasn't like Caleb at all, especially when it came to girls.

"You really like her."

"I did not say that," he said. "But yeah, maybe." I unbuckled my seatbelt, but made no move to leave the car as I leaned back in my seat and bemusedly watched a goofy smile crawl over my best friend's face as he stared straight ahead at the white garage and passed the pipe to me. "She's in health class with me, and she gets really shy when I talk to her. Like, she can't even talk sometimes. I kinda think it's annoying, but the other day I was talking about a bunch of shit, you know? And like, someone brought up Assface, and you know how I get when..." I nodded, and Caleb smiled. "Anyway, she just got really annoyed with it for some reason and told me to shut the hell up because I was being stupid."

"And this is a girl you like?" I asked incredulously. Although, I wasn't really one to talk. He hadn't told me to shut up for a while, but if I had any sense when it came to Milo Trust, I'd just figure out that he wasn't into me and move on.

"Yeah. So you think I should ask her to homecoming?"

“Sure,” I replied, shrugging. “Why not? And... I don’t think she’s gonna say no.”

Caleb just smiled for a moment, seemingly thinking to himself before he turned his glossy chestnut eyes on me. “So what about you?”

“Huh?”

“Homecoming,” he said. “You gonna ask Haily? You know she’s waiting for you to.”

My smile faltered at that.

“Nah. I don’t think so.”

“Why not? You have someone else in mind?”

“No... I just don’t wanna... I mean Haily...”

“Dude, we all know she likes you, so stop with the modesty and just say it.”

“I don’t want to lead her on,” I stated, and Caleb rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know why you guys don’t just hook up,” he remarked. “She likes you; and, she’s the only girl you ever hang out with.”

“I hang out with girls when I’m with you all the time!” I retorted.

“Yeah, but that’s different. You never even wanna hook up with them. You know, if you’re into Haily...”

“I’m not, Caleb,” I said honestly. “I love her, but it’s not like that.”

“Okay... hey, no big deal. I just thought I’d ask. You could still think about taking her to homecoming, though. I mean, it’s not like you’d be leading her on if you just went as friends.”

I sighed, not really wanting to think about anything as complicated as Haily and how to handle whatever interest she had in me. “Maybe,” I replied, and when Caleb’s brow went up, I added, “I’ll think about it.”

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It was a Wednesday morning, and once again, rain had chosen to fall over Heywell during daylight hours. I’d left for school early because both of my parents had gone to work early--my mom, still filling in at the elementary school a week after her time there was supposed to have ended; and my dad to the bakery on the north side of town, which was having a problem with one of the ovens. Driving to school the rain was coming down so hard and the clouds were so thick that I’d hardly been able to see. At least I stayed dry, though. I’d remembered an umbrella, and I’d dug my black raincoat out of the back of my closet for extra protection. I wasn’t necessarily fond of rainy days. When the skies turned gray over Heywell, everything else seemed bleak, too. But, this was a good rainy day, I decided, when I actually saw Milo Trust outside of the brick-colored trailer that we attended parenting class in.

The halls were mostly empty, forty-five minutes before the first bell rang, and Milo was sitting in one of them, leaning back against a purple locker wi

th a notebook in his lap, his jeans-clad legs outstretched on the white linoleum beneath him. His usually light flowing hair, which hung perfectly around his face, was dripping wet, pushed back out of his way and dripping down the side of his face; but he seemed unbothered by it, bundled tightly in a dark red coat. What he did seem bothered by, was the pen in his hand as he moved it over his paper violently and then inspected it, looking irritated. He seemed to be out of ink. I had a pen out of my backpack before I even thought about approaching him.

He appeared startled when he looked up and found me standing over him. I was pretty sure that I was still smiling.

“I’m Nelson, and I have a pen you can borrow.”

I held a black ballpoint down in his direction, and after his very scrutinizing emerald eyes flashed over me for a moment he took it and turned his attention down to his notebook.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, sniffing as he pushed more wet hair out of his face.

I cocked my head to get a better look at what he was working on, and then abruptly took a seat next to him, leaving a respectable four inches between us as I looked down at the neatly written paragraphs leading halfway down his paper. He went momentarily rigid when I sat, and when he turned his head to look at me, he was glaring sternly.

“Look,” he said cockily. “I’m kinda busy right now, so I don’t really even have time to tell you to go away, but I swear to god, if you so much as start a sentence with I’m Nelson...”

I interrupted him with laughter. “What are you working on?” I asked, and he turned his attention back to his paper.

“My history teacher gave us this stupid assignment yesterday because some fuckhead pissed him off. I was up all night reading eight chapters and now I’m supposed to have five thousand words by the time class starts.”

“Hey,” I said, taking interest. “You don’t have Mr. Danner, do you?”

Milo looked at me, frowning again.

“Yeah...”

“Dude, don’t worry about it,” I insisted. “He’s never even gonna look at that paper.”

“What do you mean?”

I grinned. “I’m Nelson, and I had him last year,” I announced. Milo flashed me an impatient look, so I continued quickly. “He’s a hothead. He assigns shit like that when he’s pissed off. Last year, I wrote a three-page essay on why I had five toenails on my left foot and how I kept them clean. He never knew the difference. All he’s gonna do when you get in there is hand out one of his stupid tests, and it’ll probably be open book.”

I’d hoped to relieve Milo. I’d expected to, actually. Instead, I’d caused his

eyes to widen and the next thing I knew he was tearing open his black backpack and rifling through it almost frantically.

"No, no, no," he mumbled, and for a moment, he sounded like Juanita.

"No, no, what?" I asked. But, I didn't get a response as Milo rushed to close his backpack, taking it with him as he stood up off the floor and wasted no time in moving down the hall. I wasn't far behind him with my bag and umbrella, catching up as we passed the offices and headed towards Hellschool's main entrance. "Milo?"

I was with him when he pushed the doors open, and stopped in his tracks as we listened to the clatter of the rain falling, splattering as it hit the cement steps leading down from the building. It was coming down even heavier than it had been when I'd driven to school, and water was running all over the parking lots, into the drains.

"No, no, no," Milo mumbled again, right before he turned back into the school at a much slower, defeated pace.

"Um... I'm Nelson and I'd like to know what's going on," I tried, but all that earned me was a glare. "Seriously. Come on, maybe I can help. What's the matter?"

"I don't want your help," he responded gruffly, now pushing invisible, wet hair out of his face.

"Yeah, I know," I said conversationally. "But I'm persistent. So how 'bout you tell me, and then I'll go away."

He regarded me suspiciously. "Chemistry. You just reminded me that I have an open-book test in chemistry, and I was studying for it last night and left the stupid book in my room."

"You were studying for an open-book test?"

"I study, okay?" he retorted.

"So if you need your book, why not go get it? Or borrow one, or..."

"We're supposed to bring our book to class every single day. Another stupid rule. And I can't go get it because my dad drove me to school today." I smiled at that, and he looked at me like I was crazy. "You said you'd go away," he reminded me.

"Yeah, I know," I reasonably admitted. "But I'm Nelson, and I have a car." Milo stopped walking to look at me skeptically as he pulled his red jacket tighter around his body. "I can't take a ride from you," he finally said, but at least he seemed to consider it first. In response, I released an exasperated sigh.

"Yeah. You can," I said seriously. "But we have to leave now if we don't wanna be late." Milo frowned at me, obviously unsure. "Look, I'm gonna start walking to my car. If you wanna ride, you can come, too. Otherwise, I'm going out for breakfast, anyway. Want anything?"

Milo arched an eyebrow at me, but then became serious.

“Fine. Where’s your car?”

I feigned shock. “You want to go to breakfast with me?” That was met with another stern look. I laughed and turned back towards the doors, nodding my head for him to follow. “Come on,” I insisted, and then held out my umbrella, placing it so close to him that he took it instinctively. “You take that.” As I pulled up the hood on my raincoat, I hoped he’d actually use it. If he got any wetter it was going to look like someone had tried to drown him, and as cute as it might have been, the idea of Milo catching a cold wasn’t something that appealed to me at all. I guess it didn’t appeal to him, either, because as soon as we got outside, the umbrella went up and I quickly led the way to my car, trying hard to see with the rain coming directly at us, hitting my face. When I looked back, Milo seemed okay, though, holding the blue umbrella close to his head.

“Why do you park all the way back here?” he demanded when we reached the Buick and I unlocked his door first.

“This is where I always park,” I replied, and then stopped myself from opening the door for him when he reached for it, too. I heard another vehicle coming and instinctively looked up, frowning when I spotted the headlights of Caleb’s jeep turning into the parking lot. “Um, hurry up and get in,” I said, moving quickly to my side of the car. Milo was already in and buckled up by the time I turned the keys to start it.

“Avoiding your friends now?” he remarked.

“It’s not that,” I replied as I backed out of my space and headed in the opposite direction from which Caleb was coming. And, it really wasn’t that I wanted to avoid my friends. I just really didn’t feel like explaining to all three of them the reason why I had Milo Trust in my car when we were clearly in a hurry. And, maybe I was avoiding them. Just a little bit.

As we left the school I focused on the roads, and the way that water seemed to be pouring over my windshield, despite my windshield wipers working at full force. As I took the back roads, through my own neighborhood, I began to remember that it was no short drive to Milo’s house, and there was a possibility that we’d be late getting back regardless. But as we reached the hill, where the view of Heywell and the lake was obstructed by clouds and fog, I kept going. The rain was still thumping so hard on the roof of the car that I hardly heard Milo when he finally spoke.

“Thanks for doing this.”

I glanced over at him, a satisfied smile crawling its way over my lips. I so wanted to make him repeat that. But he already looked so miserable that I didn’t dare. Instead of commenting, I turned up the heater, hoping that he’d dry off some before we did get back to school.

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The last time I’d been to Milo’s house, I remembered the dark colors and the

garden surrounding had looked beautiful against the blue sky, the sun shining down over the yard. In the storm, it looked kinda creepy. Tall and dark with fogged-up windows and the black gate surrounding it--closed, I noticed. Milo instructed me to get closer to it, and I did so, looking over at him and expecting him to open it with one of those nifty key cards that movies are so fond of. If I'd known that he was just going to get out and slide the gate open, I would have offered to help him. But, before I could even think to do that, he was running towards his house, and I was pulling into his driveway.

I know it probably should have occurred to me to just wait for him in the car, but, it really didn't. If anything, I think I was actually eager to see his room again, all of those paintings scattered in it. I decided to leave the car running as I pulled up my hood and made a quick run for the house. He'd left the front door cracked and I'd moved in easily. The house was dark, the outline of the furniture in the living room appearing to be even darker spaces, but there was a light on upstairs--in the hallway, it looked like. I moved towards it, up the wooden steps and once again found all doors closed in the hallway except for Milo's, which was wide open.

I stopped in his doorway, pausing in time to see a glimpse of his lower back as he finished pulling a dry, grey sweater over his head where he stood in front of the opened closet. But Milo, as worth looking at as he was, was not what caught my attention. I was rather alarmed to find that Milo was the only thing in the room worth looking at.

"What the hell happened in here?" I blurted, and he released a small gasp as he spun around to face me.

"What are you talking about?" he responded, obviously not pleased that I'd taken it upon myself to barge in.

What was I talking about? I regarded him incredulously and then looked around his room, shaking my head and feeling more or less disappointed. Mostly more. Looking directly towards his bedroom window, the view I'd loved so much the last time I was there was gone. Or, not gone so much as hidden, I suppose. Outside looked atrocious facing the hill and dark, low rain clouds had covered the lake and surrounding area; within them there were small flashes of lightning that looked like they were close to the downtown area, where the sheriff's department was. I guess it wasn't a terrible view in its own right, but it was hard for me to see when I was so focused on all the blank walls in Milo's room. All that was left were a few spots of hanging masking tape that had once held up sketches. The only color I could see was the burgundy comforter on his unmade bed, and the various paint-spattered rugs that were still on the floor. Even the smell of paint was gone, covered by the strong scent of sandalwood incense.

"You got rid of your paintings," I said, frowning, as I continued to look around.

und. There wasn't even an empty easel left.

"I didn't get rid of them," Milo responded, as if it were obvious. "I just moved them."

I turned to face him, confused as I watched him pull his dark red coat over his dry sweater and I backed up, seating myself on the end of his bed. "Why?"

"My dad doesn't like them in here during school," Milo said simply. "He wants me concentrating on my homework."

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard," I said bluntly. "You don't have to get rid of them to... that's just stupid."

Milo shrugged as his eyes drifted to the floor on the side of his bed closest to the desk, which had also been cleared of paintings to make room for books. "Not really," he said as he slowly walked over, and I watched him conspicuously shove something under the bed with his shoe. "I really can't have them in here when I'm trying to do homework. I have no self-control. If it was all right in front of me, I would have spent last night painting, not studying."

"So what?" I asked, standing up and moving around his bed, curious about what he was trying to hide from me. "You just stop painting?"

"No," he said irritably as I moved to stand next to him alongside his bed and looked down towards the floor. "I just study. And, it's not like it's any of your business, anyway. Shouldn't we go back to school? Nelson!" Milo raised his voice, and quickly made a grab at my arm when I nosily knelt down and reached under his bed. But, that didn't stop me from grabbing a long blue sketchbook with loose pages in it. Milo was still holding my arm, painfully tightly, when I stood up with it. "Give me that!" he ordered, reaching for it. I didn't bother trying to hold it away from him. "You can't just... fuck, you can't just come into someone's room like this!" he informed me as he grabbed the book and pulled it away. Only, as he pulled, my fingers were still holding onto one of the loose pages, which I'd spotted color on, and as the book left my hands the thick white piece of paper slid out of it and I held it up, sitting back on his bed while my eyes took in a page full of greens and blues. It was a colored-pencil drawing of the lake, I was pretty sure, the focus being a small paddle boat with two young boys in it. One falling backwards, out of the boat, while the other reached for him. But, it didn't seem like a sad or heart-wrenching drawing as much as a comical one, given the startled, but not frightened look on the falling boy's pink face and the shocked look on the dark-headed boy reaching for him.

"Give it back."

Nelson's voice had me looking at him again. His focus seemed to be on the drawing in my hands, his green eyes on it in a concentrated way. He'd placed the book on the desk behind him and now he was standing there almost ca

refully, his damp hair had fallen over his face, and he looked more than a little furious, maybe even panicked.

“This is good,” I told him quietly. “Everything you do is good. You shouldn’t stop.”

“Fine,” he said. “Thank you, okay? I appreciate the compliments--but I’d appreciate it more if you would just knock it off!”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Why?” I asked curiously, seeing nothing wrong with complimenting him. Hell, I’d be complimenting him a lot more than I already was if I knew for a fact that he might be more open than your average male to something like that.

“Just please give me back my drawing,” he said, and I sighed as I held it out for him, turning it around in the process. My eyes hit the back of the paper and that was all it took before I had it out of his grasp and in my hands again. “Don’t!” Milo insisted. But, it was far too late for that, and once again I was staring myself in the face.

It was just a pencil sketch this time--colorless, but most definitely me. Added bonus: I wasn’t naked, so no need to blush furiously. Besides, Milo was already doing plenty of that for both of us when I looked up to meet his eyes.

“I draw faces all the time,” he said quickly.

“Repeatedly?” I asked, feeling rather amused with how flustered he seemed when I turned the paper around for him to see. There was more than one sketch of me, all head shots, but I was wearing a different expression in each one.

In the first, I was smiling; in another, I looked angry; in one, I was frowning; and in the last my expression was sultry. Teasing. I was fascinated by all of this. Not like Milo, who looked like he wanted to crawl under his bed and die as I finally gave the piece of paper back to him and he spun around to shove it in his book. But, I frowned when he refused to face me again.

“I think you should just get out now,” Milo said quietly, his shoulders stiff as his back faced me.

“I’m your ride back to school,” I reminded him.

“No thanks,” he said sternly.

I sighed. He was embarrassed. I didn’t want him to be. “I draw you, too,” I admitted. “I mean, I’m not as good as you are, not even close.” And, I didn’t draw him naked. I straightened where I was sitting when Milo suddenly rounded on me, glaring.

“What the fuck is with you?” he demanded. “Seriously. I don’t get you. Why are you always trying to talk to me? I mean, I think I pretty much covered that I don’t like you, right? If you were normal, you would have either walked away or taken a swing by now. So, really. What the fuck?”

I took in Milo Trust’s words, and finally, I found myself frowning--really frowning--at him. It wasn’t his green eyes doing the glaring now, but rather,

my blue ones. I was glaring quite furiously, actually, because Milo Trust had just implied that I was the one with a problem. And, maybe I was. But at the moment, it was either the sharpness in his words and the fact that they stung, or that I was simply fed up with being nice to him only to receive nothing in return, that played a part in the way I stood up and faced him directly. "Oh shut up!" I snapped, and Milo blinked at me. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to try to be nice to someone as stupid as you? You wanna talk about someone who has a problem, fine. Let's talk about yours." Milo opened his mouth, obviously having a retort ready on his cute, pink tongue but I shut him down before he even got it out. "Stop acting like you can't stand me. It's getting old."

"I'm not acting..."

"Bullshit. I mean, come on. You want to know what my deal is? Fucking think about it, you moron. I mean, I'm a guy, Milo. How many guys are following you around trying to get your fucking attention? You keep looking for reasons why I seem to like you, right? Fuck." I sat back down on his bed, frowning to myself and feeling all together frustrated before I met his eyes again and forced myself into a suitable calm. "I'm just trying to get to know you."

Milo shook his head at me. "Why?"

"Because," I responded quietly, "I'm Nelson. And, I'm gay... and I think you are, too."

Chapter 5: Stop Doing That
by DomLuka

AN: Thanks to Jim for editing!

I wasn't sure which was louder, the tapping of the rain as it assaulted Milo's bedroom window, or Milo's breathing, which was now coming in deep, long breaths. His nostrils, perfectly shaped to his straight nose were flaring wildly, and his usual appealing green eyes were bloodshot and troubled as he stood in front of me, unmoving, while I sat on his bed and regarded him calmly, even if calm was not at all what I was feeling.

When I first came out to my family, it had been a complete mistake. Or, not a mistake so much as an accident. When I was thirteen, I'd been pretty solid in accepting that I was attracted to boys. I wouldn't say that it bothered me so much that I was different. I simply knew what I liked, just like Caleb knew that he liked girls. At the time I'd entertained the theory that I'd like girls, too. Eventually. That's how most boys worked. But as it was, at thirteen, any image I could concoct to masturbate to was a good one. I was curious, though. This was before we introduced the internet into our home, and even before I knew that magazines like the one Chad gave me for my birthday even existed, so I didn't have a lot to go on. Except, the summer I turned thirteen, was the summer that my brother's friend, Greg Hugh, spe

nt an entire two weeks with us when his parents renewed their wedding vows and went on a second honeymoon.

At the time, I'd been attracted to the tall fifteen-year-old with a dark tan and the ability to make me blush every time he smiled at me. He looked out for me, just like my brother did, and no one had really made anything of the way that I'd taken to following him around for the whole two weeks he was in our house. But, when my brother caught me spying on Greg in the shower, and then noticed the tent I was sporting in my pants, my secret became less of a secret, and more of a family bonding experience.

Chad had reacted well to finding me like that. Well enough to laugh. I'd been humiliated, and refused to speak to him until he got worried and finally just told my parents. That had led to a family meeting where they'd asked me just enough embarrassing questions to figure out that I was gay, but no one had placed a label on it back then. My mom had simply told me that it was normal to be curious about other guys, and that it might change later. When it didn't, they were all still okay with it, and thank god Greg Hughes never found out about my coming-out experience. The only person Chad ever asked me for permission to tell was Leanna, and that was only because she'd guessed it on her own.

It was safe to say that I'd never actually sat down and told anyone that I was gay. As far as I was concerned, it was really no one's business when it came to my sexual preference, not to mention that I'd never met an openly homosexual individual in my life. I'd most definitely never been brave enough to ask someone else if they were gay, let alone accuse them of it. That had all changed in a matter of seconds with Milo Trust, and I was still trying to figure out what had provoked me to do it.

Now that I thought about it, I'd taken a pretty big risk with him. It wasn't helping that he looked entirely defensive in his red coat. Furious. Maybe a little terrified. This was not the reaction that I'd wanted from him. I wasn't exactly expecting him to come running into my arms, declaring his undying queerness, but the reaction I was getting was disappointing. I didn't think I was wrong about him. But as he seemed torn between hitting me or running away, I did think that maybe making such a blunt confession to him had been a mistake.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I finally asked. My voice was soft. Quiet. It still managed to startle Milo into taking a defensive step back, placing him right against his desk. I watched him closely as he pushed his damp hair out of his face and took in an audible, deep breath.

"You. Get out of my house," he said in a controlled, calm, but cold, way. I stood up. Obviously, he wasn't taking this well. I just wanted to fix it. "Look, I didn't mean anything by it, Milo. I'm just trying to be honest with you. I think..."

"I don't care what you think," he cut me off. "Aren't you fucking listening? I want you out of my house! Seriously. Just stay the fuck away from me."

"I think you might be overreacting," I said reasonably.

He stood up straight, and I flinched when it looked like he was ready to advance on me. But, he didn't. Instead he held his ground, and glared. "Get out of my house, before I make you get out. I want you to stay away from me, Nelson." I opened my mouth to respond to that but he pointed a long, tan finger at my face and I came up short. "I'm serious. If you ever show up here again, I swear I'll call the fucking cops and say you're stalking me."

"Stalking? You know I'm not stalking you," I responded, crossing my arms defensively.

"No, I don't know that!" Milo said hotly. "I want you away from me. I'm not interested in... whatever the fuck it is you want. Just leave me alone! Don't talk to me, don't look at me, don't even fucking breathe near me, you sick fuck! Get out of my house!"

Sick fuck? Not only was that insulting, it hurt, too. And standing there, it's not like I didn't have any pride at all. I was Caleb Spangler's best friend for crying out loud. People didn't talk to me like that. With or without Caleb, I didn't let people talk to me like that. Not people who I'd gone out of my way to be nice to. Definitely not people I had an interest in getting to know better. Then again, under normal circumstances I wouldn't have been interested in getting to know someone who treated me like shit and called me a sick fuck after one of the most honest moments of my life. I was pretty sure that I was supposed to respond harshly to his words. Or at least hit him. I needed to embark on some form of communication that would let him know how non-fucking-cool he was. I didn't. I lowered my eyes, instead, and I walked out of his room feeling more embarrassed than I'd ever felt in my life.

I suppose this is what rejection was supposed to feel like. I didn't really care for it.

My the time I reached the stairs, I had my hood pulled up and I was holding the smooth wooden rail as I took the steps two at a time. The only thing that felt important to me at that very moment was getting out of that house. I hardly noticed it when the door magically opened in front of me as I reached it. I stepped outside, away from the covered doorway as the weight of the rain fell over my hood, and I barely looked back when I nearly trampled Juani ta as she stood on the dark cement patio, which looked shiny under the rain.

Her hair had fallen, dripping around her face as she held an equally drenched blue jacket around her small frame. A mess of words I couldn't understand left her mouth as she shouted after me. I didn't stop to try to figure out what she wanted. I got in my car, grateful I'd left it running, and fled the

Trust's property pretending that I didn't see the way that Milo was standing behind a window on the second floor, moving his palm over the glass to cle

ar the fog and watch me leave.

I wasn't thinking clearly. I first came to this conclusion when I couldn't find my way out of Milo's neighborhood. Every street, every house, started to look the same, and it was instinct turning the wheel for me, guiding the blue Buick in the direction of the main roads so I could get the hell out of Stratfort Ranch, and back to the hill, where I belonged. I'd somehow managed to numb the sting of rejection while I concentrated on the roads. There were city workers out in their rain coats, slowing traffic and tending to a few large tree branches that had fallen due to gusts of wind. But not focusing on the rejection itself wasn't necessarily a good thing as I was forced to face what I'd just done.

Milo Trust. Milo Trust who tolerated me because we had the same parenting class. Milo Trust, best friend of Assface. Milo Trust, who hadn't given me any signal, subtle or otherwise, that he liked me at all, unless I was going to count that painting. Which, I was beginning to wish I'd pointed out to him while I had the chance because I'd just told Milo fucking Trust that I was gay, and I had no idea what he intended to do with that information. He obviously didn't like it. Me. Being gay. I frowned to myself as I stared through the fast-moving windshield-wiper blades, hardly keeping up with the rain as it fell over the vehicle. I pushed the hood of the raincoat back off of my hair, wondering why I'd chosen to tell Milo of all people. Shit, he thought I'd been stalking him. Sick fuck. I wasn't one of those, and it hurt to think that that was what he thought of me.

I was worried now. Worried about a lot of things. Mostly, that Milo was going to find a ride to school, find Jame Graham, and at the first available opportunity, tell the Assface what I'd confessed. I didn't need to wonder about whether or not Jame would keep quiet about it. I could easily imagine the whole school gossiping by lunch time about the guy stupid enough to try to pick up Milo Trust, of all people. I was too afraid to even think about what my friends would think if they found out who that stupid guy was. And yet, I was entertaining the idea of rushing back to school so they could hear it from me and not the masses. Being the only gay guy in Heywell was something I could live with. Being the only guy in Heywell who the whole town knew about was not something I thought I could handle. Not now. But even being completely outed wouldn't be as unbearable as losing my friends.

But I couldn't tell them. I couldn't even tell my Uncle Ray. I wasn't ready for it. I was perfectly happy living a nice peaceful existence with a limited amount of people knowing what was my business, and nobody else's. Only, I wasn't perfectly happy. If I was, I wouldn't have told Milo. For a brief moment I thought about turning back. Going back to his house. I could beg. I could reason with him, ask him not to tell. It probably wouldn't be a good idea, though. Not when he already thought that I was stalking him--which

h was just rude, by the way. No. There was only one way to handle this. I needed to disappear, and wait it out. By the end of the day I'd know. That was plenty of time for Milo to tell anyone he wanted to. Heywell wasn't that big. If it happened, I'd know about it.

I didn't head back to the hill. I hardly even made it out of Stratfort as I turned off of Chariot road and headed to the chain of small businesses behind the north side of the lake. I parallel-parked on the street, directly in front of a Hollander's red-and-blue sign and moved into the building quickly, feeling better as soon as the scent of various muffins, pies and cookies hit my nostrils.

I took a quick look around, finding the place empty; not one of the white booths was occupied, and the glass counter seemed to be abandoned as I moved towards it. I was almost there when I stopped as someone came out of the kitchen, and I sighed as my dad appeared wearing his chef hat and his One-Hot-Baker apron, which covered his beer belly. He spotted me and cocked his head, pushing his box-shaped glasses further up the bridge of his nose, as if it would help him see me better.

"Nelson? Is everything alright?" he asked, coming around the counter, looking like any concerned parent would. "They didn't cancel school, did they?"

"No, Dad," I replied. "I mean, I'm fine. They didn't cancel school."

"Okay," he said slowly, his bushy eyebrows coming together as he regarded me inquisitively. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm not going to school today," I said matter-of-factly, and moved to drop into a booth. Then I looked up at him somewhat pleadingly. "Could you please call for me? Haily can get my homework."

He frowned, hesitating for a moment. "I guess so," he said carefully, and wiped his hands on his apron as he moved to sit across from me. "Are you going to tell me why you're not going to school today?"

"I just need to stay home."

He looked suspicious. "Alright. Will you be going back tomorrow?"

"It's hard to say," I said honestly.

"You don't look sick."

"I'm not," I assured him.

"Did something happen?" he finally asked.

"If nothing happened, I'd be in school right now."

"Nels, sooner or later I'm going to have to explain to your mother why I'm helping her perfectly healthy son skip his classes. Any idea what I should tell her?"

I sighed. "I did something stupid."

"How stupid?" he asked, looking really concerned now. "Do I need to call Ray?"

“No, nothing like that,” I said quickly. “It’s just... I sort of told someone. You know... about me.”

“About you?” He was honestly confused. In my family, the fact that I was gay was nothing when it came to who I was, as far as they were concerned.

“Gay, dad. I told someone I was gay. I thought I could, but it turned out I shouldn’t have done it, and now I don’t know if he’s gonna tell or not, and if he’s gonna tell, then I don’t want to be around.”

My Dad sighed, and held the bridge of his nose for a moment, just below his glasses. “Nelson...”

“Look, I know it sounds stupid...”

“No, it’s not stupid,” he assured me. “But, if he does tell, what are you going to do tomorrow, or the next day? This isn’t something you can hide from.”

“I haven’t really thought that far ahead.”

“Well are you sure he’s going to tell?”

“No,” I said honestly. “I figured I’d just wait it out. So can you call the school?”

“Yes, I’ll call the school. Do you need me to come home with you?” he asked seriously. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t need you to come home with me. And, I should know by tonight,” I replied.

My dad looked unsure, continuing to study me carefully. “Do you really think you have something to worry about?”

“I don’t know yet,” I replied. “I hope not.”

My conversation with Milo earlier had been disastrous, and honestly, I really didn’t know if I should be worried or not. But, there was one good thing I’d taken from the encounter. Milo Trust may have said a lot of things, but not one of them had been that he wasn’t gay.

“Maybe I should call your mom, or your brother... You know if anything happens we’ll do all we can to help you, Nels, but I’m not really sure what to tell you here.”

“You don’t need to tell me anything,” I insisted. “Just, please call the school. I’ll take care of the rest.”

My dad shook his head, but it wasn’t going to disagree with me. It was the situation that didn’t meet with his approval. “Who did you tell--Caleb?”

“No,” I said quickly, horrified at the idea. Not just telling Caleb I was gay, but thinking about how I’d feel if it was my best friend who could tell the whole school, didn’t sit right with me.

“Well, maybe you should tell Caleb,” my dad said. “You know we’ve talked about this before, Nels. Not everyone...”

“I’m not ready for them to know,” I cut him off.

“And what if they find out today? Not from you?” he countered.

“Dad, please. I’m gonna risk it, okay... I’m not ready to tell them. I’m not ready for them to find out like this, either. I’m just... not ready.”

I held my head, not sure exactly how I was supposed to handle this situation. I know hiding wasn’t really helping anything, but when I thought about going back to school, even if I did make it to the end of the day, I was afraid of what would happen if Milo Trust showed up. Because despite all of my other troubles, facing him again seemed like the hardest thing I’d have to do.

“Okay,” my dad said finally, standing up when I said nothing more. “I’m going to call your school. You grab an apron.”

“An apron?” I asked.

“I’ll feel better if you stick around here until the storm clears up,” he told me. Then, he forced a smile. “Besides, if you’re not going to school, you can work. No sense in being by yourself all day, thinking about this.”

I smiled back at him, thinking that sticking around for a while was a great idea.

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The rain had stopped, but the storm left behind a cold bite in the air, and the wind hadn’t diminished. It was almost three o’clock and I’d been home alone for a good thirty minutes. So far, my world hadn’t come crashing down around me. Quite the opposite, in fact. I’d had a good day with my dad. That particular shop hadn’t gotten very busy and we spent most of our time in the back, concocting new recipes--some good, some nauseating--and for the most part, keeping my mind off of what I was afraid of.

Standing on the back deck, still slick with rain, I watched the goat take advantage of the fallen apples. His white coat seemed to glow against the field, which had greened somewhat from all of the moisture. There was just a hint of a rainbow, but the sky was mostly dark with the tail end of the storm. It was very pretty, and made me think of Milo, and how a scene like this would be perfect for one of his canvases. I wouldn’t be pointing that out to him, though. Not now. I doubted I’d be talking to him at all. It was annoying that that made me sad, more than anything. I seriously felt like I should hate the guy for being such a royal prick to me, but sadly, no matter how hard I tried it didn’t happen.

By three thirty, I was stretched out on the blue-and-green sofa across the back wall of the living room dressed in my warm maroon sweats, and my thoughts had drifted away from Milo again as I became nervous over other matters. If all was normal in the world, I should have been hearing from my friends at any moment. It didn’t matter if it was a phone call, or if they showed up knocking on my front door with my homework. They just needed to do something that let me know we were still friends, and nothing unusual had happened during the day of school I missed.

It took another fifteen minutes of lying there, listening to a classical mix of piano-played tunes that my mom had left in the CD player before I heard a familiar-sounding engine coming from outside and rushed to my bare feet. I crossed the room and moved to the nearest window, pulling back a heavy green curtain so I could better see Caleb's jeep coming down the driveway. He stopped next to my car and I could see Joe in the front seat, moving to let Haily out. She moved towards my front door with a pile of books in her hand, her dark braid swaying behind her, looking as if nothing in the world was bothering her. But my heart sank as Caleb started backing out of the driveway, taking Joe with him. I jumped to the worst conclusions about why they were in such a hurry to get out of there. It didn't stop me from rushing around the wall that divided the living room from the front door, though, and I was swinging it open before Haily even knocked. She was too busy wiping her muddy feet on the welcome mat, and looked surprised to see me when I appeared in front of her, but she smiled. Just the way she always did.

"Where are Caleb and Joe going?" I asked.

"Caleb has to get Joe home because he has to do his court stuff today, for the DUI," she explained as she practically shoved the pile of books into my hands--all mine, I noticed. "Caleb's gonna pick me up later. I thought I could help you with all your catch-up work."

I stared at her for a long moment, convincing myself that nothing was different. If Milo had done anything yet, it hadn't reached Haily. That was a relief in itself. Haily suddenly lifted her hand, placing it firmly against my forehead, and I froze, blinking as she regarded me curiously.

"Haily? What are you doing?" I asked, arching my brow beneath the palm of her hand.

"You don't feel warm," she commented, withdrawing.

"Huh?"

"They said you were sick," she explained. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm definitely better," I assured her, and maybe myself a little, too.

I cradled my homework to my chest and backed myself into the door, opening it wider as I invited Haily into the house. It took her all of ten minutes to catch me up on the day I'd missed. And everything sounded... normal. Perfectly normal. Haily, Caleb and Joe had seen me that morning, leaving the school, but it seemed that they had no idea that Milo had been with me. That was another blessing. My friends had been confused because I wasn't there until second period when an office aide handed Haily a note, asking her to collect my homework for the day since I was out sick. Other than that, it had been a normal, gloomy day at school with all the rain. Caleb hoped that I wasn't contagious, and Joe already had a date for homecoming. I'm pretty sure that Haily brought up that last thing because it was her way of hinting that she wanted me to ask her. She even went as far as saying that she di

dn't think she'd find a date, looking nice and pouty about it. I assured her that she'd find someone, playing it as dumb as I could, and turned the subject to the more comfortable topic of my homework.

We went to the kitchen and spread my books out on the table and Haily walked me through various assignments. Not only did I have homework, but I had class lessons to catch up on, too. I complained about this, but Haily explained that most of my teachers were giving me to the end of the week to catch up. I figured I could pull it off in the two days given to me. When Haily got around to explaining to me that I had two chapters to read for my parenting class, and pointed out that she'd marked them for me, she also handed me a new-looking green notebook, which wasn't mine.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Notes from the class," Haily explained as I flipped the notebook open.

"You didn't have to do that," I insisted.

"I didn't," she said flatly, and as I looked down at the first two pages, the only ones in the book that were written on, I literally froze as my palm fell over the blue ink scribbled over the lines.

"This is Milo Trust's handwriting," I said, almost accusingly.

"I know."

"Mrs. Bates made him take notes for me?" I asked, feeling a little amused by that as I thought about the look on his face when she'd asked him to do it. But in the back of my mind, I was also realizing that Milo had in fact made it back to school, and obviously, he'd kept his mouth shut.

"No. He volunteered," Haily informed me, and I raised my eyes to hers, where she was standing across the table from me. I was seriously confused.

"He did?" I asked.

"Yeah," she replied, shrugging. "He's kinda weird. Not as bad as Assface, though."

Weird. She had no idea how weird this was.

"Yeah," I said, suddenly wanting to change the subject. "So, are you gonna help me get started on some of this stuff?"

"Yep. We can start with some of the worksheets Mrs. Bates handed out," Haily replied. "And don't worry about History tonight. Joe's gonna cover that with you tomorrow if he's not too pissed off about losing his license."

I just smiled at her and nodded. Yeah. Everything felt normal. Almost.

.....

Joe was outraged. Clearly, he thought, the juvenile court system was completely unfair. Not only would he be without a license until he turned eighteen, but he'd been told that he had to complete fifty hours of community service, too. He did not think Caleb and I were being helpful when we provided him with a list of businesses always looking for volunteers. They were various places that we'd worked over the summer. Joe was most definitely

in a bad mood, and all of his complaining put Haily in an equally bad mood. When Caleb got in a minor argument with Peter Forest because Teresa Mill drum had attached herself to my best friend's side during lunch, I decided that it wasn't going to be a very good Thursday.

I was having some trouble of my own. Throughout every class, I'd been using the green notebook with Milo's parenting notes in it, mostly so I could keep turning back to the first few pages and look at Milo's handwriting. It just didn't make sense. Nothing about Milo Trust made sense. He made a point to tell me how distasteful I was to him, and then he volunteered to make sure I didn't fall behind in class. If he was sending me signals, they sure as hell were mixed, and once I decided that my secret was apparently safe with him, I also decided that I was fed up. I tried to look at things in perspective.

Milo was a wet dream waiting to happen. Actually, he had happened in a wet dream or two, but not the point. I had a crush. A really bad crush. I liked that he was artistically talented. But, that was it. If he was anyone else, I imagined that I would have come to the conclusion that I couldn't stand him long before now. I'd been curious, that's all. But curiosity could only lead me so far, and I'd officially reached the end of my rope. Maybe he was gay, which became more obvious every time I thought about it, but that didn't mean that he was interested in me. It seemed that he really couldn't stand me for some reason, and while it was insulting to think that I was the one who made his skin crawl, I knew it would be a mistake to dwell on it. There were plenty of other people around who did like me. They weren't gay, and they weren't Milo, but at least I didn't walk away feeling like I should tie a pile of bricks to my ankles and jump into the lake during a lightning storm every time I talked to them.

I'd told myself before that I needed to forget about Milo Trust. This time, I meant it. At least, I meant it when I said I was going to try. Maybe he knew something about me that I didn't share with the general public, but whatever. I could live with that, as long as he kept his mouth shut. In return, I'd do what he wanted me to do most. I'd leave him alone, even if his nicer personality had surfaced long enough for him to take notes for me in Mrs. Bates's class. Normally, I'd thank a person for doing that, but in this case, I was going to make an exception.

I was later than normal getting to my last class of the day. Apparently, I had to make up a gym class, too, which meant rushing through my shower so I could take a written test on basketball. That placed me exactly five minutes late to parenting class, which was actually on time because of Mrs. Bates's leniency policy. I looked up at the trailer my class was in, and braced myself before I even entered. If today was like most days, Milo Trust would be in that classroom. I knew it had only happened the day before, but aft

er our last encounter, I felt a little nervous about even having to see Milo. But, there was no way anyone would have known it when I walked into the classroom looking as confident as always. I paused in the doorway and glanced around the room, making damn sure that my eyes didn't linger on Milo Trust, who was sitting exactly where he always sat, in the seat next to mine.

He'd looked up, and he watched me when I stopped in front of Haily to say hi and appear as cheerful as ever. I'm not sure how Milo was looking at me, though. I refused to look like I was paying that much attention.

Mrs. Bates gave me about five seconds to talk to Haily before she shooed me away from the girl's table and asked me if I was feeling better before she instructed me to take a seat. That's right. A seat. Not necessarily the one I'd been sitting in all year long. Maybe it was a little immature, but Milo had told me to stay away from him. Besides, I had no trouble taking a seat next to the platinum-blond freshman at our table. I glanced up once as I sat down, and my eyes were forced in Milo's direction, mostly because from my new seat, he was almost across from me. I caught his emerald eyes for just a moment before he looked away, seeming indifferent to our new seating arrangement. After that, I made sure to strike up a conversation with the freshman--Tim, as he'd introduced himself the first time I'd met him--whenever I wasn't busy with actual class work. I hardly looked at Milo at all, and did exactly what I'd planned to do. I pretended he wasn't even there. And at the end of the day, I felt like shit for it.

It got easier, though. The only time I saw Milo over the next couple of weeks was in class, and there, we ignored each other. There were a few glances where we couldn't avoid them, and once, Mrs. Bates asked Milo to pass out a test, so we had to deal with a split second of interaction when he passed one to me. But other than that, Milo Trust didn't exist, or so I told myself.

I discovered that without obsessing over Milo all the time, I had plenty of other things to deal with. It seems that a lot can happen in a few weeks when you're seventeen years old. Caleb, who had been spending a lot of time with Ronnie between classes, and who had taken to her in a way that I'd never quite seen before, did something stupid. Rebecca Spade was a senior and up for homecoming queen. She'd just broken up with her boyfriend of the last two years, becoming available to half of the male population at school. This was big news in our little world, and Caleb, who'd always been attracted to Rebecca, jumped on the opportunity and asked her to homecoming. Right in front of Ronnie. Ronnie was no longer speaking to him. Caleb was still trying to figure out why.

Joe had signed up for his community service through the police station. My Uncle Ray was doing a good job of keeping him busy. Officer Trujillo was his designated baby-sitter, and Joe, who couldn't pronounce his name right, was really afraid that the guy was actually going to shoot him. He'd als

o lost his date for homecoming to wide-receiver Brandon Sholer, who seemed to have more time to spend on her than Joe did, now that the court system had caught up to him. He was a little jealous of Caleb's date with Rebecca, and he'd laughed when Caleb had asked him to take Ronnie. I was glad that Ronnie hadn't heard the suggestion. She might have given up on the silent treatment with Caleb, just to give him a black eye.

Assface had the nerve to ask Haily to homecoming right in front of me. I could never really tell if the guy actually liked her or not. I was pretty sure that he mostly just liked to get on our nerves. Unfortunately, it worked, and his approach with Haily had sent her into a fit of complaints about not having a date. Haily might have been a little tomboyish, but she was a very pretty girl, and I happened to know that three perfectly decent guys, who weren't Assface, had already asked her. I also knew that she'd turned them down, hoping that I'd ask her. This left me with a difficult choice to make. I could ask her to go as friends, and still risk leading her on, or I could ask another girl and risk hurting Haily. Unfortunately, my original plan of waiting for her to find another date just wasn't working. I had some thinking to do.

There was less drama at home. After my coming-out scare, my dad had talked to my mom, and the two of them had conspired with Chad and Leanna to set up a family meeting. It wasn't very fun for me. I didn't really make a habit of thinking about what would happen if my being gay was discovered somewhere like school, but it seemed that my parents thought it wise to have a game plan, because they, as a family, hadn't really thought about how they'd handle it either. My mother insisted that a majority of the people in Heywell were accepting. But, my mom liked to see good in just about everyone, and even she could admit that there were quite a few members of the community who had more traditional opinions. I'm not really sure if we got anywhere useful during our family meeting, but I guess it was nice to be reminded that my family would always be behind me, no matter what.

My mom, no longer teaching at the elementary school, was taking on students at home to keep her busy. The piano was right above my room, making it difficult to do homework, especially when her students were completely tone deaf. She'd also asked me to round up some of my comics because she wanted to make a scrapbook of my work. She was bored; I knew it, so I went with it.

I worked with my dad at the bakeries a few days a week after school, and if he needed me, on the weekends. At home, the apple trees were almost bare now, so he hired Joe and Caleb to help the two of us do a cleanup, and while we were at it, we made sure the goat's shelter was leak-free and ready for winter, now that the temperatures were hitting the low fifties during the day. We could still wear t-shirts on occasion, and even go to Hangman, but getting in the water was now considered pointless and stupid. We still went

, though. Most weekends my friends and I were there, even if we were required to wear sweaters and replace our cooler with thermoses filled with hot chocolate. That's how I ended up running into Milo Trust again.

It was Columbus Day weekend and Caleb wanted to go because Rebecca had invited him. She wanted to spend some time with him before they actually went on their homecoming date. Joe kept insisting that it was because she was a senior and she wanted to make sure that Caleb was worthy. Joe assured Caleb that he'd be happy to step up to the plate if Caleb didn't reach Rebecca's expectations. Caleb hit him, and Joe complained about the bruise on his arm all the way to Hangman as he sat in Caleb's back seat with Haily, while I took shotgun.

The trees surrounding the cove were a little bare, their colorful leaves littering the trails and sand, which seemed bright against them. Hangman was a secluded place, but seemed even more so on the cold days. People still came, but not as many, even over a holiday weekend. It was sunny, the sky a pale blue, but it was cold. I'd bundled myself in the dark-blue coat my parents had given me last Christmas, and the beanie to match. Haily was actually wearing red earmuffs, and Joe looked like he was ready to go to some sort of prep-school meeting in his black jacket and turtleneck. Caleb had braved the weather in a black muscle shirt that showed off his arms. Apparently, Rebecca had commented on how nice those long muscled arms were, and he wasn't above showing them off, even in forty-degree temperatures. I found myself cracking up every time he pointed out how hard his nipples were. Rebecca's friends seemed like nice enough people. Most of them had known my brother in one way or another before he graduated, and for a long while I found myself surrounded by girls showing off the piercings Chad had done for them. Haily, for the first time ever, decided to cling to me while this was going on. Usually when I talked to other girls, she just walked away. I found myself hoping that her behavior was due to the cold, like she said it was as she wrapped her arm through mine and leaned into me where we were seated on the sand with several other people, while Rebecca's little brother, a year younger than us, barbecued. There was a fire ban around the lake, but when it wasn't busy, anyone could get away with a small propane grill, which is what one of Rebecca's friends had brought. I was able to pry myself away from Haily when Caleb asked me to play Frisbee with him and some of the other guys who were there. I eagerly agreed, wanting to distance myself from my only female best friend. Besides, the weather required some sort of physical activity to keep the blood flowing.

"I saw that," Caleb informed me as he tossed me the red disk, and I, in turn, tossed it to a waiting dark-haired senior down the shore from us.

"Saw what?" I asked, moving to join my wavy-haired, hard-nippled friend as Joe moved in front of both of us to catch the Frisbee.

“You and Haily,” Caleb responded with a less-than-innocent smirk on his face.

“No,” I said seriously. “She was just trying to keep warm.” That probably came out wrong, because Caleb laughed.

“You better not be perving on my cousin, Nels,” Joe threw over his shoulder at me, right after tossing the Frisbee back.

“Better him than some other jackass,” Caleb said, I assume, in my defense.

“Me and Haily are just friends,” I stated, not liking this conversation. “That’s how it’s gonna stay. So just knock it, off, okay?”

I backhanded Caleb’s broad chest and then moved away from him, trying to focus on where the disk was going to go next. Caleb, of course, was frowning at me.

“Hey, sorry, Nels, okay? I’m just saying, she likes you, and...”

“I know she does,” I cut him off. “How do you think that makes me feel? I don’t wanna lead her on, I don’t wanna hurt her..”

“Dude, relax,” Joe said as he suddenly tossed the Frisbee over his shoulder at me, and I had to jump to catch it before tossing it back down the beach. “Haily’s tough, and everyone knows she likes you. Just tell her you’re not into her. She’ll deal with it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah,” I responded sarcastically, “that just helps so much.”

Joe simply shrugged at me before turning back to the game.

“You really aren’t into her?” Caleb asked, sounding almost skeptical.

“She’s my friend.”

“Okay,” Caleb replied. “Then if you’re not into Hails, who are you taking to homecoming?”

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted.

“Well, who are you into?” Caleb asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I can’t remember the last time you said you liked someone,” Caleb responded, and I stood up straight and faced him. He couldn’t remember, because it had never actually happened. I’d just always assumed he was too self-centered to notice.

“Well, maybe that’s because I’m particular about who I’m attracted to,” I decided. “But whatever. I’ll go with someone. Where are your keys?”

Caleb frowned at me, but lifted the keys to his jeep from his pocket and tossed them directly to me. “Where you going?” he asked.

“It’s cold,” I replied, adjusting my blue beanie on my head. “I’m gonna see if that hot chocolate’s still hot. You guys want some?”

“No thanks,” Joe called.

I looked at Caleb again. “Do you want your sweater yet?” I asked him. In response, I got a wicked smirk as he flicked his left nipple, the small bead hard

and visible beneath his shirt.

“Nope.”

I rolled my eyes at him and turned away from the game to head towards the trail leading to the old bike path that we parked on. I guess I wasn't as interested in hot chocolate as much as I was interested in getting away from the conversation I'd been engaged in. In this type of situation, it was simply better to get away and give Caleb a chance to forget about what we were talking about. And hopefully when I got back, Haily would be less cold and clingy.

The cove wasn't very crowded, but that didn't mean that there wasn't activity on it. There were more families there today than groups of boisterous teenagers. They were braving the weather for picnics and to play games with their kids, everyone hoping that their various sport equipment didn't end up in the lake because no one seemed to want to get in the water, except for a few lonely souls dressed in wet suits swimming laps they probably swam every single day.

As I got closer to the trail my eyes drifted to the scarecrow, looking larger somehow with its tree barren of leaves. Most of them were piled in the sand and around the trunk, some even floating in the water making it appear murky, almost swamp-like. I cocked my head to the right when I noticed that the scarecrow's dark head looked slumped forward a little more than normal, and I hoped that no one had been throwing rocks at him again. Sometimes the tourists that found Hangman simply didn't know better. Personally, I'd always thought there should be a nice shiny plaque on the tree, with the various tales of how the scarecrow came to be there, beginning with the evil farmer Covlier tale.

When I bumped into someone, and a small digital camera fell in front of my sand-filled white tennis shoe, I quickly apologized and reached to pick the device up. It was when I presented it back to its owner that I found shining green eyes settled on me, and Milo's brunette locks blown about his face. I froze momentarily, instinctively wanting to exchange pleasantries, but instead, I thought better of it and passed the camera into his hand as he held it out. I gave a slight nod of recognition, and then quickly passed him, keen on sticking to the Milo-ban he'd helped me impose upon myself. It was the slight pressure of fingers dragging over the elbow of my jacket that had me spinning around, just in time to see him pull his hand back.

Milo just stood there for a moment, staring at me as he slipped his camera in his pocket and pulled the same red coat he'd been wearing the day he told me in no uncertain terms to piss off, tighter around his body. I watched him lightly bite at his lower lip, looking red in the weather, just like his nose. He swallowed, looking absolutely startled with himself. When I got over my initial surprise, I only regarded him expectantly. If he wanted to talk

about something, he'd have to initiate it. There was no sense in getting accused of being a stalker again, especially in a place where it might draw attention. When he finally opened his mouth and said something, I was ready to pay attention.

"Your shoe's untied," he told me. "You don't want to trip."

I looked after him as he turned and walked away from me without so much as a backwards glance in my direction. I frowned when I looked down at my feet. One lace on my right foot was a little loose, but in no way did it qualify as untied. I shook my head to myself, wondering what that was all about as I went on my own way, up the trail to Caleb's jeep, which was parked on the narrow road between a red pickup truck and a white minivan. I found that the large thermos was doing its job by keeping the hot chocolate warm. Needless to say, as I poured the dark, steaming, thick liquid into one of the plastic mugs my mom had provided while I sat in the driver's seat of Caleb's jeep, my mind was on Milo Trust. And that was annoying. It's not like he'd even said anything to me. My shoe was untied. It didn't make sense, just like he didn't make sense. Every time I thought about him my mind went back to that painting I'd found in his room, and every one of our encounters. I wanted to think that he was interested in me, but everything he said or did, other than that painting, went against it.

I downed my drink, scalding my tongue, and then I took in a breath of cold air through my mouth as I placed the lid back on the thermos and grabbed the stack of plastic cups, deciding to bring the beverage back with me. And I told myself that I was not going to let seeing Milo distract me from the rest of the day. Hell, I saw him almost every day in parenting class, and I didn't let him get to me there.

Only, in class he never touched my arm, or looked at me like he actually wanted to say something civil. He never did anything that gave me the slightest bit of hope that he didn't completely detest me. I felt a little shaken by our encounter, as brief as it was; and as much as I didn't want to think about it, I would have done anything for an opportunity to ask him what it was all about. That's probably why it wasn't my friends who I was looking for when I got back to the cove and leaned against the scarecrow's tree, thermos in hand.

I wasn't sure that I was going to approach Milo. In fact, it seemed highly unlikely once I did spot him, considering the fact that he was down the cove in the opposite direction from my friends, sitting on a black-and-blue-checked quilt with two guys who I didn't know and one I did. Jame was enough of a reason to walk away. Going over now would lead to a potentially dangerous confrontation with the information Milo had on me. I almost did walk away, too, except an opportunity came when Jame suddenly stood up, waved to two girls in the opposite direction from where I was standing

g, and started to walk towards them. I watched him leave for a moment before I turned my attention back to Milo. One of the two guys who I didn't know got up to join Jame, leaving just one of them. I could deal with that. Hoping that Jame didn't turn around before I reached Milo, I headed over. This could still be a mistake. I was well aware of that, but I wasn't really in the mood to wait for Tuesday to see him in class, knowing full well that by then I likely wouldn't have the same nerve.

Milo didn't see me coming. He'd turned his back to me, and was watching Jame move down the beach with his other friend. The guy next to Milo saw me, though. Even sitting down he looked taller than Milo. He looked older than us, but that was only because of the thick, dark sideburns that ran down the sides of his face, meeting his square jaw. He was cute, I decided, but I would have much rather have had Milo's green eyes on me instead of his dark ones. To my surprise, this stranger grinned at me. It was the same kind of welcoming grin that I always tried to provide when I saw someone new approaching me. Under the circumstances, I was encouraged by this. But the same guy surprised me again when he reached for his wallet.

"Please tell me that's somethin' hot and you're sellin' it," he drawled in a rather deep voice, and I glanced down at the thermos in my hands before I smiled right back at him.

"Giving it away, actually," I replied; and at the sound of my voice, Milo's shoulders tensed and he turned around rather cautiously, facing me with an expression that was surprised, and borderline suspicious. I smiled at him nervously. "Hi."

Milo continued to stare at me for a moment while his friend looked between us. "Hi," he finally said.

"Oh, you know each other?" Milo's friend asked.

"We have a class together," I answered.

"Nice," Mr. Sideburns said, still smiling in a friendly manner. "Whatcha drinkin'?"

"Mom's hot chocolate," I said sheepishly as I handed the thermos down to him, along with two cups, just in case Milo wanted some.

"Just the way I like it," the dark-haired guy returned, helping himself when it came to opening the thermos. Milo was still staring at me, looking as nervous as I felt, just standing there. He apparently wasn't going to invite me to sit down, but that's okay, because his friend did it for him. "You gonna sit?"

"Sure," I said, grinning as I plopped down right in front of Milo and stared back. I hoped he'd say something. Anything. But when he didn't, and his friend had sampled my mom's hot chocolate, I found myself trapped there as both of them stared at me, and it seemed necessary to say something. "I'm Nelson," I told his friend, and he gave me a nod.

“Jerry.”

“You don’t go to Hellver,” I said to him, deciding that I didn’t recognize him from school.

“Stratfort,” he told me proudly.

“What are you doing?” Milo asked, finally saying something; and when Jerry gave him a funny look, he added, “Here.”

“Oh,” I said. “I um... wanted to ask you about that assignment Mrs. Bates gave us on Friday.”

I watched Milo carefully. There had been no assignment, and the look on his face said that he knew that. It seemed like minutes passed as he continued to regard me suspiciously, and then he suddenly turned to his friend.

“Hey, Jer, can you give us a minute?” he asked. This, surprised me. Definitely wasn’t expecting it, and obviously, neither was Jerry as he looked between us curiously before standing up, lifting the plastic mug.

“Mind if I take this?” Jerry asked.

“Go ahead,” I insisted, trying not to look as nervous as I felt, and then I watched him walk towards Jame and the other guy. “Nice guy,” I commented, and meant it.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Milo snapped, and my eyes moved to his, taking in a very familiar, irritated glare. I couldn’t bring myself to smile and ignore it this time. In fact, after hearing his tone, I downright frowned at him.

“Stop doing that,” I responded, and Milo blinked at me. “Seriously. Stop it. If you want me to go away, ask and I will, but stop pretending you hate me.”

“I’m not...”

“And don’t say you’re not pretending,” I cut him off, feeling confident in the moment when a look of surprise crossed his handsome features. “My shoes untied,” I scoffed. “What the hell was that back there? Do you have something to say to me?”

Milo opened his mouth, looking like he was about ready to spit fire, but whatever he was about to say to me died on his tongue and he turned his head away from my gaze for a moment, pursing his lips and narrowing his eyes. When he faced me again, it was stubborn, at best.

“I want my notebook back,” he said. “The green one.”

I rolled my eyes, feeling exasperated as I gathered my thermos and the cups and stood up. He just sat there, watching me until I looked back down at him. “I’ll bring you a new one on Tuesday.”

“Fine. Did you mean what you said?”

“What?” I asked, not understanding his question.

He frowned, and I watched him swallow. “Are you really... are you really gay?”

I froze at the question, finding that it startled me, and now I was the one regarding him suspiciously. Only, I couldn't find much that I found suspicious. He seemed to be facing me with genuine curiosity now. I shrugged. "Yeah," I said, refusing to apologize for it, and then I decided to ask a question of my own. "Do you really think I'm a sick stalker fuck?" I was surprised at how fast Milo lowered his eyes and blushed at that. Surprised enough to sit back down. "Well?" I asked.

He met my eyes, but his brow was still lowered, his eyes looking troubled.

"Maybe..." he said quietly, and I started frowning. "Maybe, you can come over and bring me that notebook."

My eyebrow flew up. Milo was avoiding my eyes wherever possible, and suddenly, I found myself rather amused by him once again. "No," I said firmly, and almost laughed when he looked up, frowning at me. Disappointment. I saw it. "Wouldn't want anyone calling the cops because I'm stalking you," I remarked, and for a very brief moment, he almost looked sorry. "If you want it before Tuesday, you can come to my place."

And, that was all it took before Milo looked cynical again. For my part, I tried to keep a straight face. I was a little tired of feeling like I was getting burned by him, and if he was about to tell me to go to hell, I wanted to appear completely indifferent. He gave a small shrug, wet his lips, and then shocked me.

"Where do you live?"

I blinked, and rather than telling him, I cocked my head. He obviously knew he'd surprised me because a subtle smile appeared over his mouth as he bit at his lip, averting his eyes from me. When he shifted nervously where he was sitting I forced myself to clear my throat and answer him, but not before one last suspicion occurred to me.

"I know where you live, you know," I warned. "If anything happens to my house..." I was cut off by the serious look on Milo's face when he lifted his eyes to mine, and I let out a breath. "I'm on the hill," I told him. "You go like you're driving to school, but make a left on Forget Me Not. I'm the only gravel driveway you'll run into... I'll be home all day tomorrow."

Tomorrow was Monday, the last day of our three-day weekend, and I'd really had no intention of staying in all day. That had officially changed, because Milo Trust definitely looked interested.

"Forget Me Not," he repeated, and I nodded as I started standing again, schooling myself as I saw Jame returning with Jerry and the other guy. "Where are you going?" Milo asked, taking me off guard with the question as I backed away from the quilt.

I grinned down at his curious face and shrugged. "Gotta go. I don't wanna call your friend Assface in front of you... I'm starting to think it pisses you off."

Chapter 6: Try That Again

by DomLuka

A/N: thanks to Jim for editing!

I held the phone away from my ear, just enough to hawk up enough mucus to cough with, and then did so. "Sorry, Caleb, I can't," I said into the receiver. "I think it's that flu I came down with a few weeks ago. Who knows if it's contagious."

"Shit, dude," Caleb responded, sounding troubled. "You need me to bring you anything?"

"Nah, I'm okay," I insisted. "I think I just need a nap or something"

"Okay," Caleb replied, sounding uncertain, and I felt a moment of guilt for what I was doing.

"Call Joe," I suggested. "He'll go with you."

"Nah, he's doing his community service thing."

"Then call Haily."

"Yeah, I was gonna, anyway. Look, call if you feel better, alright?"

"I will," I assured him, and after another forced cough I hung up the cordless phone and dropped it carelessly on the mattress as I sat up on my bed. I felt guilty. I wasn't used to blowing Caleb off. Actually, I never blew Caleb off. It felt terrible, but necessary.

It was just past noon on Monday--morning for Caleb, who'd called to ask if I wanted to go to the park for a while, and maybe find something otherwise more entertaining to do. His sister was due to give birth any day now, and driving him crazy. Her husband was finally with her, but it seemed that Julie preferred to lean on her parents and Caleb. He'd hardly woken up and already she was ordering him to help her to figure out how to put together a breast pump. As Caleb explained it, he was a large fan of anything and all things breast, but the mention of anything to do with his sister's and he was out the door. He didn't even want to go home until Julie had the baby at this point. Any other day, I probably would have offered Caleb safe harbor and free meal tickets to boot; and in all honesty, I probably would later.

After Milo came over.

Because Milo was going to come over. We had no plans set in stone, and there was a possibility that he wasn't going to show up. But I was confident. He wanted to talk to me. He didn't have to say that for me to know it. Any resentment I might have had towards him due to our previous encounter was gone. Almost gone. Frankly speaking, he'd hurt my feelings, as stupid as that sounded to me. But I had that hope back again, and for now, I could forget about feeling bad. I was way more interested in what Milo had to say to me. And he'd better have something to say to me, because if he was really just coming over here for a stupid notebook I'd have to beat him over his stubborn head with it before I ever let him leave.

I pushed myself off my bed and straightened my blue-and-white button-up shirt. It was the one my mom liked me to wear on Sundays, and Leanna always said it looked nice on me. I'd been thinking of Milo when I got dressed that morning, but I'd likely deny any and all claims that I was dressing up for him. Same went for cleaning my room. I'd vacuumed, made my bed. I'd even dusted a little bit. What I didn't do, however, was try to hide anything. My sketch books were in their shelves, right where they always were, some with sketches of Milo right on top. I didn't have any of him on my walls, but I did have some comic drawing of my friends tacked up; and of course, the scarecrow painting was still there.

I pushed off my bed and headed up the stairs. The rat was out again. I put it away and refilled the parrot's water, when he kept dumping his bowl, because, as my mom put it, he was in a mood. Walking through the house, the closer I got to the kitchen, the more it smelled like tacos. My parents had left yesterday afternoon for an overnight date, location unknown. They did that every once in a while on a long weekend, leaving one phone number for emergencies but not much else. They'd be back later tonight. I'd heard Chad and Leanna come in about forty minutes before, shouting through the house that they were there to baby-sit me. I'd been busy cleaning my room so I opted to ignore it. But now, I was interested because they had food. I was somewhat hopeless when it came to cooking for myself. The only time I ever did it was in the bakeries, and that was hardly like cooking over a skillet, which my brother was doing now, browning a pound of ground beef over the stove. Chad's hair was as pink as ever and piled in a pony tail on top of his head. Leanna was facing him across the round counter as she carefully diced an assortment of peppers near a food processor. Tacos and salsa. I decided right then that both of them could stay.

"Hey!" Leanna objected when I reached around her, and popped an entire jalapeno into my mouth, making a face as the heat caught up to me. She laughed and tugged on one of my pierced ears. "You're turning red," she observed. "Go get something to drink."

"I'll take a soda," Chad said, glancing up from the meat he was browning as I headed towards the refrigerator. I just nodded, sucking in a breath against the pepper burning my mouth as I rolled back my watery eyes. "We didn't know if you were home."

"I was busy," I replied. "What are you guys doing here?"

"I have nothing to cook with in my kitchen," Chad said, as if this were some mystery he'd just figured out.

"I think my roommate's having sex in mine," Leanna commented.

I snickered. "That's kinda gross." I'd never actually met Leanna's roommate, but I'd heard Leanna complain on occasion that the girl was always bringing home various guys, and more often than not, Leanna had no idea what

t she was going to walk in on. I always figured that Leanna and Chad would be moving in together sooner or later, if only Chad wasn't so attached to his own roommate, Greg Hugh. "Are you guys gonna be here long?" I asked. "For a while," Chad replied, and then looked up to raise a blond eyebrow at me. "Why, are we cramping your style already?"

"No," I replied as I brought three sodas back to the counter and hastily downed one. "I'm just curious." I lifted a block of cheese and the grater, and decided to put myself to work next to my brother's girlfriend. "Hey Leanna, can I ask you something?"

"Uh-huh," she replied, throwing a sideways glance in my direction.

"Okay, if there was a guy you liked..."

Chad cleared his throat. "Excuse me?"

"It's hypothetical," I assured him, and Leanna smiled as I turned my attention back to her. "If there was a guy you liked, but he wasn't really into you; I mean, he liked being your friend, but he didn't have the same feelings that you had..."

"Why wouldn't he be into her?" Chad asked, looking offended on behalf of his girlfriend.

Leanna shushed my brother. "It's hypothetical," she reminded him, seeming amused.

"Well, how would you want him to tell you?" I asked. "That he's not interested, I mean."

"Is this about Haily?" Leanna asked. She could be a perceptive little thing behind those thick glasses.

"She wants me to take her to homecoming."

"So take her," Chad said, shrugging. "What's wrong with going as friends?"

"It wouldn't be leading her on?" I asked.

"Not if you make sure she knows you're going as friends," Leanna said. "If you tell her you're not interested she's going to want to know why, Nelson. I know I would. Plus, it's Haily. When you tell her, you're going to owe her an honest explanation, don't you think?"

"Oh," I replied, feeling somewhat put out. I understood what Leanna meant by honest explanation. I just wasn't sure that giving one of those to Haily was possible. My brother and Leanna disagreed, though, as they flashed me pointed looks and smiled at each other. I frowned. But, whatever annoyance I was experiencing was short-lived when the doorbell echoed through the house. I dropped the cheese grater. "I've got that!" I announced, and before they could say anything, I was moving through the house, eager to get to the front door.

Maybe I was eager, but I wasn't prepared. I think I'd fully expected to experience one of those disappointing moments that occur when someone expects

to see someone particular on the other side of a door, but ends up facing someone completely irrelevant instead--like a troop of girl scouts or a Play boy bunny who somehow managed to lock her keys in her car, right there in suburbia. It didn't happen, though.

Milo had his hands tucked away in his jeans pockets. It was still cold, but he'd left his red coat at home, and now he was facing me in a v-neck black sweater. I didn't care for v-necks, but I immediately decided that I liked them on him. And black. I'd noticed that the darker the colors were that he wore, the more his eyes stuck out. His hair seemed shorter today, but that was probably because there were more waves in it, due to the humidity in the air. But his stubbornness, it seemed, had not quite evaporated yet as he regarded me expectantly.

"I can't stay long," was the first thing he said to me. "Do you have that notebook?"

Whatever kind of smile that had worked its way over my face fell, and I stared at him for a full moment as I wondered if he was trying to earn himself a gold medal for jackassism. If he had any interest in having a civil conversation with me whatsoever, he was simply going to have to drop the attitude. I considered myself a patient person, but hell if I was going to be his doormat. It was my frustration with him that had me slowly closing the door in his face, and once it was between us, I turned around to lean back on it, waiting. I suppose there was a possibility that I'd hear his car, leaving, in a few moments. But, I was still confident. I just hoped that I could get Milo housebroken before I invited him in. At least he could take a hint, because the next thing I knew he was bypassing the doorbell, knocking softly.

When I opened the door this time, it was just enough to look out at him, waiting to see what he had to say for himself. He had the nerve to still look annoyed.

"I said I couldn't stay long," he said. "I didn't say not at all." I watched his expression soften, and he looked somewhat sheepish as he avoided my eyes. "Can I come in?"

I raised an eyebrow, opening the door a little more.

"Why do you do that?" I asked curiously.

Milo shrugged, subtly shaking the hair from his face. "I'm not really comfortable around you," he admitted.

That wasn't a response that I was expecting, but the honesty behind it did get my attention, and I opened the door and stepped back as I waved him into the house, where he stopped, and took a nervous look around.

"This is where you live?"

"This is where I live," I replied, cracking a small smile. He moved aside so I could close the door, and then I nodded for him to follow as I turned to move into the house. But, he didn't, and I paused to look back at him, still

standing there in the doorway. "Do I need to carry you?" I remarked, and Milo raised an eyebrow at me.

"I really can't stay that long," he reiterated, and then finally stepped away from the door.

"No problem," I replied. "We don't usually take our guests hostage and refuse to let them leave until the third visit, at least."

Milo didn't bother to respond to my joke as he caught up to me. I guess he really was uncomfortable. He certainly looked it as his eyes wandered, seemingly taking in everything in my house as we moved through it. I wanted to tell him to relax, but then decided to hope that he'd do that on his own. It didn't quite happen when we reached the kitchen, though. He paused, his eyes drifting to the large windows facing the field. Most people looked there first. It didn't surprise me that Milo did, too. But, when his gaze focused on what was in front of the windows he took a step back, seeming startled when he saw that we weren't alone with Chad and Leanna there, now putting together tacos.

"Milo," I said, loud enough to get my brother's and his girlfriend's attention. "That's my brother, Chad, and that's Leanna."

"Milo?" Chad repeated, regarding me curiously.

Leanna looked as startled as Milo did, but at least managed to smile. "Hi," she said.

Milo gave her a nod. "Nice to meet you."

"You didn't say you were having someone over," Chad said, looking at me suspiciously. He had a right to, I guess. The last he'd heard, I was worried about Milo Trust outing me. "Are you guys hungry?"

"Are you?" I asked, turning to Milo, who quickly shook his head.

"No thanks. I just wanted to get that... book." He looked nervous about saying that to me after I'd closed the front door in his face, but this time there was something behind his words that I could actually understand.

"Sure," I replied, and then faced Chad and Leanna again. "We'll be in my room."

"Okay," they both said, still giving Milo and me funny looks. I turned away from them with Milo, but couldn't help throwing a goofy smile over my shoulder, aimed towards my brother, who simply shook his head at me. But that was okay. He could ask all the questions he wanted to later. Right now, I was busy. With Milo. Who was in my house.

The first time I'd entered Milo's room it had been because of a misunderstanding, but I still remembered the moment everything hit me. Not just all of the paintings, but the fact that I was in Milo's room. For at least a brief moment, it had me feeling a little closer to him. I gathered that the reason was because a bedroom was a personal thing, and at the time, just standing in it had been the closest I'd managed to get to being personal with Milo. It

was his room. He slept there. He dreamed there. He created beautiful images and kept things that were personal to him in that room. He most definitely kept his secrets there. It had been kinda thrilling, just to stand amongst all of that. The feeling that came with having Milo in my home was similar to that. Only here, I was comfortable, and in my element, and ready to discuss some of those secrets that Milo kept. It was only fair. After all, we'd already talked about my secrets. I was hoping that Milo was ready to tell me some of his, without me having to confront him. I was sort of in a hurry to get to my room because of that. But I lost him when we reached the family room and he noticed the animals. He went straight to the African Grey and knelt down in front of the large cage, placing himself at the bird's level, and I watched as the parrot climbed from his perch, and then over the bars to face Milo, where he made a loud belching sound directly in my guest's face. Milo laughed, and I found myself smiling as I moved up behind him.

"He only does that to people he likes," I told Milo.

"You talked to them about me," Milo replied, without turning around.

"Huh?"

"Your brother and... sister?"

"Leanna's Chad's girlfriend."

Milo was silent for a moment. "You talked to them about me," he said again.

"Yeah," I replied, completely unapologetic. Milo straightened, and looked over his shoulder at me, as if he expected me to say more. I smiled. "Come on."

I turned, and moved towards the stairs, stopping at the top to let him go ahead of me. He'd made it down one step before he took in the full effect of the creepy, narrow passage and froze, placing his hands on the wall as if he thought I'd push him.

"Where are we going?" he demanded.

I laughed. "My room."

"Your room's down there?" he asked incredulously. It seemed that he didn't approve.

"Just walk," I insisted, placing a hand on his shoulder only briefly enough to get him going again. We made it through my door, where he paused again, immediately met with his own art work. His eyes didn't dwell on the scarecrow for long, though, as he took in the rest of the room. Any shyness that Milo might have displayed upon entering my house abruptly disappeared, and I watched with entertained fascination as he very boldly moved into my room and looked around, taking in everything from the sketches I kept on my walls to where I kept my homework on my desk. He even paused to open the top desk drawer and look down at the loose pencils and markers I kept in there. I leaned against my doorframe, still watching when he made his way

y to my shelves where he lifted one sketch pad after another, flipping through them, pausing every so often, his back to me. He didn't have to be facing me for me to figure out that he'd stumbled upon various sketches of himself. When he flipped through one of my older books he finally looked over his shoulder to see where I was. I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Are we even yet?" I asked.

He put the book back but not before removing a loose piece of paper from it. He turned around, shaking his head as he held up the comic-like picture

I'd done of him long before I'd ever spoken to him, the one where he had a cape and slicked-back hair. And a bulge in his pants. "Not even close," he responded, but sounded more amused than anything.

"I did that one months ago," I said, moving further into the room. "Last year, when school got out, I..."

"You saw me when I was picking up Jame."

"You remember that?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

Milo shrugged, as if it was no big deal. "I remember faces." He turned to place the drawing back on the book, and when he took a seat in my standard black desk chair I seated myself on my bed, seemingly unable to keep my eyes off of him. "Do your friends know?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"What you told me," he replied. "Being... gay."

"Oh. No, they don't," I replied. "Just my family. And Leanna. And you."

"You told me but not your friends?" he asked skeptically, to which I shrugged.

"You're different."

"Meaning...?"

"I think you know why," I said pointedly, and Milo's eyes dropped to the floor momentarily as he pursed his lips and studied his hands. When he looked up, it was determinedly.

"None of my friends know," he said quietly, and I leaned forward, interested enough to soak in every word that was coming out of his mouth. "I couldn't even think about telling my dad. He's all about image, he'd..." Milo stopped for a moment, swallowing. "You're not going to tell." It was more of a statement, than a question.

"No," I agreed, and then smiled at him. "I sort of thought you would tell Ass...eh, Jame, about me."

"Is that why you didn't come back to school that day?" he asked, meeting my eyes again.

"Part of the reason," I admitted.

"Oh." We fell silent for a moment while I continued to stare at Milo and he looked at anything but me. I think he felt awkward. I didn't. Not at all, in fact. Excited was a better word to describe it. I just didn't think he'd apprecia

te it if I jumped up and down and declared it, that's all. If it was even possible to feel better than I did, it happened when Milo kept talking. "I wouldn't have told Jame," he said, and I believed him. "When you didn't show up for school, I kinda felt like shit. I was going to try to talk to you then, in class. I mean, I wasn't going to tell you... actually, I wasn't going to tell you anything. I just wanted to apologize, for..."

"Overreacting?" I offered, when Milo came up with nothing. "Calling me a stalker... a sick fuck..."

"Okay," he snapped, sounding defensive. "You know, I didn't say that stuff because you said you were gay or anything. You just--you were creeping me out. But yeah, I was going to apologize. But then you didn't show up, and the next day you stopped talking to me."

"You told me to," I quietly pointed out. I was troubled again. It was an unsettling feeling to have when I was supposed to be excited, thrilled and perfectly happy. But I couldn't help it, not when some of the feelings that I'd had the day he blew me off were resurfacing. They seemed a lot harder to push down with Milo staring back at me. "I creep you out?" I asked.

Milo cocked his head at me. "No. It's not that you creep me out. You were creeping me out. I mean, all through community service you kept acting like we were friends or something. I didn't know what the fuck your deal was. I mean, dude, I sorta thought you might have hit your head too hard when I was beating the shit out of you that night."

This made me laugh. "You didn't beat the shit out of me. I was drunk, and I tripped."

"Whatever; when I beat the shit out of your drunk ass, then," he replied, as if to appease me. "And even when I tell you to back off you show up at my house, go in my room--and you freaked out Juanita!"

"No. She..."

"And just when I think you can't get any weirder, you ambush me at the lake and start asking for a nude portrait for your girlfriend! What did you think you were doing when you came out and said you were gay--and then accused me of it? I didn't know what the fuck your deal was!"

I opened my mouth, meeting Milo's eyes. There were so many ways to respond to that. But instead, I found myself shaking my head. "Do you know what my deal is now?" I asked him.

He sat back in the chair and studied me for a moment. "Not really," he admitted. "But after you told me...you know, I kinda figured out what you were doing." Milo let out a breath and I watched as a pink tint crawled over his high cheekbones. "I'm not... I don't know about this stuff, okay? Girls come on to me all the time, but I figured you just had a mental handicap or something. I mean, you just didn't quit."

"Yeah, I figured you'd take a hint," I responded dryly, and then regarded hi

m seriously. "So does it freak you out?"

"Does what freak me out?"

"That I'm attracted to you... interested in you. That, and maybe I like you. I'll drop the maybe if you stop being a prick to me. It stopped being cute a while ago. You're still hot, though."

Milo was incredulous. "Are you kidding me?" he demanded.

"Well, it's not like I was trying to get your attention because you won me over with your charming personality," I remarked. "Not that I think you don't have one... you just need to, maybe, work on it."

Milo once again raised a sharp, dark eyebrow. "Are you always so blunt?"

"Blunt?" I scoffed. "I've been beating around the bush ever since I met you."

"I lifted a hand to tug on the stud in my left ear for a moment, and let out a breath. "Milo, when you're not acting like you hate my guts, there's... something there. I like you, and we're both gay, so maybe you and me could..."

"Whoa," he cut me off, straightening in his seat defensively. "Just because we're both... you know, I don't even know that I like you."

"Because you keep telling yourself that you hate me," I responded boldly. "I'm still the only gay guy you know."

Milo laughed, but it wasn't exactly full of humor. "Are you actually suggesting that just because you're the only queer I've ever met that you and me should hook up or something? Because why? We're each other's only option? That's completely fucked, you know that? I plan on meeting plenty of guys sooner or later."

"Yeah," I responded conversationally. "But you could have sex with me sooner."

Milo's jaw dropped about the same time that he stood up. "Okay. I think we've done enough sharing for today."

I couldn't help the way I cracked up at the expression on his face and I stood, just in time to cut him off as he turned towards the door, holding my arms out the way I would to fend off a charging animal. "I was kidding Milo. Kinda. Look, all I'm saying is that I want to get to know you. Maybe hang out sometime. And, no, it's not just because I wanna hook up." Milo pushed his dark hair back and crossed his arms. He didn't look very pleased with me, but at least I had his attention. "I just wanna know what it's like to talk to someone... who knows what it's like. There, okay? That's what I've been after. Now it's your turn."

"What?"

"Why are you here?" I asked. "And please, don't say it's for a stupid notebook."

"I felt bad about what happened, at my place," he said, without hesitation.

"So that's it? You just came to tell me that?" I was having trouble with that explanation, as nice as it was to hear that.

"Yeah," he replied. "And maybe... you could take your seat back in Mrs. Bates's class." He sighed, and then continued, before I could even respond to that. "I sorta meant it when I said I couldn't stay long," he said, pushing his black-sweater sleeve up his wrist to glance at his watch. "I have a meeting with my dad."

"A meeting?"

Milo met my eyes. "Yeah. I have to go."

"I'll walk you out," I offered, disappointed. I suppose I could admit that I'd accomplished enough for one day when it came to the questions I had about Milo Trust. But now that I had answers to some of those questions, all I wanted to do was to keep talking to him. At least long enough to work up the nerve to tell him that I'd discovered the painting he'd done of me. But, when Milo nodded, I started towards my door before I abruptly turned back, facing him. "Your notebook..."

Milo lifted his hand, very briefly touching my shoulder to stop me. "I didn't really want the notebook back," he admitted.

I smiled. That was probably the nicest thing he'd ever said to me.

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Chad was wary, while Leanna was encouraging, when I told them how Milo Trust had ended up coming over. I didn't deliberately tell either of them that he was gay. But, I didn't really have to. Leanna told me that I should be patient. She thought it was a good thing that he'd asked me to reclaim my seat in parenting class. Chad saw it as a good sign, but he still remembered how I was worried about Milo trying to fuck me over before, and he thought I should use some caution. It was the big brother in him speaking, and I appreciated it, but the truth was, I didn't think that Milo had ever been a threat to me. That was just me, freaking out.

I did feel that I needed to be careful when it came to Milo, though. I could admit that some of the things I'd said to him were a little bold, whether or not they were harmless and meant to lighten the mood. If I wanted to get to know Milo Trust, I'd definitely have to stop scaring him away. I told myself that I'd work on my tactfulness when I saw him in class the next day.

In the meantime, I thought it would be best to distract myself from Milo Trust. Only this time, it wasn't because he was a jerk. It was because I felt that our conversation had been cut short. This whole situation with him felt unsettled, and I needed to tell myself that showing up at his house uninvited would not be a good idea. Besides, distracting myself made it easier to not think about how strange I felt, wanting to know everything about Milo again when I'd just spent the last few weeks pretending that he didn't exist.

Caleb was impressed when I found him at Haily's house, after recovering from my flu in record time. I didn't bother to call. I just went out looking for my friends, leaving the house to Chad and Leanna. Haily's mom made Caleb

and me get up on her roof to clean her gutters while we were there. After that, Haily feared her mother would find more chores for us if we stuck around, so the three of us took off together, originally heading towards the city park because it was close by; but when I turned up the heater in my car on the way there, it was decided that none of us wanted to be outside in the cold. So we went to the nearest deli that served hot soup, instead. Chicken noodle for me, broccoli-cheddar for Haily, and Caleb had a suspicious-looking clam chowder as we sat down for thirty minutes and discussed whether or not we were bored enough to go visit Joe during his community service. We weren't really sure if we wanted to do that, but we decided that we were bored enough to at least drive down to the sheriff's department to find out where Joe was working. Of course, when we got there, Ray told us that we couldn't bother Joe while he was working. But, he also said that Joe was almost done for the day. That brought us to hanging around the police station for a good thirty minutes. It wasn't a very busy place, but we stayed mostly in my uncle's office, telling him how we'd been since school started. Being in his office now was a lot different than being in it had been when I'd been in trouble. Uncle Ray was definitely smiling more. His office was still as bland as ever, but he did have new photographs of my cousin Jay in his wallet. I hadn't seen the chunky little guy since my birthday barbeque, and it looked like he'd actually doubled in size. The photograph of Jay sitting in a little red wagon with a ridiculously happy smile on his face was enough of a reminder that I needed to go visit, soon. I only felt guilty when Uncle Ray announced that Chad had made a point to stop by at least once a week after his classes. Sometimes I really didn't understand how my brother could be twice as busy as I was and still make time for things like that. At least so far everyone just liked to point it out to me, and didn't expect me to be like Chad.

When Joe arrived at the station, he wasn't very happy. It seemed that his hands were full of splinters from chopping wood for two elderly citizens who, in Joe's opinion, belonged in a home. Before Joe left with us, Officer Trujillo was there to tell him that he was a selfish, lazy, brat. But Joe looked more insulted when Trujillo asked my uncle Ray for permission to shoot him. My attractive friend went into an entire speech about police brutality and a buse of power that Uncle Ray didn't find funny at all. That's when we took Joe and got out of there.

Together, the four of us went back to my place for a while. Chad and Leanna were still there and for the rest of the afternoon they taught us how to play Hearts, until Haily's mom came to pick her and Joe up. Caleb still didn't want to go home, and he didn't have to. As soon as my parents got back from their trip they offered him our guest room upstairs. The two of us stayed up a little too late watching a comedy, and in the morning I got Caleb h

ome just in time to grab his stuff before we went to pick up Haily and Joe, and all of us went to school together. By lunch time, the four of us were sitting in one of the white Hollander booths, me next to Haily and Caleb next to Joe, and once again I was faced with my homecoming dilemma.

"I don't even know her, Caleb," Joe said irritably as he looked across the bakery to where a sophomore girl from our school was sharing a ham sandwich with one of the several girls in her group. She was just Joe's type, too. Platinum blonde hair, manicured nails, thin, pretty. Extra bubbly smile. Joe had been checking her out ever since we walked in, and as a result, Caleb was pressuring him to ask her to homecoming, since he'd lost his date.

"What's your point?" Caleb responded, and I was inclined to ask the same question. Considering that I was someone who'd thought Joe was the hottest thing to touch our school until Milo Trust walked into it, and since Joe had never seemed shy around girls before, I didn't see what his problem was.

"Homecoming is three weeks away. She probably already has a date. I'm not going to embarrass myself."

"What me to embarrass you then?" Caleb responded, a sly smile curled over his mouth.

Joe raised an eyebrow, returned the smile, and gave a slight nod. "Go for it."

Haily groaned, and then sipped my soda because she'd downed all of hers. "Caleb, don't; you're going to end up embarrassing you, not Joe. Besides, he'll find his own date. He always does." She flashed her cousin a look that dared him to argue with her. Joe just smirked.

"Well, I'm the only one who has a date to homecoming," Caleb replied. "Someone's gotta fix that."

I just rolled my eyes as I picked a piece of cheese off my roast-beef sandwich and watched as Caleb left the booth and sauntered right up to the table that Joe's blonde interest was sitting at. He tapped her on the shoulder and when she smiled up at him he took a seat on her table and looked down at her, as the rest of her friends pulled their food aside to make room for him, falling silent and blushing all at once. Caleb could have that effect on girls. He was only focused on one, though.

"You're very fuckable," Caleb declared, and when the girl predictably looked horrified he quickly added, "That's a compliment, I swear." Joe shook his head, and Haily rolled her eyes. I just cocked my head at the way that Caleb was over there, deliberately licking his lips like a wild dog anticipating its next meal. It was rather disturbing, really. But, the blonde girl, whose name was Kelly, I'd later find out, blushed up at his smile while her friends seemed rather amused. Caleb suddenly pointed to our table, directly at Joe.

"But, sadly, I'm not currently available. Do you wanna go to homecoming with my friend? I'm sure he won't step on your feet or anything. If he does, you

can come find me. I'll take care of you."

Kelly looked over, saw Joe, and blushed again. Joe didn't notice. He was too busy glaring at Caleb, so I kicked him under the table, bringing his attention to me.

"Dude, you might wanna go rescue her from Caleb if you actually want to go with her," I pointed out.

Haily nodded to agree. Joe didn't argue with us, and lifted what was left on his lunch tray to trash in the wooden-framed bin on his way over. As Joe left, I found myself turning my head to face Haily as she tapped the straw from my drink to her lips where she was slouching in her seat, looking straight ahead.

"I guess that means it's our turn to find someone," she commented, and I sighed.

"It's not like we don't have time," I said.

"For you maybe. If I'm gonna find a decent dress, I'm going to have to start looking soon."

"You don't like dresses, anyway," I pointed out, and she shrugged, knowing this was true.

"I'll wear one for homecoming."

Haily sent a sidelong glance in my direction, and I forced a smile in hers. "I don't really feel like looking for a date," I said, after some careful consideration.

"You don't?" she asked, granting me her full attention now as she pulled her braid in front of her to fidget with it.

"Nah. I'm just going because you guys are going," I explained. "It's not like I want a girlfriend or anything."

"Oh," she said quietly, and I felt bad as soon as I saw the corners of her mouth curl down. But she hid it quickly, and smiled in my direction. "I know what you mean. It's kinda stupid. All the fuss about trying to find a date for just one night. And, the dance isn't even really fun."

"Yeah," I agreed. "It's the parties afterwards."

There was a genuine smile on her mouth this time. "Very true," she agreed.

"So, you wanna be my date?" I asked her. "We can go as friends. And if you find someone else before homecoming, I won't get upset if you back out."

"Yeah," she replied. "That sounds good. And... you, too. I mean, if you decide you want to go with someone else, I'm okay with it."

"Don't worry about that," I assured her. "Go ahead and get your dress."

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It was the first time in weeks that I was looking forward to walking into my parenting class. I didn't realize that I was nervous, too. Not until I got there. Milo had been so unpredictable in the past that I wasn't really sure

what to expect with him. I think when I went into the classroom, I half expected him to end up ignoring me again. I made sure to get there a little late. That way, he'd already be seated, and I was hoping I could read him easier. I was comforted when he looked up from his seat as I walked into the classroom, and pulled out the seat next to him, just as I'd done the first day that he walked into the classroom. As always, I stopped to say hi to Haily before I walked around the table. Milo seemed to be finishing up his homework from the night before when I slid into the chair next to him, but he glanced at me, if only briefly. Rather than speaking to him, I looked across the table and made friendly conversation with Tim, the blond freshman who looked a little put out by my move. For the last few weeks, I'd been talking to him, and there was no sense in letting him think that I was blowing him off. But even as I talked to Tim, asking about how his weekend had been, I made myself aware of all things Milo.

He was there next to me, seemingly concentrating on his homework, but most definitely listening to every word I was saying to Tim. Beneath our table, his knee, the closest one to me, was ever so slightly extended in my direction. There was less distance between our seats than between Milo and the free chair on the other side of him, and the faint scent of sandalwood coming off his clothes made me think of his empty bedroom. When I did take brief glances in his direction he'd meet my eyes every time, glancing from beneath his dark lashes. And most importantly, he wasn't glaring at me. When Mrs. Bates started her class, and Tim went to pull out his book, I finally allowed my gaze to drop on Milo, where they lingered when I was faced with green ones looking right back at me.

"Hi," I whispered, not wanting to draw attention from Mrs. Bates. The corner of Milo's pink lips curled into something akin to a smile, and then he turned and opened his parenting book to the page Mrs. Bates was instructing us to read. I sighed, and did the same, and for the next fifteen minutes we were silent, simply aware of each other's presence as Mrs. Bates circled the room, calling on different people to read. When she paused to hand out a worksheet, there was a low rustle of voices around the classroom, and my voice was amongst them as I faced Milo again. "It would be easier to talk if you'd meet me outside of this classroom," I remarked. As if making my point for me, Haily suddenly looked back at us with a strange look on her face. I flashed her a reassuring smile in return.

"Anything you have to say to me you can say here," Milo responded stubbornly. But, there was still a hint of a smile on his face.

"What? You need witnesses?"

Milo raised an eyebrow at me, but didn't respond for another twenty minutes as class continued. Not until Mrs. Bates stopped to tell us that we'd need signed permission slips for some movie that she wanted us to watch.

"Is your family okay with it?" Milo asked in a hushed voice.

It took me a moment to catch his meaning. "They always have been."

"How did you tell them?"

I turned my head in his direction, regarding him curiously as he faced one of his notebooks, rather than me. "Are you thinking about telling yours?" I asked.

"No," he said quickly. He sounded like he thought the very question was something worth laughing about. "I was just... wondering."

I nodded, and then told him, the very next chance I got. When I got to the part where Chad caught me spying on his best friend, Milo snorted, drawing attention from the whole class. He blushed, and I tried not to laugh before we went back to paying attention to Mrs. Bates.

For the entire hour and twelve minutes that Milo and I sat next to each other in class, I probably only talked to him for about fourteen of them. And he talked to me. He seemed a lot more relaxed than he'd been sitting in my room the day before, and seemed more interested in my family's reaction to me than anything else. He asked me a question that I never even would have considered before, like what I would have done if my parents had said they didn't like that I was gay. I, of course, had no idea how to respond to that. Actually, the question itself made me downright uncomfortable because I didn't even want to think about what if in that situation. Milo let it drop quickly enough, though, and when he spoke again he was asking me about Chad and Leanna, wanting to know if they lived with me, and what my parents did for a living. All of his questions didn't leave much room for me to ask any of my own. But, I still enjoyed talking to him. Just sitting there with him while he was open to my presence was a good thing. My only disappointment was when the end of class came and Milo left just as quickly as Haily came to stand in front of our table.

Milo and I had even less time to talk on Wednesday, but on Thursday, Mrs. Bates split us up into pairs again. I partnered with Milo, but we didn't talk about anything personal at all. Instead, we did something better. We laughed. We shared a notebook. We made fun of the way that Mrs. Bates kept lifting her hands to her chest whenever she started to talk about breastfeeding, and ended up cupping her own. At one point Haily turned around to see what we, and most of the other guys in the class, thought was so funny, and I was surprised when Milo took it upon himself to fist his hands beneath his forest-green sweater, as if they were supposed to be breasts, and only laughed at me when I grabbed one of them. Haily wasn't the only one in class who found this somewhat amusing, and as a result Mrs. Bates had us reading silently through the rest of the period. But, I hardly did any reading. I was too busy glancing at Milo, meeting his eyes, smiling, as if we were sharing an inside joke of some sort. He elbowed me twice, and once I leaned into

his shoulder--a small nudge, just for the sake of contact.

On Friday, after school got out I asked Milo if we could meet over the weekend, and I was somewhat put off when he said that he had plans. I was pretty sure that his plans wouldn't last him all weekend. I told him so. He responded by looking generally uncomfortable before he told me he'd see me later and took off.

I missed seeing Milo over the weekend. But, on Saturday the cold front that we'd been experiencing diminished for a day, and with temperatures hitting the mid-fifties, Caleb, Haily, Joe and I went to Hangman again, where I watched Caleb make out with Rebecca Spade for a good hour while Haily and I tried to convince Joe that Officer Trujillo was not really going to shoot him. Joe was skeptical. He cheered up later, though, when Rebecca invited us all to a party that her friend was throwing. After a night of socializing with a bunch of seniors and dancing with Haily, I woke up on Sunday at Joe's house, where Caleb and I had stayed the night. Haily must have driven us there, because all three of us were nursing hangovers, and it turned out that my car was at her house a few blocks away.

I spent most of the rest of the day shopping. We all did. Actually, Haily was shopping for a dress and she'd recruited the three of us to go with her.

I'm not sure why, though. She refused to let us see her in any of them. She seemed happy when she found one, though. Then, she said she needed shoes, a task which occupied two very long hours of our time.

For Caleb, Joe, and me, finding a suitable wardrobe for homecoming was a lot less complicated. It was traditional for the guys at my school to attend in jeans, so long as they had some sort of formal jacket. Except for the football team. They tended to go all out.

I parted with my friends early on Sunday night to go home because my parents had invited Uncle Ray, Aunt Patty, and little Jay over for dinner. It was a nice visit, but when Jay became cranky halfway through it and I volunteered to take him, I discovered that I just didn't have the same special touch that Caleb had when it came to small children.

On Monday afternoon, I was back in health class with Milo again. He seemed to be in a somber mood. He wasn't rude to me or anything. Just, quiet, I guess. I worried that whatever chemistry we'd shared the previous week had diminished on his part, and it left me feeling so down that I didn't even want to go out with my friends that evening. But on Tuesday, he changed again, and through the class we both talked with Tim, discussing how none of us had even signed up for the class, and Milo told us how at his last school, electives were decided by some sort of personality test they took at the end of each year. When Tim was busy talking to other guys at our table, Milo and I were whispering again as he told me that he'd known he had a preference for guys for as long as he could remember, but he was even worse than I was.

as when it came to wanting to hide it from the people around him. Apparently, a while back he'd gone through a phase of dating every single girl at his last school when he feared one of his friends had suspected him. Now, he knew that he'd just been paranoid, but he wasn't sure that he'd change his behavior if he had it to do all over again. I doubted that he would, given the way that he could hardly tell me about it without constantly looking over his shoulder.

On Thursday afternoon, I wished that I'd been paying more attention to the permission slip I'd brought home for my mom to sign the previous Tuesday. There were certain things that I had no desire to ever do in my lifetime, and one of those things was to watch a live birth via video tape in a trailer behind the school. Honestly, I could respect the miracle of birth and all that, but I didn't see why I actually had to see it happen. Close up images of... really gross things. I guess I hadn't expected it to be so... messy. For the most part, our class handled it well, I think, except for one of the expectant mothers, who burst into tears during the video and had to leave. The guys seemed uncomfortable. I knew I was. I'm sure a few of the others were reevaluating what they expected to do with their dates after homecoming. And then, there was Milo. He couldn't seem to decide whether or not he wanted to look at the screen. When he did, it seemed to take a great deal of effort on his part. Frankly, I was getting worried, because it was clear that it wasn't discomfort that was plaguing him. Even in the dark, against the glow of the television, I could see that he'd grown pale. Small droplets of sweat had broken out over the side of his face and he kept swallowing, as if his mouth was terribly dry. That's when I'd given up on even trying to watch the video and focused all of my attention on trying to distract him from it.

"Andre Lour," I whispered. "And Brandon Sholer."

"I know who Brandon Sholer is," Milo replied. "He's not bad... um...Daniel Atkins, he went to my old school. Oh, and the guy that works at Velda's... that cafe, he's the one with the red hair..."

"Really nice ass?" I asked, lowering my voice even more. "I know the one."

We were naming off all of our past crushes, and it seemed to be working well enough as Milo cracked a small smile.

"I've had a huge crush on my friend Joe, like, forever. I thought he was king shit... until I met you."

Milo smirked, and turned towards me. His eyes seemed half closed as he held his head up. One glance at the television screen, and more of a woman's labored sounds, and he was swallowing hard again, but attempted to maintain.

"I'm king shit now?" he asked blankly, and I stopped smiling as I leaned towards him.

"Milo, are you okay?" I'd avoided asking until now. He obviously didn't want to draw attention to himself, and he seemed a little embarrassed over the reaction he was having. He frowned, but nodded, right before he crossed his arms on the table in front of him, and put his head down on them. My hand moved to his shoulder. He felt warm even beneath the thick fabric of his knit sweater. "Milo?"

He mumbled something into his arm, and I worriedly moved my hand to the back of his neck for a brief moment, finding it damp with sweat as he shivered beneath my fingers. I frowned, and looked across the classroom where Mrs. Bates was watching the video, and rather than calling for her, I raised my hand into the air, where it remained as I kept one eye on Milo, until Mrs. Bates approached us almost five minutes later. She didn't have to ask me what was wrong as she took in the sight of Milo and shook her head disapprovingly.

"Mr. Trust?" she asked, leaning over him with a hand on his back.

Milo lifted his head, still swallowing hard as he looked up at her.

"Sorry, Mrs. Bates," he said quietly.

"There's one every year," she commented, patting the top of his head. Poor Milo didn't even have it in him to object to that. "Can you get up, Mr. Trust?" Milo nodded, and started to stand, but Mrs. Bates stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Just a moment."

As soon as Mrs. Bates walked away, Milo's head was back down on the desk and when she returned, it was to me that she was handing the long eraser that served as a hall pass. "Mr. Larmont, will you please walk with Mr. Trust to the nurse's office?"

"Yeah," I said quickly, but Milo lifted his head at that.

"I don't need a nurse," he said firmly.

"I take it you're well enough to watch the rest of the movie, then?" Mrs. Bates asked challengingly, still managing to maintain the friendly smile on her face. Milo glared at her.

"Come on," I insisted, tapping his arm as I stood up. Impulsively, I wanted to reach down and help him up, too, but something told me that he wouldn't appreciate that as he stood slowly. I guessed that Mrs. Bates didn't expect him to come back, because she gathered his things. When Mrs. Bates held out his backpack to me, Milo indignantly reached for it, but I got it first and flung it over my shoulder. I earned myself one of his glares doing that, but this one I found I could smile at.

Milo led the way out and I followed closely behind him. We didn't go without drawing attention from some of our classmates, either. Haily looked at me inquisitively as I left the trailer, but all I could do was force a smile and close the door behind Milo and me as the cool air outside hit us. I felt a light breeze brushing over my short hair and sending a chill down my spine.

But rather than going back in for my jacket I turned to catch up to Milo. It seemed that wasn't very hard to do, since he'd decided that the short metal ramp leading down from the trailer was the perfect place to sit down and rest his head on his arms, which he'd folded over his knees.

"Milo?"

I knelt beside him quickly, placing a light hand on his back.

"I can't... I don't... I don't do..." he mumbled into his arms. "It's not just the blood..."

"Yeah, I kinda got that," I cut him off, moving my hand gently between his shoulder blades as I took a seat beside him and placed his bag on the other side of me. "Don't think about it, okay?" He nodded into his arms while I looked on worriedly, not sure what to do as I listened to his ragged breathing.

"Maybe I should go get the nurse and bring her to you," I suggested.

Milo shook his head, and then turned it, still resting on his arms, but facing me now. "Jake Armstrong," he said quietly, and when I raised an eyebrow, he added, "That was my first crush. He's really fat now."

I smiled, and then playfully narrowed my eyes on him. "I think I'm the only one who's not on your list."

"Are you fishing for compliments?"

"Of course," I responded, and Milo looked like he was going to smile, just before he faced forward and swallowed hard.

"You okay?" I asked.

He was silent, but forced himself to nod, then he tried to stand up, moving away from me in the process.

"Hey," I objected, not liking the way he seemed wobbly on his feet. The last thing I wanted to do was watch him faint. I reached for his arm, but Milo pulled it away.

"I'm okay," he stated. "Just kinda... dizzy."

"So let me help you," I responded irritably. Now, was not the time for him to be stubborn. "Shit. I won't bite unless you ask me to, okay?"

Milo cocked his head at that as his hair blew into his face, and then he released a small chuckle. "I can walk by myself."

"Alright," I agreed. "You walk, and I'll make sure you don't fall on your face." I lifted his bag from the ground, and Milo jumped when I moved my hand to his back again, resting just between his shoulder blades. He tried to step away from it, but I followed, and met his glare with a stubborn look of my own until he lowered his head and walked down the ramp, no longer objecting to the way I walked close to him, touching him.

"If I pass out..."

"You think you're gonna pass out?" I cut him off, gripping the back of his shirt, alarmed.

Milo glanced at me. "I said if. If I do, just tell everyone you hit me or some

thing, okay? At least that'll sound like a good enough reason for why..."

"You should relax," I insisted. "I pass out when I see a little tiny needle, okay? I could cut myself and bleed buckets, but I've never been able to have my blood drawn without someone holding me down. So... just don't worry about it. Besides, if I said I hit you, I don't think it would be very convincing. I doubt anyone would believe I mistook you for Jame... better yet, just don't pass out."

Milo sighed, and as we slowly made our way towards the gym he started to look a little better. At least, it seemed that way. His color wasn't exactly back, but his breathing was growing normal and the cool air warded off the sweat he'd broken out in.

"You're on my list," Milo suddenly said, and I glanced at him while he continued to concentrate on where his hiking-boot-clad feet were going as we moved across short-cropped grass, green and still moist from the last time the field surrounding the school had been watered. "But, don't let it go to your head or anything."

I smiled, really hoping that he wasn't brave enough to tell me that only because his brain had been deprived of oxygen and he was about to pass out. "Don't worry, I kinda figured that," I replied.

Milo regarded me with interest and my eyes moved to the strand of hair that had blown into his face. I found myself tightening my grip on the back of his sweater, resisting the urge to pluck the dark lock away from the corner of his mouth as he wet his lips. "Why would you think that?" he asked.

I released a small laugh. "Dude, do you really think I ever would have told you I was gay if I didn't think you might have at least a small thing for me? I'm really not that brave, you know."

"But why would you think I had a thing for you?" Milo asked, making a face at me. "I don't even remember being nice to you."

I regarded him for a moment, and then smiled. "I don't think I should tell you right now. I mean...here."

He was suspicious. "Why?"

"Let's just get you to the nurse," I said, and he frowned at me. "I'll tell you later," I promised. And, I meant it. I just wasn't sure how upset he was going to be with me, and I hardly thought school was the right place to explain things to him.

"Drinking fountain."

"Huh?"

"There's a drinking fountain in the gym," he explained. "I think I'll feel better if I just get some water. And you can let go of me now."

I ignored that last thing. "We can stop in the gym," I agreed, and as we neared the large sand-colored structure that matched the school I looked at Milo and walked even closer to him, so I could feel the heat emanating from his

body against my side, even through the cold air surrounding us. "If I'm on your list, why won't you meet me outside of school?" I asked, and the corners of his mouth curled down, just as they had last Friday when I asked him to meet me over the weekend. "I'd settle for outside of class," I added.

He turned his head slightly, his eyes drifting to mine and I waited for a response as I noticed his steps becoming smaller, slowing us down until we'd stopped completely. "When are we supposed to do that?" he finally said. "When you're with your friends, or I'm with mine?"

"What do our friends have to do with anything?"

"It would be weird if we just started hanging out."

"Why?" I asked, confused. "There's no rules saying that we can't be friends. That's stupid."

"People would talk."

"I think you're being paranoid," I remarked, dropping my hand from his shirt. "No one's going to care if we hang out, and if someone does, who cares? Besides, you like me. You said so--can't take it back now. Just say yes."

"I can't. I don't know what I'm saying yes to."

"You're saying yes to... sacrificing a few moments of your obviously precious time spend it with me. To letting me meet you in the halls before a few of your classes or, coming over to see the goat. Did I tell you we have a goat? Or... giving me an actual invitation to show up at your house. I don't know, Milo. Anything. Preferably something that involves you letting me kiss you, but for right now I think I'd settle for you showing up at my locker just to borrow a stupid pencil."

Milo's jaw dropped as some of his color came back. I think it was just because he was blushing.

"Do you actually think before you let words come out of your mouth?"

I frowned at him. "When I'm around you, I get to be honest. Most of the time, like, around my friends... around almost everyone, I'm just a liar."

His eyes narrowed as he lifted a hand, lightly scratching at his brow. "You make me..."

I took a step closer, waiting for him to continue, but the sound of loud footsteps, quickly padding over the grass and the jangling of keys had me looking back, just in time to see Caleb jog right past us as he headed towards the trailers.

"Caleb?" I curiously called out, and my best friend spun around with windblown hair and a red hue to his cheeks, clearly winded. His eyes focused on me, seemingly confused as he glanced back at the trailer, and then me again. When he suddenly clapped his hands together and took a step forward, I straightened, lifting a curious eyebrow as Milo took the opportunity to move back behind me.

"I'm an uncle," Caleb announced, sounding as if it took a great deal of effort

t to get just those words out. "I mean, not yet--I'm gonna be. Julie's in the hospital, and I need you to take Joe and Haily home so I can go." Caleb's face lit up. "She said after all the shit she gave me I can tape the birth." Caleb laughed to himself, obviously amused by this. "Pretty sick, huh?" I heard Milo inhale a deep breath behind me and glanced back. His eyes were closed again and he looked like he was trying very hard not to hear what Caleb was saying.

"Milo?" I asked, ignoring the funny way Caleb looked at me when I turned away from his news to touch Milo's shoulder. His green eyes snapped open and the next thing I knew he was reaching for his backpack, pulling it off my shoulder and leaving me with just the hall-pass eraser.

"I'm gonna get that water now," he told me, and I nodded.

"I'll be there in a second," I told him, and as Milo headed into the gym I faced Caleb, smiling. "Yeah, I can get Haily and Joe home. No problem," I insisted. "Go."

Caleb's brow was frowning as he looked behind me, in the direction Milo had gone. "Dude, what was that?"

"Oh, he's sick," I replied. "I'm walking him to the nurse's office. Hello, Julie--having a baby?"

Caleb's attention snapped back to me and his expression went back to being excited. "Yeah, do you know what that means? She's gonna have to move back into her own fucking place, and she has to be nice to me or I will never baby-sit for her."

I smiled at him. "Are you really gonna tape it?"

Caleb made a face. "No. Not really. Don't even know if I wanna watch it yet."

"If you're interested there's a sneak preview going on in parenting class," I remarked, and he cocked his head at me, just before he straightened.

"I have to go!"

"You have to go," I agreed. "Congratulate Julie for me."

"Yeah, yeah," he responded, turning back towards the school. "Call you later, Nels!"

I smiled after him, hoping that things at home would get easier for him. Julie's husband probably would want her to be back in their own place now, as soon as she recovered. But, without him around, I saw her doing that just about as much as I could see Caleb refusing to baby-sit, especially when the new baby was his niece or nephew.

I turned towards the back entrance of the gym and opened one of the purple, double doors that Milo had gone through, placing me in the wide hall with marbled black-and-orange tiling and fluorescent lights, right next to entrance to the guy's locker room. It was warm in the hall, muggy from the nearby showers, and the scent of deodorizers and musk pleasantly hit my nostrils.

, tempting me to take a peek into the male shower room. The only thing that stopped me was thinking that I should invite Milo to come, too. Only, as I looked down the hall, to the left of the door leading into the gymnasium where I could hear basketballs thumping on the court and echoing through the building, there were two drinking fountains, and Milo wasn't near either of them.

I didn't have to look around the gym to know that I wouldn't find him there, but I did, anyway, feeling disappointed. Not only had Milo ditched me, but there wasn't a single naked body to be found in the locker rooms.

After walking all the way to the main building, and discovering that Milo hadn't even been in the nurse's station, I made it back to Mrs. Bates's class just in time to gather my things as the bell rang. I returned the hall pass and lied on Milo's behalf, saying that he got to the nurse just fine. Haily wanted to know what was going on, but she couldn't have cared less about what happened to Milo as soon as I told her that Caleb's sister was having a baby. I took Haily home before I drove Joe directly to the police station for his community service. He'd planned to just work mostly on weekends, but since his parents had made him give up his job at the gas station when school started, he decided to try to get his community service over with faster by putting in a few hours every day after school. To my surprise, he didn't complain about Trujillo at all on the way over. Instead, he was talking about Kelly Down, the girl he was taking to homecoming. It seemed that he liked her enough to ask her out over the upcoming weekend, too.

"You're taking Haily, right?" Joe asked me.

"As friends," I replied.

"Good. I don't think you should be anything more than that, anyway."

"Because you don't want me fucking your cousin?" I asked, glancing at him sidelong from the driver's seat.

"No, I don't care about that," Joe responded, as if it were obvious. "It would screw everything up if you and Haily got together. I'd be stuck hanging out with Caleb all the time."

"Is he still pissed at you?" I asked.

"Because he got community service? Nah. He's been better ever since I got it. But whatever. It was all fucking bullshit, anyway."

"Joe, you tried to run down two people and you destroyed Milo's paintings," I replied, feeling irritated with his attitude. That's probably why the subject didn't come up very often.

"Like he can't color more pictures," Joe responded, rolling his eyes. "Besides, it was an accident. Everyone just needs to get over it."

I frowned, but didn't comment further. It was easier to just drop Joe off and hope that Trujillo gave him an extra hard time today, than try to tell him that he was being a prick. Besides, I was in no mood to be in a bad mood. W

hile Caleb was finding out first hand what a live birth was like, and Haily was doing her homework, and Joe going off to hopefully get more splinters, I had some unfinished business of my own to take care of.

There were no cars parked outside of the Trust residence, and as I became brave enough to knock on the front door, I could only hope that Milo's car was the only one parked in the garage. When it was Juanita who answered the door, wearing a simple black dress today, with her hair pulled back, I was half tempted to forget about why I was there and run away. She took one look at me and released an exasperated sigh.

"Milo... please," I said, as I waited for her to slam the door in my face. But instead, she rolled her eyes and waved me in.

"Vamos."

I couldn't decide if I wanted to be nervous or grateful to discover that she wasn't very chatty today. She called Milo twice from the bottom of the stairs while I eagerly waited in the many shadows that his house seemed to be full of, but no response came. I was disappointed, but I felt a lot better when Juanita waved for me again, and I followed her up the stairs. Milo's door was cracked open this time, and Juanita looked in first before she turned, rolled her eyes, and walked away shaking her head, leaving me no more instructions. I looked after her curiously before I turned towards the door and took my own peek into the room. I smiled.

The walls were still empty, but that didn't seem to matter much now as Milo lay beneath the ceiling light, face down on his bed facing the pillows with his bare feet hanging off the edge of the bed as he wriggled his long toes. From the angle, his jeans seemed to hug the tight lift of his ass snugly, and his tan, shirtless back seemed flexed as he held himself on his elbows over an opened book, spinning a pencil in the air between his fingers as he bobbed his head to the music coming from the white headphones plugged into his ears.

I glanced over my shoulder, making sure that Juanita was gone before I slowly pushed open Milo's bedroom door and then closed it behind me. The well-oiled hinges weren't a problem as the bottom of the door slid along the rugs beneath my feet, and then clicked as it shut. When I turned back around, Milo hadn't moved, obviously not noticing anything amiss. I waved away some smoke coming from burning sandalwood and then made myself comfortable, removing my jacket and hanging it on the doorknob. I straightened my long, white shirt sleeves as I moved towards his bed. I wouldn't say that I snuck up on him, exactly. I just didn't do anything to draw attention to myself as I looked over his shoulder to see that he was working on history homework from Mr. Danner's class. When I moved to the side of the bed and turned onto the burgundy spread, stretched out on my side and propped up on my elbow, I got his attention.

Milo jumped, his eyes widening as he turned his head to face me, just as I plucked one of the headphones out of his ear. He opened his mouth, a few sounds escaping him as he struggled for incredulous words.

"You didn't finish what you were saying, back at school," I said calmly, as if I wasn't the crazy blond boy who'd just snuck into his room and jumped in bed with him.

He looked exasperated. "What?"

"You said, I make you... what?" I asked.

Milo stared at me for a long moment, his tongue appearing to leave a moist strip along his top lip while he gathered himself and did his best to look less startled as he slowly removed the second headphone from his ear. "Uncomfortable," he finally said, his eyes boldly facing mine. "You make me, uncomfortable."

I thought about that for a moment as I took in the current situation. I'd just startled him alone in his room. On his bed.

"I think I can understand that," I admitted reasonably.

Milo simply nodded. "What are you doing here?" he asked, but none of his usual animosity seemed to be behind it.

"Actually... I just wanted you to finish that sentence," I admitted, finding it a lot more foolish now than I had when I'd knocked on the front door. "So are you feeling better? You didn't go to the nurse. I checked."

"I just went home," Milo replied. "I'm better. Someone's having a baby?"

"Caleb's sister."

"Oh." Milo folded his hands over his book, and stared down at them for very long moment. When he didn't say anything, I took in a deep breath, braced myself, and kept a promise that I'd made earlier.

"I figured out you were gay..." I paused when Milo instantly looked up at me, his emerald eyes seeming inquisitive. "I mean, I sorta figured you might be..." I sat up, and let out a frustrated breath. "Look, I know you think about me naked, okay?"

Milo, seeming somewhat alarmed, turned onto his side to better face me, and I got distracted when I allowed my eyes to wander over his bare chest, looking defined, with one arm crossed over it as he braced himself. His dark nipples looked hard against the cooler air in the room and I found myself tempted to reach out and trace the thin trail of hair that led from his navel downwards, disappearing into his faded jeans which were unbuttoned, allowing me a narrow glimpse of white boxers. Milo must have followed my eyes because he was suddenly sitting up and buttoning his pants as he moved to a cross-legged position on his bed.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he demanded, now crossing his arms over his bare chest as his somewhat messed hair fell over his face. "And stop doing that!" he added defensively as a warm blush colored his cheeks.

"What?" I asked, looking around as I tried to figure out what was offending him.

"You're staring," he informed me.

I looked at him for a moment, warding off my own blush because he'd been inconsiderate enough to actually point that fact out. "So it's okay when girls do it, but not me?" I responded dryly, and then narrowed my eyes as if to catch him with them. "And how long did you look at me after you were done painting yourself some Nelson-porn?" I retorted, lifting an expectant eyebrow in his direction.

Milo cocked his head at me for a brief moment as he took in my words, and then he was slapping his hand over his mouth as his eyes widened on me. I just nodded, feeling self-satisfied as I confirmed that whatever he was thinking was in fact, correct. But I nearly fell back off his bed when he lowered his hand and glared at me so hard that I thought a vein might pop right out of his forehead.

"You fucking asshole," he hissed at me.

"Hey, I found it by mistake," I said defensively. "It was when I came to drop off the scarecrow painting--you can't get mad."

Milo swallowed hard as he suddenly tore his eyes from mine and I watched him stand right up on his bed. "I'm not mad," he said quietly, and I stood as

I watched him march right off of his mattress onto one of the rugs covering the floor. He paused there, holding his head for a moment as I walked around him enough to see that he really wasn't angry. In fact, it was worse.

His face was as flushed as a bad sunburn would be and his eyes had glassed over, and did everything they could, to avoid me. Milo Trust wasn't mad. He was humiliated. I took a step towards him, not wanting him to feel bad at all, but he immediately backed up.

"You need to leave now," he stated.

"Milo, come on. It's not a big deal, okay? I mean, how do you think I felt when I saw it?" I blushed even thinking about it. He looked at me then.

"Which one did you see?" he asked.

That took a second to sink in. "Which one?"

While I tried to figure out how many naked-Nelsons were floating around his canvases, Milo groaned and shook his head. "Never mind. Get out. Seriously, I can't... you have to leave." He pointed to his door and I frowned, but I didn't go towards it. Instead, I moved towards him.

"Look, I didn't go looking for it, alright? And you know I'm not going to say anything to anyone," I gave him a smile as I got closer to him, glancing down at his bare feet as I cautiously lifted my hand to his arm, just above his elbow where I let my fingers rest lightly over his muscle there. I brushed my thumb over smooth warm skin as I tried to meet his eyes. It would have been easier if he wasn't avoiding mine as he pursed his lips. "I'm sorry, I didn't

know how to tell you about it before. It really isn't something to get upset about, Milo. I mean... after I stopped freaking out, I kinda liked it," I admitted. "And, I'm glad I found it, otherwise I never would have known..." "You don't understand," Milo cut me off, suddenly facing me directly. He looked agitated, but didn't pull his arm away from my hand. In fact, it felt like he moved further into it. "I'm not glad that you found the stupid painting! And it's not even about the painting, I can't...." He stopped, taking in a few deep breaths. "If you found it, it could have been anyone..."

"Well, when it's sitting right there next to your closet..."

"No, I mean, I don't do things like that, ever. You might be okay with your family knowing, but I'm not like you, okay?"

"Hey, I know what it's like not to be able to tell people you care about," I interjected. "But no one's asking you to do that. I wouldn't."

Milo dropped his eyes and shook his head some more, obviously having trouble with something. Honestly, I really didn't understand this. I could understand him being embarrassed, but if he was worrying about someone else finding that painting... or, paintings, then it wasn't like he couldn't hide them. Or, even get rid of them. It was true that I liked the one I saw... or more specifically, I liked the way that Milo seemed to see me. But, I wasn't exactly in a hurry to let anyone else set eyes on it, either. That didn't mean that whatever problem he had about the paintings couldn't wait, though. I was more interested in wiping that frown off his face as my stomach knotted over whether or not this encounter was going to once again change the way we interacted. I wasn't sure that I could handle going back and forth with his obviously mixed feelings towards me in play. I moved my hand from his arm to his back, my attempt at a comforting gesture.

"If you don't want... I know you don't want me here, but why don't you get a shirt, and we can go somewhere and talk," I suggested, allowing my fingertips to trace down his spine. I felt goose bumps appear there and he sucked in a breath as he lifted his eyes to mine again, still looking troubled.

"I think talking to you is part of the problem," he said quietly, and I frowned at him as my eyes drifted to his lips, waiting for them to tell me to get out of his house again.

"I don't understand," I admitted. "If you didn't want to talk to me, you wouldn't. You keep playing these games..."

"I'm not playing games," he hissed. "I'm trying to be... I just want to be like everyone else."

I met his eyes again as I wet my lips. "So do I, that's why I'm here." I didn't see what the problem was.

"If I let you kiss me, will you go away?"

My eyes snapped to his. I cocked my head at him, and then shook it. "No." Milo regarded me stubbornly, but I didn't really pay attention to it, not wh

en I was so focused on the suggestion he'd just planted in my head. I glanced over at my hand, moving from his back to his side, leaving a trail of goose bumps until it came to rest on his side, where I traced his rib with my thumb through a layer of tight flesh. Milo trembled, his body stiffening against my touch, but he didn't move away.

"Then you can't..." he started to say, even as my eyes dropped back to his mouth.

I think I was the only one who really moved forward, my free hand going to his other arm as he seemed to come closer to me. It was me, leaning towards him. I just didn't notice the difference as I gently came into contact with him. His mouth felt soft beneath mine as I grazed it. So close, I noticed that Milo had closed his eyes. I did the same as I leaned in further, cautiously releasing my tongue against his lips, sampling the soft, smooth texture of them. My hand climbed up his arm, feeling his muscles flex as he reached out and took hold of my shirt, if only loosely. I didn't know if he meant to push me away or pull me in, but as my fingers rounded his bare shoulder and climbed his neck to trace his ear I stepped in closer, satisfied with the way I could feel the heat from his body through my shirt. I sighed when he parted his lips beneath my gentle coaxing, and I sealed my mouth over his, my tongue delving into his mouth, tasting and exploring warm, sweet territory. I felt his hand firmly grip my shoulder, pushing at me; but at the same time, his tongue came against my own, meeting my exploring rhythm and jarring me from curiosity and caution to excitement as I slid my hand to the back of his neck, holding him tighter to me. My nose fell alongside his as I deepened the kiss, enjoying the way that his breath hit my face and his hand moved loosely to my side, while my fingers explored the bare skin of his, all the way down to where his narrow waistline disappeared into his jeans. We were broken apart abruptly when Milo pulled back, and when I opened my eyes, all I saw was a deep green before I closed them, leaned forward, and kissed him all over again.

Chapter 7: Tempted

by DomLuka

I was getting dizzy. Every time I leaned forward, I'd feel Milo, his lips moving timidly beneath the onslaught of mine. His tongue was a pleasant thing. I kept searching it out, feeling him respond. My hands were busy, too. I discovered an interest in touching his neck. His skin was soft, warm. He shivered when I touched him there. I moved my fingers upwards, over his face. My thumb brushed his chin, lifting it so he could better meet my mouth. His hands went to my wrists, his fingers wrapped around them so tightly that my hands tingled. At first it felt like he wanted my hands off him, and meant to pull them away. But he did no such thing; he just gripped my wrists, moving with me every time my fingers moved to explore a new inch of skin.

I kept my eyes mostly closed. The first girl I'd ever kissed, back in the seventh grade, had informed me that it was rude to kiss with my eyes open. I guess I'd taken her word for it, because it had managed to stick with me. I kept pulling back, though, to look at Milo. I think I kept expecting him to tell me to stop. I could hardly blame myself for that. But still, I couldn't stop smiling at him, even with all of those faces he was making each time he looked back at me. His eyes were narrowed, and his brow stubbornly knit. If I had to describe it, I'd say he looked furious. It might have been discouraging if his mouth wasn't reacting to mine every time it settled back over his lips. As my lips sank against him again and my tongue tasted and teased, I moved my fingers away from his face, down over his neck. His hands on my wrists tightened when my palms came over his chest, holding me away for a brief moment before he loosened his grip, and I accepted it as permission to explore. It would have been a shame had he stopped me. I was too enthralled. Besides the kissing, everything about experiencing Milo felt amazing to me. I liked the soft feel of his skin--hot beneath my fingers--and the firmness of his muscles underneath. Even his nipples I could feel harden beneath my fingers as I slid over them, the little beads tickling my palms. The way he took in a breath against my mouth and pulled at my wrists, placing my hands more firmly against his bare chest was only an encouragement; the act sent even more excitement through me, and with his hands still holding my wrists I moved my fingers to his sides to trail downwards softly. Again, Milo's grip tightened on my wrists as he squirmed against the contact. He seemed ticklish there, but unbothered once my hands met the hem of his jeans. Rather than moving lower, I slid my arms around his lower back and he finally released my wrists, only to clutch my shoulders with an equally strong hold as I pressed into him, deepening the kiss as I pulled him towards me and took a step forward. Only, Milo thwarted me by taking a step back. Even as he returned my kiss, and his arm moved around my shoulders for balance, he managed to leave distance between our bodies as I followed him. And I did follow him. I followed him until his back was against his bedroom door and he had nowhere else to go.

I pulled back from the kiss again to look at him, feeling it was time for another small intermission. He wasn't glaring at me anymore, per se, the look on his face was almost accusing; but his green eyes had glazed over, and he took me in curiously. I felt his thumb brush over the back of my neck and shuddered against the contact before I leaned forward and sought out his mouth again, closing my eyes as I found that his lips were already parted and his tongue was waiting for me. I heard him sigh as I stepped against him. I think it's what I'd wanted ever since I'd started kissing him. We were so close to the same height that our bodies matched up nicely as I pressed my chest against his and sank against him, wishing that he wasn't the only

one who didn't have a shirt on, but too impatient to remove my own. This was nothing like kissing girls. It wasn't like kissing anyone, I imagined, as I moved my fingers gingerly up and down his sides, provoking more light trembling from him as he awkwardly clung to my shoulders and kissed me back. I felt like my whole body was stirring. Even through the pounding of my own heart I swore I could feel his as I breathed heavily through my nostrils and tilted my hips forward against his. In my pants there was a steadily growing erection that nearly jumped to life when I felt a long, hard bulge come up alongside of it through Milo's jeans. I pressed in harder upon feeling it, practically thrusting at him while my fingers dug into his back. He released a small sound against my mouth that could have sounded like a protest, but even if it was, everything his body did disagreed as he held me where I was and tilted his head, getting a better angle on our kiss; and I was surprised, and pleased when I felt his tongue press its way into my mouth, timidly, before I made a point to welcome it. Milo wasn't pushing me away. Not at all. That didn't happen until we heard a door slam somewhere downstairs and he practically shoved me away.

He moved away from the door, getting away from me, and as I turned to look at him, feeling rather frustrated, yet concerned, he just stood there, his breathing as heavy and ragged as I imagined my own was, and he stared at me. His hair was tousled; curiously, I thought, because I'd never had a chance to get to it. But his usual full, sensual mouth was swollen and red from kissing, something I felt rather proud of, actually. He swallowed hard as I regarded him expectantly.

"My dad's home," he explained, and that made even me edgy.

"Is he going to come up here?" I asked as I reached for my jacket, which had fallen from the doorknob to the floor. I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't worried about what Mr. Trust would see upon looking at us.

Milo snorted. "No. He never comes up here."

I cocked my head, and just like that, Milo turned his back on me, moving to lift up the history book he'd left on his bed. I watched him close it and go to his desk, where he shoved it in his backpack, as if anything that was bothering him a moment ago had never existed. I took a step in his direction, confused. My body was still shaking, warm from being so close to him, and I could still taste him. I wasn't sure if I particularly liked the way that he was suddenly avoiding my eyes as his cold demeanor took over.

"Then what's the problem?" I asked.

Milo looked up at me, incredulous. Uh-oh. I frowned, suddenly very concerned that he was going to say that I shouldn't have kissed him, or that he was going to turn this into something bad. I felt like I was begging, even if no words had actually left my mouth. I braced myself, just in case he was about to say something I really didn't want to hear.

"Didn't you hear me? My dad's home!"

I looked at Milo, sighing when he said nothing more. "I thought you said he wasn't coming up here." I really didn't get it. As usual, I understood absolutely nothing about him. I was relieved that he wasn't accusing me of mauling him, but seriously--I mean, come on. I glanced down his body; his nipples were still hard, pointing outwards on his bare chest, and it seemed that his boxers were loose, because his cock was still hard enough to be noticeable, swaying beneath his jeans when he moved. I wondered if he could even feel it. Honestly, I wasn't even as hard as he was and my whole body felt like it was aching. In fact, if he didn't look so standoffish as he turned his back on me to zip up his backpack I might have found myself back against his warm body, rubbing on him like a cat in heat.

I took in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Perspective. Once again, I needed perspective. I'd just made out with a guy. For the first time. Milo Trust, of all people. Okay. Go me! But now he was doing that... that thing, again. That cold, distant, annoying thing that made me uncomfortable. Because he was uncomfortable. Uncomfortable. He kept saying that. I scratched my head, wondering if I should actually start listening to it. At least he hadn't told me to go away yet, and I supposed it was something to work with.

I took an unsteady step towards him. Milo must have heard me, because he rounded, and now he was glaring again. I openly frowned at this, waiting for him to say something insufferable. He was good at that. But instead, he lowered his eyes and sighed.

"I think... you should probably get going now," he said quietly. I was simply surprised that he'd managed to say that without seeming like an asshole. It prompted me to take another step forward.

"Okay. Why don't you come with me for a while?"

Milo's green eyes narrowed on me, but it seemed like curiosity more than suspicion. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that he hadn't expected the invitation at all, and that, more than anything, was amusing to me. When he didn't say anything, I tried to smile as I cautiously stepped towards his closet.

"Where are your shirts?" I asked. "In here?"

Milo regarded me skeptically, but gave a small nod. I turned towards his closet, opening it quickly. It seemed better not to let him think about things for too long. I wanted to get him out of there, and hopefully relaxed. Talking probably wouldn't be a bad thing. In fact, I wanted to make sure we at least talked before things became awkward. If things got awkward, there was no way in hell he'd ever want me to kiss him again.

I found an old, faded, green-hooded sweatshirt, stained with paint, and removed it from its hanger. I was a bit startled when I turned around to find that Milo was right in front of me now. I momentarily gritted my teeth, wishing that he'd stop making those faces--the angry, troubled ones. It made me feel

el like he was blaming me for something, or at least about to. Only, his cold expressions notwithstanding, he was being quite agreeable as he took the sweatshirt and pulled it over his head. I put my jacket on as I watched him straighten the shirt over his bare chest, and when he looked at me again I raised my eyebrows, still hoping that he wasn't getting dressed just to tell me to get lost.

"You need shoes," I pointed out, looking down at Milo's bare feet. He looked down, too, a frown tugging at his mouth.

"I don't know..." he started, smoothing his dark hair with both hands.

"Is your dad gonna get mad if you go out for a while?" I asked, and Milo looked at me as if it were a stupid question as he shook his head. "So... maybe we can take separate vehicles," I suggested. "That way, you can just leave whenever you want to, if you don't want me taking you home."

Milo cocked his head at that suggestion, and to my surprise some of his uncertainty faded as he straightened himself. "Your car's downstairs?"

I smirked. "I didn't exactly walk here."

Milo stared at me for a long moment. "We'll take your car," he finally decided, and I simply watched as he turned his back on me again, long enough to grab a pair of socks from his dresser. He had them on rather quickly, and practically stepped into his shoes. He nodded for me to follow as he took the lead out of his bedroom, turning off the light in the process, leaving the hallway looking even darker than usual. I followed behind him quickly, matching his pace and wondering if I'd ever get used to these mood swings he seemed to be prone to. I wondered if I wanted to get used to them.

I silently laughed to myself, shaking my head as I thought of Caleb and Joe, and all of their complaints about how they'd never truly understand women. Women were easy, I decided. If they wanted a challenge, they could try seducing Milo Trust sometime. When he wasn't being impossible, he was just plain confusing me. Like, when he shouted words beyond my comprehension to Juanita rather than his dad as he opened the front door, and then led the way to my car without waiting for a response. He was in the passenger seat, buckled up, and I was backing out of the driveway and squinting against the sun before it ever occurred to him to ask where we were going.

"I thought we could go somewhere and talk," I told him.

"But where?" he asked. "I don't want to go to your house."

I glanced over at him, and tried not to appear too disappointed. "Okay."

"And, if we're going to talk it has to be somewhere where no one from school is going to see us," he said warningly. His tone was cold, but I decided to be happy that he was at least open to the idea of talking.

"You're bossy," I remarked, and Milo responded by looking out his window, obviously willing to ignore me.

I sighed, wondering if it had occurred to him that we could simply talk in t

he car. Not that I didn't want to go somewhere. In all honesty, I'd planned to take him back to my house. I was hoping that I could have gotten him to relax there. I guess my intentions weren't really that noble, because I'd also hoped that there, we could get back to kissing. However, I could settle for simply getting him out of his house. With me. I had no idea where to go now, though. Not with his stupid rules.

"Why is it a big deal if someone from school sees us together?" I decided to ask ten minutes later as I headed towards the hill. I wasn't taking him back to my place. He'd asked me not to. "You think they're going to look at us and know we're on a date?"

"This is not a date," Milo responded, indignant.

"Right," I said, rolling my eyes. "You wouldn't want to give me the impression that you're easy." Milo was still glaring when I looked over at him. I sighed, and tried to smile. "I think I know where we can go for a while, but I can't promise no one from school will be there. Are you up for an early dinner? I'm kind of hungry."

Milo considered, and then reluctantly nodded, falling silent for the rest of the drive. I wished that I knew what he was thinking, and why he saw fit to appear agitated every time we were together outside of class. I guess maybe that it was because he didn't want to be together outside of class. It's not like he hadn't let me know that. But still, he was there with me now. By choice. And maybe I'd initiated that kiss back at his house, but I hadn't been the only one contributing to it. I just didn't understand Milo Trust.

.....
"I don't understand you."

Milo looked up at me, seemingly startled as he sat across the small wooden table meant to seat two, with his left cheek looking swollen as he chewed a rather large bite of his cheeseburger. We were in a small restaurant, not far from the taco stand and A Woman's World clothing store, where Milo and I'd had our first community service assignment together. I went there with my brother sometimes, when he was waiting for Leanna to get off work. It always seemed like a good place to go, since it was so close to the dance studio. Besides, as far as greasy hamburgers went, this place had the best. It was always hard to find a clean table in the small establishment with a worn, amber-colored linoleum floor and dusty old rodeo pictures hanging on the walls; but if you could get past the fact that the cook in the back always had Band-aids on his fingers, the food wasn't that bad. Plus, the way that the place was designed suited our purposes. The dining room was divided into sections, and while the place wasn't completely empty, we had a suitable amount of privacy at our table, which was up against a wall that divided our section from the other four.

"I don't understand you," Milo retorted, and then I watched him take another

healthy bite of his food. I'd hardly done anything more than pick at my fries, I'd been so busy watching him. Under the dim light, he'd practically been inhaling his meal. It was interesting, considering the fact that he'd refused to eat anything when we first walked into the place. Like any reasonable person, he'd been rather disgusted by it. But I'd ordered for both of us, insisting that he should at least try the food. He did, and hadn't stopped eating since. He was almost finished with his cheeseburger, and I had a feeling that he'd be reaching for mine next.

"I'm serious," I insisted, leaning back in my uncomfortable wooden chair. "You... confuse me. I mean, back at your house..." I paused when he met my eyes, studying me expectantly. "Did that even mean anything to you?" I asked pointedly, deciding that asking outright might clear the air.

I watched, refusing to look away from him as Milo lowered his eyes and took an obnoxiously long time to swallow the food in his mouth before he washed it down with a long sip of soda through a straw. He licked his lips, and as he reached for one of the pink napkins on the table, he spoke so softly that I hardly heard him. "It was kinda... nice."

I straightened a little, forcing a rather ridiculous smile off of my face. "Yeah?"

He glanced up at me, a small hint of a smile appearing at the left corner of his mouth before he shoved a french fry between his teeth, obviously not wanting to repeat himself.

"So what does that mean?" I asked. "I mean... could we do it again?"

Milo frowned at that, letting out a breath. "Look, I..."

"You kinda like me," I provided for him, and he met my eyes, wearing another stubborn expression.

"It doesn't really matter, though."

"Why not?" I demanded. It came out a little harsher than I intended it to, but at least it earned more than a scowl from Milo as he sat back in his seat and looked more disturbed than annoyed.

"I already told you why. I could never tell..."

"And how many times do I have to tell you that you don't have to tell anyone?" I responded.

"They could still find out."

"Not if we're careful. Milo, even if we hung out sometime, no one would even suspect."

"If you were anyone else, maybe."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Everyone thinks we're supposed to hate each other. I see how that girl from class looks at us every time you start talking to me."

"Haily? She's probably curious, but she doesn't think I hate you. She was there when I bought that painting, remember? And she totally knows I'm int

o your work."

"I saw the look on Caleb's face today, too."

"Also curious. Look, Caleb doesn't really like anyone, okay? He knows that I like people he doesn't. It happens all the time. Seriously. You should have seen how long it took just to get him to acknowledge Joe when he first started hanging out with us. I don't tell my friends I'm gay; but just so you know, I've always been honest with them when it comes to the fact that I don't have a problem with you. I talk to people all the time. They're not gonna think anything's up if I start talking to you."

"Maybe my friends are different," Milo said quietly.

"Hmm... I don't know who you hang out with at school, but the only one I could see having a problem with you talking to me is Jame," I replied. And that was true. I really didn't have any enemies. Hell, Jame wasn't even mine, he was Caleb's. He'd just been doing his best to make me his enemy recently. "But just because he doesn't like you talking to me doesn't mean he's going to think you're gay. Fuck. Most people around here wouldn't even think it. They probably think a queer is something that secretly wears women's underthings and plays with a secret Barbie stash. I don't think we have anything to worry about."

Milo looked down at his food and lifted another fry. He was silent for very long moments, and at least appeared to be thinking about what I'd said. I just wished that he didn't look so troubled. Maybe he was thinking too much, I decided. A distraction was in order. Besides, while Milo was busy thinking about whether or not he and I should hang out, it was already happening. Maybe if I went about this the right way, it could happen again.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, resting an elbow on the table. He looked up again. "How did you and Jame start hanging out, anyway?"

Milo shrugged. "My dad hosts dinners sometimes for people he does business with, and they bring their families. Last year Jame was at one and started hanging around me and my friends. One of them had some shit and we figured he just wanted to get high, but afterwards he didn't go away. The dinner was at my house, so he showed up a few times after the party..." Milo stirred his drink with his straw, looking thoughtful. "I thought he was really annoying at first. I mean... a lot of people just stick around because of who my dad is. I sorta thought he was trying to hang around because he wanted me to introduce him to some girls or something--but he turned out okay. He didn't really care about hanging out with my friends, or at my house. He likes to watch me paint... He's a really good friend. He's the one who talked me into switching schools. I was getting kinda tired of mine, and wanted a change."

I thought on this for a second. I guess maybe Assface was good for something, after all.

"Why do you guys give him such a hard time, anyway?" Milo suddenly asked, and I met his inquisitive green eyes, a little taken off guard by the question.

"Hey," I said defensively. "I didn't really even have a problem with him until he started one with me. The guy doesn't quit; and, he seriously doesn't get any points for harassing Haily. Hey, does he actually like her, or does he just like to start shit?"

Milo actually smiled at that. "I really don't know," he replied. "But I mean, come on--he doesn't mean anything. Plus, if you guys are the ones who started calling him Assface, you deserve anything he comes up with."

"That was Caleb," I said. I wasn't ratting out my friend. No, Caleb would have admitted to that one, had he been there.

"Well, your friend Caleb sounds like a prick."

I frowned at that. Milo Trust might have been hot, and officially the only guy I'd ever kissed, but instincts provoked me to stick up for my best friend.

"Caleb is not a prick... actually, he can be, but it's not just his fault, what goes on with Jame. They've always hated each other. Shit, I can't even remember exactly what it was about. Just... when we were younger Caleb was a little... chunky, I guess. Not fat. He's always been big, but before he started going to the gym he was a little sensitive about his weight. Jame started calling him lardo one year, so Caleb called him Assface. Lardo didn't stick, Assface did."

"Okay," Milo said slowly. "But... don't you think it's time to quit?"

I smirked at that. "I'll tell you what; I'll stop calling him Assface if he stops acting like one."

Milo narrowed his eyes on me. "How mature of you... but I guess it's fair enough." He turned serious then. "Still... I do kinda hate that you call him that."

"So I'll try not to around you," I replied, and Milo seemed somewhat surprised by that, but gave an approving nod. I took a drink of my soda, and then smiled at him, deciding that maybe it was time for a subject change. "Are you working on anything new? With your paintings, I mean?"

Milo lifted his cheeseburger again, and after taking a bite he started to explain to me that he didn't really have as much time for painting as he would have liked to have. But he did sketch a lot, being in a new school with plenty of new faces. I made a point not to ask him if my face was still among those, not really wanting to remind him of a certain painting; and as he finished his meal and I finally ate mine I started to feel at ease with him. It was kind of like we were in class, with more freedom. I even got him to smile a few more times as we talked about art and occasionally, our friends. Apparently, the two guys who I'd seen at Hangman with Milo were two of his good friends--Jerry, and the other was Jonathan. They both lived close to Milo,

and were some of the only people who he was making any sort of effort to stay in touch with from his old school. It seemed that he was still invited to all the Stratfort parties, but Jonathan and Jerry were the only two guys he'd have over to his house on weekends--along with Assface, of course. I found it curious that he didn't try to keep in touch with anyone else. But then, if it were me, I'd probably be looking to keep in touch with everyone I could think of from my own school, and make plenty of friends at a new one. Maybe Milo was the son of Thompson Trust, but he most definitely wasn't the socialite that his dad was. In fact, I was sort of getting the impression that he was a loner. It was strange, because I really wasn't attracted to loners--as friends, or otherwise. I liked outgoing people. But with Milo... it just made me more interested in him. It had me wanting to get to know him in ways that he wouldn't allow most people to do. I hoped that eventually, he'd let me. I'm not sure how I managed it, but by the time we were finished eating, Milo was relaxed enough to actually accept an invitation to my house. Of course, he stressed that he couldn't stay long, and that he really only wanted to see the field--which didn't surprise me. But, I'd take what I could get where he was concerned.

Being the middle of October, the sunsets were coming sooner, and as we headed up the hill around five thirty, the sky was orange and streaked with shades of yellow and crimson above us. It gave the illusion of a warm atmosphere, but it was a deceiving one since the air was cold enough to bite at our skin. I had my coat, but unsure of whether or not Milo was warm enough in his sweatshirt, I made sure that the heat was running in the car.

My parents were both home when we got to my house. It didn't really surprise me that Milo seemed much more at ease with them than he'd been with Chad and Leanna. My parents didn't get nosy in front of company. They'd wait until after he left for that. It sure didn't stop my mom from getting embarrassing, though. She'd known who Milo was before I'd even introduced him because he looked so much like his father. She gushed all over him, and much to my dad's chagrin, told Milo that he was just as handsome as Mr. Trust was. Milo blushed, but he got over it, just like my dad got over my mom's comments as soon as she kissed his nose, right beneath his glasses. Then, it was my dad doing the blushing.

It was cold, but Milo and I stayed mostly outside on the deck. I'd offered him one of my extra coats, but he'd refused, so I was glad when my mom brought out hot chocolate. He could at least warm his hands on the mug that way. As we watched the sun set, Milo took in the field as I tried to explain that it was much prettier during the summer. He'd insisted that it was fine the way it was. It wasn't hard to agree with him. Though, when he mentioned that he'd kill for a view like we had out his back door I had to laugh as I pointed out the incredible view he had from his bedroom window. Milo was

a little surprised when the goat came to us and tried to eat the hood of his sweatshirt, but more amused than anything else. He even helped me feed it some carrots and a tomato from the kitchen, along with the regular mix that my dad kept in the garage. It was almost dark by the time that Milo said he needed to get home. Unfortunately, it was right before I planned to ask him if he wanted to go down to my room.

The drive back to Stratfort Ranch was a silent one. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but it wasn't really a comfortable one, either. I wasn't sure what Milo was thinking about, but he'd gone back to staring out his window. If he looked in my direction at all, I didn't see it. And, I would have seen it. I couldn't quite figure out if it was more important to focus on Milo, or the road.

That kiss was on my mind again. It was hard not to think about it, and despite Milo acting like it hadn't even happened, my heart rate was probably going up just remembering it. I licked my lips, glancing over at Milo as he stared out the window into the dark. I could practically feel his mouth on mine.

It had been a good kiss. Or, a series of several good kisses. He'd said it was nice. I supposed that I could work with that. Only, Milo hadn't really given me any indication that it was going to happen again. He certainly didn't when I dropped him off in front of his house. He was practically opening the door before I came to a complete stop. He did say he'd see me tomorrow, though. In class.

It was Caleb who helped me decide that I was going to try to see Milo before parenting class, whether or not he liked it. Actually, the idea to track Milo down before school hit me when Caleb called me on Thursday night to tell me about his new niece, who apparently, was adorable and blonde, but still had no name. Caleb was going to skip school on Friday because Julie was going to be taking the baby home, and the only way his parents would allow him to do it was if he could get someone to pick up his homework for him. That someone was me. I called Haily, and since her mom agreed to drive her and Joe to school in the morning, I was free to get there early to pick up Caleb's homework, and look around for Milo.

There was no guarantee that he was going to be at school early. The way I'd found him sitting in front of those lockers before had given me the idea. Once I made rounds to every one of Caleb's classes, that's the first place I checked. Milo wasn't there, but as I stared at the purple locker that Milo had been leaning against, I couldn't help but wonder if it was his, or if he'd just decided that it was a good place to sit.

I found out about twenty minutes later. I'd taken a quick walk around the school, and rather than finding Milo, I found Haily and Joe. We had breakfast together and agreed that at lunch we'd take a quick trip down to the hospital to see if we could see Caleb's new niece. It was about three minutes before

the first bell when we separated. But, instead of going to my first class, I returned to that locker, just in time to see Milo Trust close it, and disappear down the hall with Jame Graham. I didn't try going after Milo then. I was too focused on the locker as I smiled to myself and removed a piece of notebook paper from my backpack. With a blue pen I hesitated for a moment, and then wrote my note on the paper. I didn't sign it. Milo would know who it was from as soon as he read the words, Am I still on your list?

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School wasn't quite as entertaining without Caleb around, I decided. For a Friday, it was a pretty boring day, actually. At lunch, Haily, Joe and I did show up at the hospital with flowers for Julie. Caleb had run out with his parents, but Julie's husband Mike did let us see the baby. She was sleeping at the time, and Caleb was right--she was cute. We spent a good fifteen minutes with her parents, suggesting names, before we had to get back to school. I was almost late to gym when I took the time to stop at my locker so I could relieve myself from some books; but I was glad I did as soon as a familiar piece of notebook paper fell at my feet upon opening the metal door. I dropped my backpack and lifted the paper, unfolding it to see that it was the very note that I'd left in Milo's locker that morning. Only, below my writing there was another note in red ink. You rank about number four. Don't get too excited. New guy in chemistry. You might be demoted.
I chuckled to myself, wondering how the hell Milo had figured out where my locker was, and wishing that I had time to get the note back into his. Since I didn't, I slipped the note into my pocket instead, and headed for class. I'd see Milo soon enough, anyway. After sweating my ass off running laps around the track because Coach Don was holding a meeting in the gymnasium we'd been using for basketball, I took a quick shower and showed up for parenting class with wet hair. At least they weren't running the air conditioner in the trailer anymore.

It was a good class. Haily stopped me at her table to double-check that I could give her and Joe a ride home; and as soon as I turned towards mine, I was met with a surprise. Milo Trust smiled at me. It was a small, shy smile, but still a smile, and still aimed at me, just before he went back to talking to Tim. I caught myself staring at him for a few moments, watching as he tucked a strand of dark hair behind his ear. His emerald eyes took me in sidelong as he laughed at something Tim said.

On Mrs. Bates's order, I moved around the table, taking my seat next to Milo as I greeted Tim. I usually always greeted Tim first. But when Mrs. Bates told us to get out our books my focus was more on Milo. When I opened my backpack, I was sure to extend my elbow, just to touch his arm; and as class got started I kept sliding my foot up against his. It was only for brief moments at a time, but Milo noticed what I was doing. He didn't say anything

, though. He did little more than glance at my behavior. But, a few times I swore his lips curled up into a smile. I'd never have pointed this out to him, though. He'd probably insist that it was my imagination.

I talked to him a few times. Neither of us mentioned the notes in our lockers, or what had happened between us the night before. I blamed it on the awkwardness of adolescence, but I sure wanted to bring it up. I most definitely wanted to ask him if I could see him outside of class again, since it was Friday and there was a whole weekend to make plans for. But, I didn't. Which was strange, because generally when I wanted something, I had a bad habit of blurting it out. And, I wanted Milo to come over again. Or, I wanted to go see him. It didn't really matter which. Too bad I already knew what Milo would say if I asked him. I had a feeling that he thought I was too pushy. I preferred to think of myself as eager. If I was pushy, I wouldn't have decided to back off some, which, I reluctantly did.

But not asking Milo to come over, or mentioning anything about the night before, certainly sparked an interesting reaction from him. On most days, while I was trying to get Milo to talk to me, he was packing up his things and rushing off, leaving me to wonder about him. This time, he kept looking at me as I packed up my backpack, and I noticed that he was moving extra slow in gathering his own things. He seemed curious about something. Almost expectant. I couldn't really help smiling as I stood up, threw my bag over my shoulder, and faced him.

"I'll see you Monday," I said.

Milo narrowed his eyes, went back to packing up his things, and nodded. I was just turning to meet Haily when I heard his voice following me.

"Here's your pen back."

"You can keep it," I replied, and a glance back told me that Milo was still in his seat, staring at the pen in his hand.

"Plans this weekend?" he suddenly asked, catching me off guard. Haily was leaving her desk and coming towards me, but I turned around and smiled at Milo anyway, giving a small shrug.

"I might try to go see Caleb. If it's warm enough we'll be at Hangman. I'll probably be at home most of the time, though." I stopped there, and let Milo study me for a moment before he zipped up his backpack. There seemed to be something on his mind. "What about you?" I asked.

"My dad's having an engagement party."

"Oh. You're going?"

"Haveta, I guess," he replied, and then looked up sheepishly. "I'm the best man."

"Ah, so duty calls and all that," I remarked, and then after a moment of careful consideration, "Well, if you get bored or anything..."

"Ready to go?"

I felt an arm loop through mine and turned to face Haily, who couldn't seem to figure out if she wanted to regard me expectantly or Milo suspiciously. I frowned at that, and the way that Milo was suddenly in a hurry to leave. He stood up, pulling his backpack over his shoulders as he did so.

"Um, yeah," I said to Haily, trying not to frown too hard when Milo suddenly passed us without another word. "Hey!" I called after him, and he paused at the door to glance back at me. "I'll see you later."

I ignored the way that Haily was staring at me and focused on Milo's shy nod, just before he moved through the door, the wind catching his hair on his way out.

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I tilted my head, trying to figure out where the muscle-bound dark-haired guy ended and the little blond beneath him began. Huh. Maybe it was just the camera angle that was confusing me. I guess it didn't matter, though. There was at least one nice ass to look at, high, and tight, and rounded. I traced the curve of it with my index finger, idly wondering what Milo's ass would look like without all of those clothes covering it as I pressed my hips into my mattress against the stirring in my groin.

It had been a long time since I'd had nothing better to do on a Friday night than lay around in my room looking at porn that my brother gave me for my birthday. Caleb was busy with his family, Joe didn't feel like doing anything after his community service and Haily... well, Haily was available, but I told her that I had things I needed to do at home. For a while now, I realized, I hadn't really hung out with Haily that much, just the two of us. Either Joe, or Caleb were always there. It was alarming to realize that I wasn't exactly comfortable spending time with her alone. I guess that's because she'd been making it more obvious that she had feelings for me, and I wasn't quite ready to deal with that, let alone place myself in a situation where I might have to. It bothered me, though. It wasn't like me to be uncomfortable around anyone, let alone one of my best friends.

I shifted on my bed as I flipped to the next page in the magazine. It was a nice open wide shot. I found myself stretching my jaw, mimicking the redhead in the photo who looked rather eager to take in the long, dark-headed cock in front of his face, even if his tongue seemed shy about moving out of his mouth to touch it. If it were me, I decidedly wouldn't be shy. These magazines that Chad got me every once in a while were the only form of education I had when it came to gay sex. I'd found a few things on the internet, but I really did enjoy the magazines better; it was like an illustrated textbook, and I felt fully prepared to take my final exam. Hanging around Caleb all the time left me feeling like the only one in the world who wasn't getting any. The soft knock on my door distracted me from the page and I closed the magazine, sliding it beneath my white bedspread before I reached for the sketch

book I'd left on the floor. I started on my most recent drawing, right where I'd left off, adding wavy hair to Caleb's oversized head. I'd made him caricature style, holding his new baby cousin.

"Come in," I called, and glanced up as my mom entered carrying a plastic bag, which had a pleasant odor emanating from it. "Hi, Mom."

She smiled at me, throwing her curtain of red hair over her shoulder as she leaned down to kiss the top of my head and eye my drawing.

"Now that's adorable," she commented, placing the bag down next to me.

"I'm gonna give it to Caleb, I think," I replied, putting my pencil down to reach for the bag.

"We brought you chicken," my mother informed me. I'd been invited to dinner with her and my dad, but I hadn't really been hungry at the time. "Is that okay?"

"Smells great," I replied.

"Make sure you remember to bring leftovers up to the kitchen. You don't need any science projects growing down here."

"I will," I assured her.

"Are you planning to go out tonight?" she asked curiously. "It's late. Usually you're out of the house by now."

"I'm staying in. Everyone's kinda busy, and... I dunno. I don't really feel like doing anything."

"Oh. Okay. It's Friday."

"I know," I replied, turning my head to smile at her, hoping that she'd realize that there really was nothing to be worried about.

"Don't you want to invite anyone over? Maybe Milo. He was nice."

I smirked at that. "He'd have to want to come over. I'm fine, Mom, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, but instead of walking away, she continued to look at me. I raised an expectant eyebrow. "Are you and Milo Trust friends?" she finally asked.

I made a face. "It's hard to tell at this point," I said honestly.

"Okay... well, maybe invite him over for dinner sometime."

"I'll do that," I replied. I knew she was curious, but I really didn't feel like explaining the complexities of how Milo and I interacted to her. She seemed to understand, because she released an exasperated sigh and smoothed back my hair before she finally went.

"Well, your father and I are upstairs. We might be old, but we're not boring. Come join us if you feel up for it."

I smiled. "Thanks, Mama."

I waited for her to close the door behind herself, and I stared at it for a long moment before I dropped my sketchbook back on the floor. I reached for my magazine, finding the page I was on, and then looked between it and the food bag for several long moments of personal debate. Finally, I lifted the b

ag, placed it carefully on the floor, and then rolled over onto my back, taking the magazine with me as I reached to unzip my black jeans. If I was going to eat, I figured that there wasn't any harm in at least working up an appetite first.

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Saturday was a very slow day. I did go see Caleb, and became amused to find that he was doing more mothering for his new niece than Julie was. They'd decided to name the baby Clair, but as far as Caleb was concerned, the choice wasn't set in stone until they put it on the birth certificate, and little Clair's parents were being rather indecisive.

I pulled Caleb away long enough to get him to go down to Hangman with me, along with Haily, and Joe, who was taking a day off from going down to the police station. It wasn't a very long trip, though. Hangman was a miserable place to be when it was windy, especially with all the sand. I hadn't even sat down while we were there and by the time I got home, I was covered in it. I was also oddly tired. I hadn't done much to exert myself throughout the day, but that didn't stop me from taking a nap before dinner on Saturday-one that lasted until six thirty on Sunday morning. I guess I couldn't complain about not getting enough sleep.

At least on Sunday Caleb finally took a break from Julie and her new family. It seemed that his sister was on his nerves once again, and he was desperate enough to go to church with my family, just to get away. Caleb only ever attended church when he went with us. Usually he thought it was boring. This particular Sunday, though, he thought it was particularly amusing when Grannie Tenny came down with a rather disruptive case of gas and my dad volunteered the two of us to take her for a walk throughout half the service.

It was a nice morning; sunny, but cool. It was light-jacket weather. Tenny was in her wheelchair, and since being behind her was currently a dangerous thing, Caleb and I took turns pushing her on the sidewalk, around the block where the church was. We were downtown, and even walking around the block I felt like we were boxed in by tall buildings. But, it wasn't unpeaceful.

Most streets were empty, the tall brick courthouse was vacant and the copper-looking bell that hung above the church looked newly polished. It might have been late in the season, but the grass surrounding the church was freshly watered and puddles were seeping into cracks in the sidewalk as we walked.

While Granny Tenny enjoyed being outside, I confided in Caleb, about how I was afraid to be alone with Haily. At least he was able to take it seriously. Actually, when Caleb wasn't trying to help me get laid, he was more than happy to help me with my other problems. It seemed that he had a few delusions that Haily and I would make a perfect couple, but once I explained tha

t I really didn't feel that way about her, he agreed that she and I shouldn't get together, on the grounds that he'd be obligated to kick my ass if I hurt her. Caleb did not want to have to kick my ass. Unfortunately, his suggestions weren't exactly helpful. He was convinced that the only way to get Haily off my case was to start dating other girls--which he thought I should do more of, anyway. I had to change the subject when he became excited over the prospect of hooking me up with one of Rebecca Spade's friends. After church, while Chad and Leanna volunteered to go with my parents to drop Granny Tenny and Mr. Hoover back off at the retirement home, Caleb and I went to pick up Joe, and the three of us went to shoot a game of pool at a place near Velda's café. Haily couldn't come. It seemed that she was having trouble with her mom. Mrs. Geld had discovered that Haily had gone to buy a dress for homecoming, and was offended that Haily hadn't asked her along. Given that Haily never shopped for dresses, this was a big deal, and the only way she knew how to fix it was to say that the dress she already got didn't fit her right and beg for her mom's help in finding a new one, now that homecoming was a week away. I really did feel sorry for Haily. Sorry enough to drop by her house after Caleb and I had dropped Joe back off at home, just so I could bring her some of the nachos from Velda's that she liked so much. Caleb had slapped the back of my head when I did it, ranting about how bearing gifts of food was not the best way to convince a girl that I wasn't interested in her. He was probably right.

Caleb and I hung out at my place for the rest of the afternoon, and while he was there he made me finish the caricature that I'd drawn of him and Clair. He wanted to show his parents when he got home. But that wasn't going to happen relatively soon because my mom delayed his departure when she invited him over for dinner. We had minestrone and homemade meatballs as Caleb told my parents all about the new baby. He was convinced that she was smiling at him already, and didn't care if anyone said otherwise.

We'd just finished eating, and I'd volunteered to help my mom with the dishes. But, when Caleb announced that he needed to get home and finish his homework before school started tomorrow, my dad had offered to help my mom, so I could walk Caleb out. We were almost to the door, chatting about whether or not Caleb should skip third period and take an extra long lunch, when the doorbell echoed through the house. We glanced at each other. "If that's Haily, you're not leaving," I warned him. "I love her, but until this gets sorted out, you can't leave me alone with her."

Caleb shook his head in mock irritation. "You're the only guy I know who'd want to run away from a girl trying to get in your pants. What's with that? Pathetic."

I backhanded his arm, not knowing why I bothered. Caleb was muscled there, even when he wasn't flexing, and the impact always hurt me more than it d

id him. "Just remember that girl is Haily," I reminded him as we reached the door together. "She'd get hurt and you'd have to kick my ass."

Caleb rolled his eyes at me as I opened the front door, probably about ready to make a smartass remark. But, as we focused on the figure standing beneath the porch light, Caleb's jaw snapped shut, his eyes narrowed, and he stared while I looked out the door, startled as uncertain emerald eyes looked back at me.

I think I stared for a whole minute before I convinced myself that it was, in fact, Milo Trust standing there. He just looked... different. He wore a black sportcoat, which matched his tidy black pants, over a smooth, dark dress shirt. His hair, which usually fell around his face to frame it messily and perfectly, was rather combed back neatly in a way that I didn't really care for. I suppose he looked a little like Mr. Trust had, the first time I'd seen him. Even his shoes shined. But, Mr. Trust hadn't looked as nervous as Milo did now. I wasn't sure what he was doing at my house, but given his wardrobe I guessed that he'd come from his father's engagement party. The way his eyes glanced uncertainly towards Caleb, who was glaring at him, told me that Milo was regretting his decision to come over here, despite what had provoked him to do it in the first place. When Milo looked at me again, some of his timid demeanor faded and he developed one of his more determined glares. I thought he was going to say something, but instead, he was suddenly shaking his head and turning away from us. Before I could even think about it, I reached out, grabbing his wrist and holding on every bit as tightly as he had mine when I'd been kissing him a few days ago.

"Don't!" I practically snapped, surprising Caleb, and causing Milo to turn back around. I forced myself to calm my tone, and tried to sound casual as I let go of my unexpected guest. "What's your hurry?... Uh, Caleb, you remember Milo, right?"

I looked at my best friend. His chestnut eyes had gone from looking warily at Milo, to looking skeptically at me.

"Yeah, so?"

I frowned at Caleb. "So, I invited him over here," I lied. "I just sorta forgot." I glanced at Milo, who was regarding me as curiously as Caleb was. "I thought you'd be here earlier," I told Milo, hoping that he'd figure out that I was trying to help. It took a while, but he managed a shrug.

"Yeah... okay..." Caleb sounded fed up as he faced me again, looking very much like he would like an explanation for this atrocity. It was that look that had me glaring right back at Caleb, annoyed that I felt I had to explain myself to him. If Milo had been almost anyone else, Caleb wouldn't have blinked twice at the situation. Maybe that's what bothered me.

"Caleb was on his way out," I finally said to Milo. "Um, if you wanna go in, I'll be there in a sec."

Milo looked unsure again as I took Caleb's arm and cleared the path through the door, all the while looking at Milo expectantly until he reluctantly stepped into my house.

"I changed my mind," Caleb said, glancing over his shoulder as I dropped his arm and we walked towards his jeep. "Fuck the homework. I'll stay."

"Dude, what's your problem?" I demanded.

Caleb, incredulous, ran a rough hand through the waves on his head, and then abruptly pointed towards my front door, as if that explained everything.

"You invited him over?"

"Yes."

"So you're hanging out with him now?"

I frowned. "Yeah, so?"

"Assface..."

"Isn't here," I cut him off. "That's Milo, and he's actually pretty cool. So knock it off, okay?" I wasn't going to play this off as no big deal. Not with Caleb. I was going to be as honest as I could. If I got my way, I'd be hanging out with Milo a lot more. My friends were going to see part of that, and they were going to have to deal with it. I kept telling Milo that it wouldn't be a problem if people saw us as friends, and I was determined to prove that to him.

"I'm sorry," Caleb responded, yet there was more sarcasm than regret in his voice. "You're telling me that guy's your friend?"

I smirked. "What? Are you jealous?"

Caleb turned a glare on me, but it wasn't one of his more threatening expressions.

"Nels..." He stopped and shook his head, but it was followed by a slight smile as he turned back towards his jeep and opened the black vehicle's driver's-side door. "I think the guy's a prick," he informed me, glancing back over his shoulder.

I snorted. "You think everyone's a prick."

"Whatever." Caleb suddenly turned, facing me pointedly. I wasn't quite prepared for the concerned expression that masked his face. Almost panicked, like he was seriously worried that I'd just betrayed him somehow. "Dude, you're not hanging out with Assface, too, right?"

I wasn't sure if it was the look of horror on Caleb's face, or how ridiculous that question seemed to me that caused me to laugh out loud. "What do you think?" I responded dryly, and Caleb actually released a sigh of relief.

"Okay... see you tomorrow?"

I nodded. "If you wake up early enough come to the bakery. I wanna stop for breakfast."

"Fine," Caleb responded, trying hard to sound like this was a chore for him. "But there better be some of those damn blueberry muffins around this time."

e."

I stepped back, waving as he climbed into his jeep and left. I sighed. Caleb wasn't going to make a bigger deal out of Milo showing up than he already had. If it had been any other guy, I really don't think he would have cared, but Milo was Jame Graham's friend, and in Caleb's opinion, anyone who could stand Assface obviously had something wrong with them. Unfortunately, as I headed back to the house, I had a feeling that Milo was going to make this into a bigger deal than it really was. And that sucked ass, because somehow, he'd found it in his heart to show up at my house, and I really didn't want to ruin that because he was insecure about how people saw us.

The front door was still open, and the porch light still bright, leading me to it. But I couldn't see Milo there. I glanced over to where he'd parked his car behind mine, in front of the garage. At least he hadn't snuck off yet.

I decided that he must have moved further into the house. Either that, or my mom had managed to ambush him. The thought alone had me moving faster. "Milo?" I called, as soon as I pushed the door further open and then closed it behind me. The house was warm, and still carried the aroma of our supper, reminding my belly how full it was.

I moved down the hall, with no response from Milo. I'd completely passed the living room before I abruptly turned back and looked inside. Milo was standing there in front of the far wall, staring almost blankly at the many family photographs hanging on it. I doubted that he even realized what he was looking at, since it was a simply photo of my Grandma Tenny, standing behind a thanksgiving turkey. It had been taken before her stroke.

"Hey," I said softly. My voice made him flinch more than jump as he abruptly turned to face me. He was glaring again. He was good at glaring. But, he seemed to have as many glares as normal people had smiles. This one seemed more upset than cold. I raised my brow in surprise when he suddenly pulled up a dark jacket sleeve to look at his watch.

"I have to go," he announced, as if he'd been there all day and now had somewhere else to be. He headed towards me, but didn't make it out of the living room when I stepped in front of him, only to be met with his more challenging glare.

"Caleb's fine," I informed him. "You shouldn't worry about that."

He was unconvinced. At least, he looked unconvinced. I smiled at him.

"Come here," I beckoned as I headed out of the living room, and then continued to look over my shoulder to make sure Milo was with me as he followed me through the house. He had his hands in his pockets and his eyes downcast. I wondered what I could say to make him feel better. My guess was that there was nothing. He wasn't happy that one of my friends had caught him here, and the only way he was going to get over it, was to see that tomorrow, no one would notice the difference. But as I watched him, I couldn't h

elp thinking that maybe there was something else wrong. It occurred to me that if it was just Caleb, he would have ranted at me. Hell, he would have put up more of a fight to get out of my house. There was definitely something going on. Maybe whatever it was, was the reason why he showed up in the first place. Because while Milo was always invited as far as I was concerned, I hadn't actually asked him to come over. I doubted that he would have without a reason.

"Gross, mom!" I groaned, as soon as we'd reached the kitchen. I'd walked in first to find my mom on the other side of the round counter with my father. They were sharing a bowl of chocolate ice cream and I'd just watched as my mom licked a smudge of it off my dad's face. It was nice they were in love and all, but sometimes the mushiness could get embarrassing.

My mom giggled as she looked across the kitchen at me. My dad just rolled his eyes behind his glasses and took over the spoon they were using, obviously caring more about the ice cream than he did about whether or not he was embarrassing his son. That's why my mom noticed Milo standing shyly behind me, first. She looked surprised, but then smiled.

"Hi, Milo, I didn't realize you were coming over."

"Uh... I wasn't... I mean, I just...I hope that's okay." Milo fumbled for words, obviously having no notebook excuse this time.

"Of course it's okay," my dad spoke up, winking at me in a way that had me blushing and glaring at him.

"Are you guys going to come help us eat this?" my mom asked as she fished three more bowls out of the cabinet to the left of the sink and lifted the lid off the ice cream carton. Milo quickly started to shake his head, and wasn't prepared when I grabbed his wrist long enough to pull him towards the counter.

"Sounds good, Mom," I said, and she smiled at us. She'd already started to scoop the ice cream into the bowls, glancing at Milo as he stood uncomfortably next to me.

"You're all dressed up," my dad commented, looking at our guest.

"You look very nice," my mom added.

Milo blushed, and I rolled my eyes. "He just came from his dad's engagement party," I explained, and Milo seemed surprised that I remembered. "Leave him alone."

My mom made a point to look offended. "Well he does look nice! Very handsome, Milo."

I grinned at Milo. There was a pink flush cast over his cheekbones and he wasn't meeting any eyes around the room, but I swore there was a hint of a smile on his lips. "It's not fair," I remarked. "She never says anything like that to me."

My mom gasped. "I do all the time!"

"And here I thought I was special," Milo remarked, and we all looked at him, surprised. I was quick to laugh, though, mostly at the look on my mom's face. It was nice that Milo was at least making an attempt to joke around with us. It was a good sign that he was relaxing.

"You're both awful," my mom informed us, and my dad laughed when I turned my best puppy-eyes at her. My mom groaned, sliding two bowls of ice cream across the counter. "You get out of here before I decide that you should wear it, instead of eat it," she warned. I laughed and blew her a kiss.

"Thanks, Mom."

I lifted both servings of ice cream and nodded to Milo, who was smiling, if only faintly. He walked with me as my parents continued to feed each other ice cream, fawning over each other in a rather disgusting manner. When we reached the family room, we had to walk around the piano, which had been pulled to the center of the room, since my mom was giving lessons and liked it better there.

"Your parents are nice," Milo said quietly as we reached the stairs. I smiled, and stepped aside so he could go down first. He seemed to move into my room a lot easier than he had the last time. But once he found the light switch and stepped inside he just stood there, his eyes disconcerted as they drifted. He seemed to be thinking hard about something, not really noticing his surroundings.

I studied him for a long moment, and then put the cold bowls I was carrying down on my desk. Milo hardly noticed when I moved up behind him; not until I slid my hands over his shoulders and took hold of his jacket. "It's kinda warm in here," I pointed out when he looked over his shoulder at me. I pulled the material over his shoulders and he shrugged out of it, and then turned to watch as I neatly hung his jacket over the back of the desk chair. I lifted both bowls of ice cream and held one out for him, getting it so close to his chest that he had to take it if he didn't want a smudge of chocolate on the lapel of the jacket. He frowned at me, but when I took a smothering step towards him he sat back on my bed and lifted the spoon, staring down at his bowl as he stirred the contents, only looking up when I took a seat on his right, close enough to lean into his shoulder. I tasted my dessert, licking a small amount of chocolate from my spoon, and without looking at him I allowed the cold substance to melt over my tongue and took the time to taste the creamy, sweet flavor.

"How was your dad's party?" I asked.

"Sucked," he responded simply.

I turned my head to meet his eyes. He was close, I noticed. I could smell a light cologne. Not the kind that overwhelmed. Just enough of a pleasant scent to make me want to lean forward. I didn't. I licked some more ice cream off my spoon instead. "Is that why you came over here?" I asked curiously.

"I figured no one would look for me here," Milo replied, and I watched as he finally tried his ice cream. "I'm kinda... my dad and I had a little disagreement."

I frowned. "Is it serious?" I asked. I rarely had a disagreement with my dad, so this tended to concern me.

"Not really," he said. "We fight all the time. It's not a big deal." I continued to watch Milo as he looked away from me, and each of us slowly ate. He was thinking. I was just waiting him out. When he abruptly dropped his spoon in his bowl and held it towards me, as if he didn't know what to do with it, I took his, along with mine and moved across the room, placing them on the desk. When I returned, I didn't bother sitting any further away from him than I had in the first place. "I didn't make a toast," Milo finally said, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his fists as he leaned forward. I looked over his back, following his dark, silky shirt to where it tucked in to his pants. I lifted my hand, lightly resting my fingertips low on his back, feeling the thin, smooth material, and Milo's warm skin beneath it. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"The best man's supposed to make a toast. But... no one ever asked me to be the best man. My dad just told me that's the way it was going to be." Milo snorted in disgust, shaking his head. "Then, he just expected me to have a speech or something ready tonight. He got all pissed when I didn't."

I didn't really know what to say to that, so I took a moment, and when Milo sat up I allowed myself to let my fingers move up his back, rubbing gently.

"So you guys are fighting?" I asked. I was aware that that was a stupid question, but at least it kept him talking as he met my eyes and gave a slight nod, squirming against my fingers as they reached his side, without pulling away from me.

"We're always fighting. Like I said, it's not a big deal."

Milo released a small breath and lowered his eyes blankly to my chest as he chewed at his bottom lip. He looked tired, and bothered, and broodingly hot.

I was experiencing the urge to mess up his hair, among other things. But even as I had the thought I chastised myself for it. Milo was trying to talk to me. The last thing he needed was for me to act like a pervert. Unfortunately, when it came to Milo, it seemed that I was a pervert more often than not. I moved my hand all the way up to his shoulder, squeezing lightly before I traced my way down his arm, and over his hand to take it in mine. Milo looked up again as I flipped his hand, palm up, and began to trace circles over his palm, using my thumb.

"Is there a reason why you couldn't have just made a toast?" I asked. "Even a small one?... Like, congratulations and all that?"

Milo glared, but rather than pulling his hand away from me he closed his fin

gers over mine. "Yeah. I hate the bride."

"Emily Hill, right? I met her... once. What's so bad about her?"

I remembered my brief encounter with the woman. I remembered her to seem a little flaky, but I didn't really remember anything awful about her. Except, I did recall a portrait in Milo's room of Emily Hill. He'd portrayed her in a dark light, and now I was curious.

"She's a total bitch," Milo snapped. I frowned, somewhat taken aback by his tone, and I lifted my free hand to where his fingers were gripping mine. As he spoke, I gently pried them off and took his hand into both of mine, studying his fingers with mine. "He's a fucking idiot for marrying her. I swear all she cares about is his money and he's not even making her sign a pre nup. He met her because she applied for a job at one of the banks. He might as well be fucking his secretary. Now she's been on this fucking kick about how we need to spend time together as a family. She's only doing it to impress my dad, and she needs to fucking get it through her head that I'm a little too old to need a substitute mommy."

I remained silent, continuing to move my hands over his, deciding that a nice, calming massage was in order while I waited to see if he was finished. It seemed that he was when he suddenly took in a breath, closed his eyes, and held his head with the hand that I wasn't lavishing with attention.

"I just flipped on you, didn't I?" he mumbled. "I'm sorry. I just didn't want to talk to anyone... and, everyone else I know was at that party. I just thought ..."

"No problem," I insisted. It's not like I hadn't been trying to get him to come see me. True, it would have been nice if he didn't see me as a last resort for an escape, but I'd take what I could get. I pulled his hand towards me, massaging more thoroughly, and as if he'd just figured out what I was doing he tensed for a moment, but then relaxed again. "So where's... your mom?"

I asked. "I mean, your real mom. Is it okay if I ask?"

A rueful smile made its way over Milo's lips. "Yeah. Uh, she's not around."

I frowned at that. "Not around because she's... did she die?" I asked, not really sure how I was supposed to ask such a question.

"No. She left when I was eight. My parents divorced."

I nodded. This was actually something that I could understand. "My dad left when I was really young, too... Kenny, upstairs... He adopted me and my brother. I don't even remember my real dad."

"Oh... sorry," he said quietly. "Um... it's not like that with my mom. I still see her about once a year."

"Where is she?" I asked curiously, and Milo shrugged.

"Don't know," he paused, glancing down as I unbuttoned the wrist of his shirt and slid my fingers over his skin there. "She's a photographer. I never

know where she's gonna be. Sometimes her cell phone goes out of service for months; but, every six weeks or so she sends me a box of pictures, all copies from her work. I think she hopes I'll find something worth painting, but I hardly even open the boxes anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't really know," he replied, his brow frowning. But his troubled expression disappeared and I watched his eyes widen on me when I lifted his hand to my mouth and flicked my tongue over the place just between his thumb and his index finger before my lips rested over it, kissing him. Milo swallowed, and when he pulled his hand away to hold it in his other I released him. I watched him flush and forced a small smile as I wished I could make him feel better.

"You can stay here as long as you want," I offered. "Stay the night if you want to."

It was funny how fast Milo could go from looking shy to regarding me like I was some kind of predator. I couldn't help it; I laughed throatily as I rolled my eyes at him and stood up.

"I'm serious. We have a guest room upstairs. My friends use it all the time."

"Oh," Milo replied, suddenly standing up. "No. No thanks. I need to go home, anyway."

"It's still kinda early," I pointed out, moving in front of him when he headed towards the door. He was avoiding my eyes again.

"Um... thanks for letting me vent and all, but..." That was as far as he got, all because he had to pause and lick at his bottom lip. My hands moved to cup his face and I pulled a startled Milo directly to me, closing my eyes as my lips settled over his, sucking the tip of his tongue into my mouth. It felt cool, and tasted sweet from the ice cream, and he tilted his head, leaning in to me.

Milo clutched my sides, roughly enough to make me jump, but it didn't seem to matter as I parted my lips, deepening the kiss as he slowly responded to it. I only became encouraged when his hands slid lower and he gripped my hips, pulling me up against him; and as I slid my hands up into his hair, making good on my earlier desire to mess it up, I was surprised that beyond his body, firm and warm and clothed against mine, I could feel a distinct bulge against my stirring groin.

When Milo's lips left mine for the briefest moment, I only leaned forward more and moved my tongue over his soft, full lips, not feeling the need for the small breaks we experienced the last time. I coaxed his mouth back onto mine, open and responsive, and I became bolder, sliding my hands down his back without stopping as I reached the curve of his ass. He felt firm beneath my splayed fingers, but soft enough to get a good grip on as I pulled hi

m harder against me and ground myself against the hard organ he had tucked away in his pants. My actions solicited a small, deep moan from Milo, the sound taken into my mouth along with his tongue.

When I slid my hands up to his back, I gripped his shirt, pulling it out of where it was tucked into pants. For a brief moment he defensively held the material down, but decided to clutch my shoulders instead, his arms moving around me for balance when I made sure he lost his, and I braced myself, making sure not to land over him too hard as his back landed securely on my mattress.

Milo looked up at me. A lazy expression occupied the emerald of his eyes, which looked darker beneath my shadow, and the expression on his face was one of nervousness and curiosity as I met his gaze, all the while untucking the front of his shirt. His lips parted, as if he wanted to say something, but stopped when I leaned forward, brushing my mouth over his cheek, rather than his mouth, just in case he still wanted to say something as my fingers found his bare stomach, smooth and contoured with light muscles beneath the surface. I kissed my way towards his ear, and nipped gently at his lobe before he lifted his hands to my arms and I finally heard his voice.

"This isn't what I came over here for," he whispered.

I froze over him, releasing his ear. That decidedly was not a good way for him to get his point across if he wanted me to stop. I'd definitely need a more specific order, considering the way that my own cock was just as hard as his now, straining against my zipper where it rested against his thigh. At least I didn't have to wait long. Milo didn't say anything more, but I felt his chest heave beneath me as he took in a breath, and all at once his body seemed to relax as his fingers tightened invitingly around my arms, just above my elbows. I lifted my head to meet his eyes, perhaps searching for any last objections without really giving him time to make them before I settled my mouth back over his for a simple kiss. I'd just felt his lips respond when I abruptly pulled away and slid down his body, guiding him to lift his legs further onto the bed while I lifted his shirt well over his abdomen.

I heard Milo's sharp intake of breath when my mouth met his skin and I kissed him wetly, just above his right hip, and dragged my mouth to the other. Feeling his hands on my head, smoothing back my short hair, I closed my eyes and found the bottom of his pants with my tongue and then traced a trail upwards, following the thin line of hair to his navel. His skin felt hot beneath my hand as I slid it up his shirt while my other worked to unbutton the garment, just enough to bare his chest to me. He trembled beneath me as I teased his skin with my mouth, tasting clean, smooth flesh. My tongue found his left nipple and when I closed my lips over it, sucking lightly, the tiny bead hardened against the pressure and Milo arched up, a surprised sound escaping him as he forced down a moan. My hand pressed against him firmly

y as I dragged it down his stomach, over his pants, until my palm came to rest firmly over the long bulge beneath the material. He squirmed, his fingers digging into my scalp as I lifted my head from his nipple and placed my mouth over his neck openly, lightly sucking at his skin as my hand explored his organ through his clothes, taking in the long shape of it and cupping the firm smoothness of the head before I teasingly traced my way back down his shaft and then gripped him firmly through his clothes.

Milo's hands moved to the sides of my face, guiding me upwards and I saw a flash of green eyes, glazed over and rolled back before my mouth settled over his. He opened readily beneath my tongue and his responses became anything but hesitant as he kissed me back while I slowly worked my fingers along his cock. He arched his hips impatiently, and becoming rather impatient myself I ground my own erect member against his thigh and groaned against his mouth as I dragged my hand deliberately up his erection, meaning to unfasten his pants. I'd just reached the button when Milo suddenly shuddered, his body convulsing as he gasped against my mouth.

I paused over him, but only because he'd stopped kissing me. As I studied his face, his brow was knit and his eyes were tightly shut. I watched his cheeks heat right in front of me, a tempting shade of red that momentarily made him seem more beautiful than handsome, or at least he would have if he didn't look so troubled all of a sudden as his hands clutched my arms again.

This time, it felt as if he was holding me back more than anything else. It took me a moment to realize what had happened, but when I did, I had to bite my lip, hard, to keep down the chuckle rising in my throat. As it was, I was lucky enough that Milo's eyes were closed, otherwise he might have noticed just how amused I was.

I moved slowly as I leaned back down and gently kissed away some of the tension masking his features. I found his lips and coaxed them open, becoming satisfied when he met my tongue and his body relaxed again. But, it didn't last long. As soon as I popped open the button of his dress pants, Milo gripped my wrist, holding it away as his eyes snapped open. He looked at me, seemingly worried about something, and the next thing I knew his hand was on my chest, pushing me away as he sat up. I gave him some room, frowning as I watched him looking anywhere but at me as he tried to catch his breath.

"Milo?" I tried, when he said nothing. I moved my hand gently over his thigh but he took in a breath and caught it again. I stopped, frowning.

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding uncertain.

"Hey, it's fine," I insisted, but as soon as my fingers so much as wiggled against his leg he was tightening his grip.

"Please don't."

"Milo..."

He turned his head, facing me as he tucked his hair behind his ear and I watched as that lovely blush crept over his entire face. "Look... I sort of already ..."

I grinned. "I know," I informed him. "I thought... you might wanna clean up. It's cool, okay? No worries."

Definitely no worries. I certainly wasn't offended if I'd caused Milo Trust to come in his pants. Flattery at its finest, if you asked me. Milo's expression softened as I smiled at him; and when I leaned forward, planting a small kiss against the corner of his mouth he leaned into it as he let go of my wrist. I reached for his pants once again, this time disappointed when he abruptly stood up and looked down at me where I remained on the bed. He was shaking his head, and my frown deepened because I knew that look. It was becoming very familiar on him.

"I'm sorry. I can't stay here," he stated.

I stood. "Milo..."

"I'm just gonna walk myself out, okay?" he stated, and before I could do, or say anything more, his back was turned on me as he headed out my bedroom door, practically slamming it behind him.

I closed my eyes for a moment, warding off a headache that I knew I was going to have later, and shook my head. Milo Trust. I wondered if he'd ever make sense. I didn't go after him as I heard him moving up the stairs. Obviously, he didn't want me to do that. So, I did the next best thing. I dropped my pants, and my white cotton boxers joined them around my ankles, freeing my cock to flip up against my abdomen, just beneath my t-shirt. I wrapped my hand around the smooth texture of my shaft, ready to release the most tension my body had ever felt. I got off two strokes before I was suddenly releasing my cock, shocked to find my bedroom door swinging open. I stood there, ready to scream at someone; but when Milo Trust walked back into my room and made a beeline for his jacket which was still hanging on the chair, and he didn't even bother to look at me, all I could do was stand there, crossing my arms sternly and shaking my head. When he turned with his jacket in hand, Milo abruptly dropped it as his eyes widened on me, drifting down past my waist. He swallowed hard, dropping his jaw stupidly, and to my surprise, he was the one blushing while I just stood there feeling annoyed over the interruption, especially since he'd just run off on me. It seemed that all Milo could do was stare, and I was too stubborn to just pull up my pants. When he took a hesitant step in my direction, meeting my eyes, I dropped my arms, but still didn't bother covering myself as I regarded him expectantly. He obviously had something to say to me. Why it couldn't wait was beyond me, though. My balls were starting to ache, I was so hard. I was irritated. Maybe a little hurt. Worried that Milo was going to stop talking to me again. Not to mention I was currently half naked and too ho

rny for my own good. Distracted. I was distracted, and that's probably why I didn't notice that Milo was getting closer to me, not until he was close enough to touch.

I reached out abruptly, grabbing the bottom of his shirt, fisting the soft material as I pulled him to me. Before he could think to do anything about it I'd leaned forward, planting my lips over his. Milo's hands came out, reaching for balance. One gripped my t-shirt, and when the other fell firmly on my bare ass, Milo moved it up to my back almost politely, causing me to break the kiss just to smirk at him. He shyly avoided my eyes, but leaned forward again to let his mouth brush hesitantly over mine, giving me the only signal I needed to kiss him more soundly. I closed my eyes, feeling him as he brought himself closer to me, and gasping when I felt his hand, those long, warm fingers, close around my cock. I wasn't expecting it, or the slow, careful strokes as he slid his hand experimentally over my length. I sighed, wrapping an arm around his neck to hold him to me, and closed my fingers over his, surrounding my cock, guiding him as he moved and doing my best to demonstrate how I liked it. When I pulled back from our kiss, Milo Trust still wouldn't meet my eyes, and he was still blushing. But it didn't matter. I liked him that way, I decided. And the way he was touching me... for now that was enough.

Chapter 8: Social Dilemmas

by DomLuka

If I was a pervert, then Milo Trust was a slut. An evasive slut who disappeared as soon as I went to retrieve a few damp washcloths. Oh, he was good. Out the door less than five minutes after I came all over his hand. My parents had been in the living room and hadn't even heard him leave. I didn't have his phone number, so I couldn't call him and ask why he'd ditched me again. I was confused, especially after the encounter we'd shared. I could understand why he'd be embarrassed, and maybe why he'd run out the first time he did last night. But, he'd come back. Sure, it was for his jacket, but considering that I still had that very jacket in my car on Monday morning, I doubted that it was the important thing to him. He'd come back, and things had felt so perfect. Those magazines I looked at still put us to shame, but for me and Milo, it was perfect. My first sexual experience with a guy, and I couldn't even bask in the afterglow because once again, I was concerned over Milo Trust and what the hell went on in that thick skull of his.

At least when I met Caleb, Haily and Joe at the Hollander's near the school that morning, Caleb didn't so much as bring up Milo. If he'd thought about Milo Trust's presence at all after he left my house, then it certainly didn't show. Then again, it wouldn't surprise me if Caleb hadn't given it a second thought. He was probably just satisfied that it wasn't Jame Graham hanging around. Or maybe, I thought, he wasn't about to make a big deal out of

it in front of Haily and Joe. Either way, I was glad that Milo's name hadn't been mentioned. I was irritated with him, and I doubted I could make him sound like a good guy with my friends while I was so frustrated.

I just didn't understand why he had to leave like that. There were probably a hundred excuses that he could come up with. I'm sure any of them would have been better than what I was thinking. Beneath all of my frustration and confusion as I continued to try to understand Milo, there was blunt concern that he regretted. Regretted something, or maybe everything that had happened the night before. It made me question my own behavior. I knew I didn't force him to do anything. Not at all. But at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder if my timing was appropriate. True, I'd been thinking about initiating contact like that with Milo since I'd met him, but I guess I could have found a more appropriate time. Like, when he wasn't over at my house venting about his family.

I was worried about that, too. Milo's family. His dad. He'd said they were fighting, and I hoped that he wasn't in trouble. I wished there was a way to find out. Unfortunately, it wasn't like I saw Milo until parenting class, so I supposed that I had a long day of suspense and overanalyzing the situation ahead of me.

"Here, eat this. I can't finish," Haily said.

I looked towards her and turned my nose up at the half-eaten bran muffin that she was holding out for me. I'd hardly eaten anything when I met my friends at the bakery for breakfast. This seemed to concern Haily more than anyone else, and she'd been following me with that muffin ever since we arrived at school.

"You sure?" she asked, pouting. "You're not getting sick again, are you?"

I sighed, and forced myself to smile at Haily as we navigated our way through the halls, crowded with several members of the varsity football team standing around, clad in their purple and orange team jackets, and further cluttered by several girls. It was homecoming week, and there were banners and flags in every single hall, along with a sense of excitement emanating from the student body. Generally, I enjoyed the atmosphere of it all. A bunch of testosterone-happy guys bouncing off the walls had never hurt anything, if you asked me. But at the moment, I was just too distracted to care about any of it. Unfortunately, I was afraid that my distraction was also hindering my ability to be a good friend. Haily was just trying to help, but like a lot of her recent behavior, it only had me feeling smothered. She'd showed up at Hollander's that morning with Joe and Caleb teasing her because of the change in her wardrobe. She was still prone to jeans and a t-shirt, but what she'd dressed in today definitely hadn't come from the men's department, like most of her clothes. Today she was dressed like most of the girls in our school in jeans that hugged every curve she had and a close-fitting red, long-sleeved

ed t-shirt. Her hair was still back in its familiar braid, but she'd gone to the trouble of putting on lip-gloss. While Caleb and Joe had been teasing her through breakfast, she kept looking at me, probably waiting for me to tell her what I'd thought. Feeling uncomfortable with the looks she was giving me, I'd kept my mouth shut, and I was afraid that I'd hurt her feelings. The way she was frowning at the bran muffin now told me that I was in risk of doing it again.

"I'm fine, Haily, really. Thanks, though," I said, and then for good measure, added, "I think I ate too much pasta last night. I'll be better by lunch."

"If you say so."

I sighed, feeling the need to say something more. But, before I could get a round to it I heard my name and turned around.

"Larmont!"

I smiled at Brandon Sholer as he pushed through a group of his massive friends to get to me, wearing his team jacket, just like everyone else. Brandon and Caleb might have been rivals, but if I stayed away from everyone who Caleb saw that way, I wouldn't have any friends at all; and beneath Brandon's womanizing and cocky persona, there was actually a nice guy. Not to mention, he wasn't bad to look at. He was an inch taller than me, and his straight blond hair was almost as light as mine, but he wasn't as fair skinned. Blue eyes, boyish dimples, and a body fit to eat off of completed the package. He clasped my hand as he reached me, and unleashed those dimples at Haily. She openly rolled her eyes at him, but if Brandon noticed, it didn't show as he handed me an orange flyer.

"We're having a spirit rally tomorrow night here at the school," he announced. "Are you guys coming to the game on Friday?"

"We'll be there," I replied. My friends and I usually went to one football game of the season, and that was usually homecoming. This year I was particularly looking forward to it because our school was going against Stratfort. There had never really been a rivalry between the two schools, because Stratfort sucked too much for there to be one, but I was curious to see some faces that might be familiar to Milo. "Good luck with the game, Brandon." He smirked. "Who needs luck when you've got me?" he remarked. "I'll see you guys later. Oh, and after the game, I'm throwing a party at my place. Stop by... you look good today, Haily."

I laughed at the way Haily blushed this time and waved to Brandon. "Later." I watched him walk away for a moment, appreciating the strut his walk had always had. When Brandon Sholer walked away, my focus was rarely anywhere other than his ass. But my focus was disrupted when a more unwelcome voice came from behind Haily and me.

"Yeah, Haily. You look good today. Those jeans are very becoming on you. You know, if I was your pants, I'd be coming, too."

I had to grab Haily's arm when she whirled on Jame Graham, standing there with his obnoxious smile and big cheeks, wearing a green-and-white sweater that his grandma had probably made him last Christmas.

"And if I was your face, I'd be taking a shit!" Haily retorted, sounding outraged. It only got worse when Jame smirked at her. It seemed like he'd been harassing Haily since school started, and I for one was getting tired of it.

"Come on, Haily," I insisted, dragging her around Assface. "He's not even worth it."

I felt Haily relax when I pulled her away, but I was glaring at Jame, only becoming a little furious myself when he ignored me and blew a kiss at Haily. I pulled her behind me in response, and turned on Jame. Now, it was Haily tugging on my arm.

"Why don't you just back off?" I demanded. "I swear to god, next time I'll let her kick your ass."

"Kinky!" Jame responded, still grinning in a way that had his cheeks all puffed out. "Looking forward to it."

"Oh, fuck yourself, Assface!" Haily snapped behind me, suddenly sounding exasperated. She started pulling me away, but I scowled at Jame until she got me turned around, too. How the hell Milo could be friends with that idiot was beyond my understanding. "I hate that guy," Haily said, drawing my attention.

"Yeah, I know. Let's just..."

"Ignore him? Okay...so are we going to that party?" Haily asked me as we turned and headed up the stairs.

"Probably," I replied, smiling at her. "We're still going to the game, right?"

"I plan on it. So does Caleb, but Joe might need some convincing."

"Joe?"

"He's been cranky lately. But, he doesn't have much more time to put in on his community service. I think he'll get better once it's over with."

I hummed in agreement and we walked to the locker we'd been sharing. I took a seat on the ground next to it and started to unload the books I'd taken home over the weekend while Haily wrestled with the lock. As soon as she opened it, she started grabbing her books, and it was probably a good thing she was distracted with that because she didn't notice the folded piece of notebook paper that fell from the locker and landed next to me. I grabbed for it immediately, not even looking it over before I shoved it into my pocket; and as I looked up at Haily, it occurred to me that I should probably warn Milo that I was sharing a locker with her, especially if he were going to make a habit out of this. I smiled at the thought. A habit. I had no idea what his note said yet but already it was making up for the way he'd disappeared on me the night before. A little.

"What are you smiling about?" Haily remarked, glancing down at me.

I shook my head and stood to switch books between the locker and my backpack. "Nothing. I'll see you at lunch?"

"Okay," Haily replied, and I started walking before I paused, and looked back at her.

"Brandon's right," I said. "You look nice today; you really shouldn't be stuck going to homecoming with me."

Haily cocked her head at me, but didn't get a chance to respond as I walked away. I'd meant what I said, though. I should never have agreed to go to homecoming with her. She deserved to go with someone who'd actually appreciate it when she put an effort into her appearance. She deserved someone who could appreciate her.

As soon as I was out of sight, I lifted Milo's note from my pocket, ready to know what he had to say for himself. Only, it wasn't a note at all. There was only one thing written on that piece of paper, and that, was a phone number.

.....
"So I guess I earned this, but not a goodbye, huh?"

Milo was no less than startled when I snuck up right behind him and dropped his piece of notebook paper in his lap, where he sat at our table in Mrs. Bates's class. He turned brilliant green eyes up in my direction as he tugged at the collar of a new-looking black hooded sweatshirt; and as I took my seat next to him, lacking my usual smile, he was frowning at me when he lifted the piece of paper and placed it in front of us.

It was safe to say that despite what he'd left in my locker, some of my irritation was still present. I wasn't as upset, deciding that giving me his phone number was sign enough that he was still interested in some contact; but over the course of a very long day, I'd decided that some of Milo's hot-and-cold behavior was grating on my nerves. Especially the cold part.

"I thought..." he started, but then stopped as Tim passed by. We both greeted him, and then faced each other when Tim was safely in his seat, talking to someone else.

"You thought what?" I asked.

Milo narrowed his eyes on me. Another glare, no doubt. It was his cute, worried glare. I never thought that someone frowning could turn me on until I met him. But, I looked away, deciding to stay irritated.

"Do you think we could talk about this later?" he asked.

"When?"

"I don't know," he responded, and I swore that I could hear a note of sarcasm in his tone. "I thought maybe you could use this."

I watched his long fingers, which had been so perfectly wrapped around my cock less than twenty-four hours ago, slide the folded piece of notebook paper in front of me. I hesitated for a moment before I picked it up and shove

d it in my backpack.

"Why don't you just come over after school?" I asked. I wasn't really a phone person.

"Because," he replied, bringing his voice to a near whisper, "I need... I want to talk to you while you're not... I mean, when you can't..."

I looked curiously over at Milo, regretting it immediately, because as soon as I saw the look on his face, any frustration leftover from him ditching me disappeared and I felt a slow smile curling my lips. I just couldn't stay mad at him, and god forbid if he ever figured that out. He was blushing again, ever so faintly, as he fidgeted with his hands, seeming unable to say what he wanted to say.

"Do I distract you, Milo?" I asked teasingly, and his eyes snapped sharply to mine. I chuckled.

"Shut up," he mumbled, and I rolled my eyes at him.

"Did you really wanna talk?" I asked, sobering, and he gave a nod.

"Okay," I said quietly. "I'll call tonight, but you better have something to say about the way you took off last night."

"I had to do that," he said quickly. I issued a challenging look to that statement that clearly said I thought he was full of shit. "Okay," he relented. "I freaked out. Look, this is... new to me."

My expression softened as he faced me seriously, and I let out a breath. "I know," I told him. "But the thing is, you're not the only one dealing with that."

Milo's lips parted, the beginning of a word escaping him before he closed his mouth and frowned, suddenly looking guilty, like a little boy who'd just been scolded. I almost felt bad about it. Almost.

Nothing more was said on the matter as Mrs. Bates started class, five minutes after the bell rang. Once again, I found myself hardly paying attention to anything she was saying as I idly tapped my pen over my notebook, thinking about Milo. If I made him feel guilty, he was just going to have to deal with that. Maybe all of this was new to him, but it's not like I had any clue about what I was doing, either. I suppose I was a little put off because what happened the night before should have meant something. At the time, it had. Yeah, getting off, literally, at the hands of the biggest crush I'd ever had was great and all, but while it was happening... I guess for a little while, I felt a little less lonely. It was nice to know that there was someone else there, who was just like me. It was nice to feel it. When I'd walked back into my room, I could practically feel myself glowing. But when I figured out that he was gone, all of it had seemed so pointless. It was like being abandoned. Left to wonder. I'm still fucking wondering, I thought, frowning as I looked over at him. He glanced up, meeting my eyes for a brief moment and graced me with a small smile. It was uncertain, but it was still a smile. I tried to return

n it, wondering if I'd ever figure out what I was going to do about him. I guess I'd just have to call him later and find out.

Or not.

I probably should have called. Milo had a point. It was hard to talk when all I wanted to do was touch him. When he was around, I felt like a dog with a new tennis ball. I didn't like being told that I could look at it, but not play with it.

But, I didn't call. In fact, I hadn't even been home to call. After school on Monday, I'd volunteered to take Joe down to the police department. I'd stopped in to say hi to Uncle Ray, who'd shaved off his red beard. I'd hardly recognized him when I saw him. He looked ten years younger. Under that beard had been a kind, approachable face with pink cheeks and a thin mouth. I doubted that he'd be intimidating any bad guys anytime soon, but I held off on telling him that. After a short visit with Ray, and even saying hello to Officer Trujillo, I'd intended to go home. But it seemed so much easier to go to Stratfort instead. I should have called, though. The look on Milo's face when he actually answered the door for once, said that I should have called. He let me come in, though. When I made a point to close his bedroom door, he'd mentioned that no one else was home, and then his eyes widened on me when the first thing I did was turn into him, planting the softest of kisses over his lips. I couldn't help it. He looked too cute standing there, ranting about how he'd teach me how to use a telephone if I wasn't aware of how easy it was to dial seven digits.

I could feel him glaring at my back when I headed over to his bed. It was made neatly, covered with his burgundy comforter. Only, his two pillows, clad in navy pillowcases were over the spread, rather than under it. Near them was a sketch pad, which is what I was going for. I ignored the colored pencils lying over the mattress as I climbed up and took the sketch pad into my lap, inspecting his latest work. I wasn't in this one, but it still caused me to raise an eyebrow at him. To my surprise, he shrugged rather than taking on his defensive stance. As he moved to sit at the foot of the bed, I looked back down at the sketch. It wasn't one I would have expected. My bedroom, in detail. He even remembered what order certain books had been in on the bookshelves. There was his jacket, which I still had in my car, hanging over my desk chair. The scarecrow portrait, looking blurred in this sketch. The only thing that was missing was most of my usual clutter. In fact, in the sketch my room looked tidy. Except for the bed. That was rumpled, sheets tangled, the pillow askew. It looked like someone had done more than slept in that bed. The night before, the real thing hadn't succumbed to such disarray, but I got the point.

When I put the book aside, and looked up, Milo was still perched on the foot of his bed, watching me.

"So what are we going to do?" I asked pointedly. "You know I don't mind chasing you, but it would be nice to know that you at least like it every once in a while."

"I don't want anyone to find out," Milo responded, and I frowned.

"Yeah, I got that."

"And I don't know what I'm doing... I like you."

"I got that, too," I replied, a small smile curling my lips. Milo looked away from me to stare at his closed bedroom door, and I took the moment to crawl over the bed and claim a seat next to him; and then, just to touch him, I fixed the tag sticking out of the back of his hooded shirt. He took in a breath as my fingers grazed his neck and my eyes went to his hand as it slid from his lap, and rested between our thighs. Despite my frustration with some of the things Milo did, I guess I had to admit that he did give me some signals, even if they were subtle ones. I slid my hand over his, and met his eyes when he finally looked at me. "Why'd you freak out last night?" I asked. "You just... left."

Milo shook his head. "It's stupid."

"Probably," I remarked. "But I'm still asking the question."

Milo was silent for a moment, pursing his lips. "I didn't know what to say to you," he finally said. "When you left for a minute, I just started thinking... that I didn't know what to say to you. When I got to your house, everything happened kinda fast.... I didn't know what to say. I mean, we were supposed to say something, right? And then I started thinking, you know... what if we don't say anything. And then I started thinking about how weird that would be. And, I feel like I don't even know you. And last night... I've never done anything like that before."

"You think I have?" I remarked.

Milo looked at me pointedly. "I mean, never. Beyond kissing I haven't...."

His brow went up, his expression searching for understanding.

"Never?" I repeated. "You dated all those girls. I mean... obviously, not the same, but..."

"Never," Milo repeated.

"Oh." Well, that blew my theory about Milo being an evasive slut out the window. Now he was an evasive virgin. Which, in all honesty, surprised me. I'd dated girls, too, and while I'd never actually felt the spark with them that I felt with Milo, it wasn't as if curiosity had never got the better of me.

Or, alcohol for that matter. Like, with Teresa Milldrum. It was a little hard to believe that someone like Milo, who could likely have whoever he wanted, was untouched. Well, not exactly anymore, but still. "Was it okay?" I found myself asking. I was suddenly experiencing pressure that I hadn't felt last night. "I mean, did you like it?"

Milo's eyes widened slightly, and I had a feeling that once again he thought

t I was being too forward. "It was quick," he finally responded, once again looking rather embarrassed. But, that was probably because he was the one who was quick.

I smiled in response. "I kinda thought that was hot."

I watched the corners of Milo's mouth curl up ever so slightly as he looked away from me, and then to my surprise, he laughed. "You have no idea..."

"What?" I asked, grinning at him as I tightened my hand over his, drawing his attention back to me.

"I thought you would have expected... more."

"Me?"

He nodded. "You talk... you act like you do this kind of thing all the time."

"I told you that you were the only gay guy I've ever met," I replied, confused.

"Yeah, but that doesn't matter. It's like nothing bothers you--you're kinda intimidating. I don't always know... how to be around you."

"Yeah, well I don't always know if you want to be around me," I replied. "There's a lot of mixed signals there, Milo. I don't know what to think. I like you, too. But... what would you even say to me if I asked you out? Or if I said that I wanted to do something with you, go somewhere... or just pick a specific time and place to see you."

"I don't know," he replied quietly, after several moments of consideration.

"Are you really that worried about someone figuring us out if we start spending time together?"

"I can't be out, Nelson."

"What if I promised that you wouldn't be?" I asked. "Not if we're careful."

"You can't make promises like that," he said, shaking his head.

"Then what if I showed you? I mean, that it's not the big deal you think it is where everyone else is concerned."

"How?" he asked, looking suspicious.

"The football team's throwing a spirit rally tomorrow night. Come with me."

He laughed. "You want me to go to a school function with you?"

"Yeah."

Milo shook his head. "A spirit rally?"

I smirked. "Yeah, and maybe afterwards, you can show me how much spirit you have," I teased, and Milo's eyes widened right before he elbowed me, likely trying to distract me from the blush creeping over his face. "Just don't disappear this time," I added.

His smile faded at that, and he studied me for a long moment.

"Thanks for letting me stay last night," he finally said, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say that his voice seemed a little shaky. "I did... I did like it."

Why that was so difficult for him to say, I couldn't understand. But, I cer

tainly did appreciate hearing it. He even gave me a shy smile when I reached out and brushed away a strand of his hair that felt light and soft against my fingertips. He met my eyes and I watched as his clouded over while he licked at his lips. He started to lean forward, but caught himself, seeming uncertain as he looked at me. I caught his chin with my index finger gently, and guided him forward until his eyes closed and his mouth came into soft contact with mine. I parted my lips, and he mimicked the gesture. Our tongues briefly made contact before he pulled away, his mouth drawing into a kiss against my thumb when I traced his lips with it and rested my forehead gently against his. I smiled at the way he was meeting my eyes easier now, unwavering, the way he had the first time I'd ever seen his face.

"Come to the spirit rally," I said quietly, well aware that he hadn't given me an answer yet. Milo sighed and his breath hit my face. He looked tired as he briefly closed his eyes, and when he opened them, I had emeralds focused on me.

"I'll think about it."

I could live with that. For now. I smiled, and told him so. I wished that he would have given me an answer before I left, though.

I didn't stay long after that. A few shared, light kisses later I'd asked Milo if he'd worked things out with his dad. Unfortunately, it reminded him that he was supposed to talk to his dad when Mr. Trust got home, which would be soon. Apparently, that was one of the reasons why Milo had been so adamant about wanting me to call. I think it made him feel better, though, when I left before Mr. Trust even showed up.

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On Tuesday, I'd been eager to get to school just to see if Milo had left any more surprises in my locker. Like, perhaps a quick note saying that he was willing to meet me tonight. No note. No nothing. But, I took a moment to slip one into Milo's locker. It explained that I shared a locker with Haily, and why, although I did avoid the term Assface. I almost regretted leaving that with him when I didn't get a return letter all day. But, it didn't really surprise me. I didn't see him until parenting class. I was pleased to find that he was smiling at me a lot more. Even more than he had on the days when we joked around. He was in a good mood, with his pencil constantly scratching at his notebook. I wondered how he stayed so focused all the time. At least, I wondered that until the end of class when he handed me the piece of notebook paper he'd been scratching on, and I looked down at a quick sketch of myself, leaning back in my seat and yawning with my hair sticking up in places, like I'd just gotten out of bed. He'd laughed at me when I very carefully slid it into a text book so it wouldn't get damaged before I put it in my backpack.

When I asked him about the spirit rally again, he said he was still thinking a

bout it. I thought it was a little late to still be thinking about it, considering that the rally was only hours away. When I tried to explain this to him, he surprised me by asking for my phone number, instead of giving me an actual answer. And of course, he didn't tell me if he was going to use that number to give me an answer later. I didn't like it, but I refused to sulk about it. Besides, after school when I mentioned to my friends that I was going, Haily and Caleb were ready to go too. Between the three of us we convinced Joe, who said he'd go with us, but absolutely refused to have any school spirit. Haily was right about him. He was getting cranky. I hoped that it was the fact that he was tiring himself out between community service and school that had him so down, and not something else. As it was, he was much more snappish than usual, even towards us. I didn't think on it very much, though, or let it bother me. I was already bothered enough by the fact that I couldn't tell my friends that Milo Trust would be coming with us, even knowing what their reactions would have been.

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I was all for social gatherings. Loved them, actually. As long as I could talk to, or be around people, I didn't get bored. Even around a bunch of cheerleaders, and especially around a boisterous football team. I liked the noise. I liked the screaming. I liked making small talk with the people I knew, and the people who I didn't. But what I hated, was our school colors. Purple and orange just didn't bode well for my complexion, and I refused to dress up in them, even for a spirit rally. Since this thing was supposed to be outdoors, in the cold, I stuck to a thick black sweatshirt and jeans instead. I topped it off with my blue beanie and a worn jeans jacket that used to be my dad's. By the time I was ready to leave the house my mom was teasing me about how I made a cute dockworker.

The rally didn't start until six thirty, and all I knew was that it was taking place behind the football field. We probably wouldn't miss much if we got there late, so my friends and I had decided to go out to dinner first, when Rebecca mentioned to Caleb that a lot of people were getting together for pizza, including most of the cheerleaders. The sun had all but disappeared, leaving behind a magenta sky. Our field and the trees in it looked like nothing more than dark shadows as I looked out the large window in the kitchen and waited for Caleb. I could hear my parents in the living room. They were watching a movie. It must have been good, because they both broke out into fits of laughter every few moments, and I could hear the parrot chattering from the family room, mimicking their laughter, and every once in a while, the telephone. I hated when the bird did that, especially when I was hoping that the real phone would actually ring. He sounded just like the damn thing. That's why I was holding the cordless in my hand, just in case.

I was waiting for Milo. At least, I hoped that I was waiting for Milo. I wan

ted him to call me. I wanted him to call and tell me that he wasn't going to the rally. At least that way, I wasn't left wondering. I was well aware that I could just call him, but I refused to do it. I needed to hear from him. Hear anything from him. He liked me, I knew that. Maybe I was just being unreasonable about it, but knowing wasn't enough. I guess I wanted him to do something to show me. I wanted him to show me that he wanted to get to know me, more than just behind closed doors. I was so eager for him to call, that I actually answered the phone when the doorbell rang.

"Nelson?" My mom called, and I sighed before I headed through the house.

"I'll get it," I called. "It's just Caleb." He was driving because there was no sense in taking two cars, and everyone was pretty much on the way, when coming from his house. I stopped in the living room to kiss my mom goodbye and let her adjust my beanie. Dad let me get away with a simple wave and a promise not to stay out too late because it was a school night.

I went outside to head to Caleb's jeep. It was just above freezing, dark, and a little windy. Caleb would have had Haily come to the door, but she wouldn't have waited there. That's why I didn't expect to run directly into a body. Or, almost run into a body, as strong, firm hands reached to grab my arms, just as I realized there weren't any headlights in my driveway.

Milo released me as soon as I met his eyes, looking just as startled as I did.

He was the first to smile. It was probably at the look on my face. I hadn't expected him, not even after all of that waiting for him to call.

"You're here," I managed to get out.

"I was going to call, but figured I'd get even--were you leaving already?"

"Um...yeah," I admitted. "I mean, I guess not yet. I sorta thought you were Caleb."

"Caleb?" Milo repeated, suddenly frowning. I guess I should have expected that. "You didn't mention Caleb."

"That's because I wasn't going to ride with him until I figured you weren't coming," I responded dryly.

Milo shook his head. "This wasn't a good idea."

I groaned when Milo turned and headed towards his car. "Milo, wait!" I reached him, just as he opened his door, and we both froze as headlights hit us in the dark. The next thing I knew, Milo and I were standing next to Caleb's jeep; the passenger window was down, and Joe was staring out it with a very cockeyed expression on his face; and I imagined that if I could see Caleb or Haily, they'd look the same way.

"Nels?" Joe inquired, meeting my eyes.

I stepped up to the window and looked in. Caleb was frowning past me, probably perplexed since it was his second time catching Milo at my place; and Haily was in the back, not looking at me at all. She was staring at Milo through the window, and there was silence. I smiled, despite the discomfort.

"Hey, guys. Milo's coming with us. I'm gonna ride with him... We'll follow you, okay, Caleb?" This was met with more silence. I kept smiling and crossed my arms, pretending to shiver. "Brr it's cold tonight. Anyone need an extra jacket out of the house?"

All three of my fiends shook their heads at me, still speechless.

"Okay," I responded to the silence. "Lead the way out, Caleb."

When I turned, it was Milo who was staring at me, scowling. There wasn't really a surprise there. I walked around his car, opened the passenger door on my own, and sank down into a surprisingly comfortable dark green front seat.

It was soft, worn just enough to adjust to my body. As I closed the door, I noted that there was an odor, too. A pleasant one. Soft, but masculine. And unlike my vehicle, his didn't need to be vacuumed. I quickly felt relaxed in it, but that didn't last very long as Milo took his seat and slammed his door.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. "Your friends think you're crazy!"

"Huh. You'd better follow Caleb before you lose him. He's not going to the school. We're meeting at a restaurant first."

Milo looked about ready to spit nails. "Nelson..."

"Hey," I cut him off calmly. "Everything's fine. I'm not going to act like there's something wrong with me hanging out with you, because there's not. And if I start acting like it, they'll start thinking it."

"They're already thinking it."

"Well, they're gonna change their minds," I insisted.

Milo shook his head, but started his car to follow Caleb. "I'll drop you off .. but then I'm going home."

I closed my eyes as I rested my head back against his comfortable seat, taking in the pleasant scent surrounding me as the sound of the gravel beneath the tires tickled my ears, and I grinned. "You're gonna change your mind, too."

I'm sure he was glaring at me for that one. But, it didn't make me any less right.

It was a little out of the way, meaning past the school, but Ozario's Eatery was not only a great place to gather in large groups, it was a great place to eat, too. This is what I explained to Milo as I coaxed him out of his car. He was reluctant to go in, but in the end, he was through the glass door and in Ozario's warm atmosphere with me. At the entrance there were two large aquariums holding colorful saltwater fish, and a wide set of stairs led down to the massive dining room. With pergo floors, dark, matching booths and long tables, the place had a clean, soothing environment. Mini-chandeliers hung from the rectangular building's ceiling, leaving the light dim; and the aroma flooding my nostrils, as always, was mouthwatering. Ozario's served many things, but they were popular for their specialty pizzas. During dinner ho

urs their buffet was open and it was the perfect place to go with an appetite. Tonight, orange and purple flags were hanging from most of the tables, and the place was full of my classmates. It seemed that we weren't the only ones planning to be late to the rally, since it appeared that the football team was there, too, along with Coach Don.

Caleb, Joe and Haily had arrived just ahead of us, but already I'd lost sight of them. I had a feeling that it didn't matter. I was pretty sure that at least one of them had an eye on me. They usually did. I just hoped they'd calmed each other down enough over Milo Trust. I'm sure their ride over was filled with Haily talking about how I sat next to Milo in parenting class, and Caleb's tale of how he'd caught him coming to my house. If I knew my friends, they'd at least calm down long enough to ask me questions before they made any final judgments about my choice in friends. At least, I hoped they would. I doubted that Milo needed the stress. As it was, he looked rather pale as he looked over the room. He hardly noticed it when I stepped up to the petite blonde woman behind the register and purchased a meal ticket for each of us. He frowned at me when I handed him a glass for his soda.

"You can't be that nervous," I remarked.

"Your friends hate me and I don't know anyone here."

I looked over the room skeptically, and as if on cue a redhead in an orange and purple cheerleaders' outfit, who I recognized as one of Teresa Milldrum's friends, waved at us from halfway across the room. "Milo!"

I looked at him triumphantly. "See, your fan club's here," I said, and he smiled at me. I was starting to think of that face as his brooding-artist look.

"Do you wanna sit with them?" I asked.

Milo shrugged indifferently, but made no objection when I led the way down the stairs and the two of us took a seat at the redhead's long table where she and several of her friends, a few more cheerleaders and couple other girls I knew from school, made room for us. It took me all of two minutes to figure out that despite Milo's insistence that he didn't know anyone, he sure seemed friendly with a lot of girls from our school. He even let two of them drag him off to fill his plate. I was happy to see that he had the ability to feel somewhat comfortable there. I was also a little annoyed to feel a small amount of jealousy, which was not at all like me. But then, I'd never really had anyone to be jealous over before.

It was Teresa Milldrum with her curly blonde hair, wearing a denim skirt, cut even shorter than the ones that the cheerleaders wore, who snatched me from the table and toured the buffet with me. She was more than happy to point out all of the carbs that my barbecued-chicken pizza had in it, and made faces as she sat next to me at the table while she watched me down it. Milo was on the other side, fending off a few girls when they had the nerve to ask him which school had prettier girls, ours, or Stratfort. As I listened to him

, I think I was surprised more than anything at how charming he could be. He was holding out chairs and offering to refill drinks. Maybe I shouldn't have been that shocked, but it was definitely a side of him I'd never seen, and the fact that these girls were the ones bringing it out of him only served to increase any jealousy I was feeling. But I shoved it down because Milo wasn't only being polite to them, he was also smiling at me again, talking to me like two friends would, and he seemed comfortable about it. At least, until my friends found us.

We'd been there for fifteen minutes when Caleb, Joe and Haily found us. I'd expected that to happen sooner or later, which is why I hadn't gone looking for them. Joe and Caleb liked the table I'd chosen a lot more than Haily did, but from across the table, all three of them kept looking between Milo and me, obviously wanting to say something. At least they had the decency not to. I think they were trying to ignore Milo, as much as Milo was trying to ignore them. For my part, I acted like Milo sitting at our table was an everyday occurrence, and as usual, talked to everyone. I thought it was very clever of me, when I mentioned to Caleb that Milo knew a lot of girls from Stratford. Milo had glared at me for it at the time, but when Caleb started seeing him as an opened doorway to a whole new dating territory, and Milo offered to introduce him to a few girls, the two of them seemed to warm to each other, if only a little. It only lasted until Rebecca showed up at our table and slapped Caleb in the back of the head, though. He had to go after her to make sure that he still had his date for homecoming. I was smiling when Joe picked right up where Caleb left off, wanting to know about the Stratford girls. Of course, all of this talk about girls ended up making the ones already surrounding us jealous. Teresa Milldrum couldn't figure out if she wanted to cling to me, or Milo. I cursed Joe when he gave a pen to one of the cheerleaders, because he wasn't the only one who ended up with phone numbers written all the way up his arm. Haily pretty much sat across the table, scowling at us.

After dinner, when we headed to the school, I was not at all happy when Milo and I were abruptly separated. Teresa Milldrum and a few other girls invited themselves into his car, packing it full of shaved legs and perfume. This left Haily to drag me to Caleb's jeep as I worried over being able to find Milo in the crowds when we actually got to the rally. It seemed I had other things to worry about first, though.

"That guy's a putz," Joe remarked from the back seat of Caleb's jeep, where he was sitting with Haily.

"Who?" I asked, frowning. I already didn't like where this was going.

"Oh, come on, Nels," Joe said, as if it were obvious. I guess it was.

"Yeah. Okay," I responded dryly. "Fuck you."

"Hey, I'm saying..."

"He's a pretty cool guy, Joe," I cut him off. "Don't even start talking shit unless you know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Dude," Caleb cut in, reaching over to tap my shoulder. "Hey, it's okay, Nels. Let's just drop this, guys."

I gritted my teeth, and stared out my window, fuming. It was never a good sign when Caleb became the voice of reason. But, I found it best to listen to him as we all went silent. It was a better idea than to try reasoning with Joe, especially since it was pointless to try to reason with a complete jackass.

"It's just..." Haily's voice spoke up timidly. "We don't get why we're hanging out with him."

"No shit," Joe muttered.

"Because he's my friend," I snapped.

"We're your friends," Caleb said quietly, focusing on the road.

"Well so is he," I stated.

"That's fucking stupid," Joe remarked, and I turned to glare at him. He was leaning back in his seat with an almost bored expression on his face. At one time, I might have found it sexy. Now, I wanted to beat it off of him.

"You know, what the fuck has he ever done to you, Joe?" I demanded.

Joe snorted. "Are you kidding? All that shit last summer..."

"Oh, fuck that!" I cut him off. "It was more our fault than theirs."

Joe rolled his eyes. "If you're talking about those pictures again..."

"They were paintings, Joe! Really good fucking paintings, and you ruined them! Shit..." I took in a breath, trying to calm myself. "Dude, think of it this way. What if someone fucked with your Mustang?" That got his attention, and he sat up in his seat, glaring at me like I was an asshole even for suggesting it. "It's the same thing with Milo's paintings."

"That is not the same thing," Joe objected.

"Well... maybe it is to him," Haily said quietly, and I smiled at her.

"Thank you, Haily."

She flashed me a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, and I turned back around.

"Look," I said. "It's not like we're hanging out with Jame Graham. I'm telling you, Milo's cool. It's not gonna kill anyone to give him chance before you decide you hate him."

"We didn't say we hated him," Haily insisted. "We just... never mind."

"Hey," Caleb said, glancing over at me. "If he's cool with you... it's fine, okay?"

I gave a slight nod as I removed my beanie from my jacket pocket and pulled it back on my head, but I felt skeptical. I didn't necessarily see my friends ever wanting Milo Trust hanging around. I was beginning to realize just how much I cared about what my friends thought, and in my whole life, I'd never wanted to be more wrong.

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The outdoor lights lit the school, guiding our way past the football field. I hadn't understood why the rally wasn't being held indoors because of the weather until we reached the small crowd and realized that the school had put together a bonfire. Faces glowed in the dark as the flames lit the sky, and the subtle breeze kept most of the smoke off of us. It was more of a bother seeing my breath in front of my face as I buttoned up my jacket against the cold.

Milo found me easily. Teresa Milldrum was with him, practically attached to his arm. I frowned at this, but decided against calling her a slut and ordering her off my Milo. She looked miserable enough already in her short skirt. Her teeth were chattering, just like the cheerleaders, who were already going through their routines, trying to keep warm as they cheered on the Heywell Otters. Yes, Otters. My theory was that the same moron who came up with our school colors came up with the name of our football team, too.

It didn't take long to notice that the crowd at the bonfire wasn't going to get as big as the crowd at Ozario's, even with the school staff and some of the parents there. It was simply too cold. Hot chocolate was being sold for twenty-five cents a cup, and I smiled when Milo brought me one. It meant nothing that he got one for Teresa, too. Or Haily, who was as attached to my arm as much as Teresa was to his. Joe had disappeared as soon as he'd seen Kelly there, and I was pretty sure that Caleb and Rebecca were doing things in his jeep that would be reason enough never to ride in it again.

For the next hour, things moved quickly as Coach Don introduced each member of the team and they came running off the field one by one, loud and sweaty in their purple uniforms, carrying their helmets and acting like the cold didn't bother them at all. Coach Don gave a speech, getting everyone riled up for the season, and his speech was followed by one from our tall, freckled, auburn-haired quarterback, Derek Oton. He looked boyish and adorable on the outside, but Derek had always had a wild streak, and when he mooned the crowd at the end of his speech, revealing Go Otters in black ink written across his ass, everyone became even more riled. If it wasn't for the cold and the girls the event could have been considered a hot, loud male-bonding experience. I thought Milo was going to have puppies when I took advantage of the testosterone-induced atmosphere and slapped Brandon Sholer's ass, right before I slapped his. Haily probably thought I was playing a game because my left cheek stung after she got to it.

If I'd been worrying about my friends accepting Milo on the way to the school, I started feeling better as the rally came to an end and noticed Haily was talking to Milo. He said something to make her smile, and a little later she explained that he'd offered to trade lockers with her, since he obviously didn't mind being near Assface and Milo's current locker was in a comp

pletely different hall. I told him that was a terrible idea, because I didn't know where his new locker was going to be, and he'd given me a deep throaty laugh that was contagious, and then told me that the only reason he'd done it was to get Haily away from my locker. What mattered to me in the end was that Haily decided that Milo wasn't too bad, and when Joe and Caleb finally caught up to us again, they didn't do anything to make it seem like they didn't want him around. I think by the end of the night, Milo had actually managed to have some fun.

Everyone was about frozen solid by the time the rally started to clear out.

I asked Milo if he wanted to come over for a while, and wasn't exactly happy when he said he needed to go home. But when he said that he'd do something like this again with me, I forgave anything else.

Caleb drove Haily, Joe, and me home, and like so many other juveniles on the hill that night, we were screaming out our windows and doing anything possible to cause a ruckus. But I'm pretty sure that we were the only ones yelling about how Caleb's jeep smelled like sex as I dropped my pants and pressed my ass against the cold window every time we passed one of our teachers.

Chapter 9: You and Me

by DomLuka

"Why not?" I asked. "We're playing your old school. I figured you'd want to be there."

"Well, you figured wrong," Milo informed me while he closed his locker, slinging his backpack over his shoulder as he turned to face me. It was Friday afternoon, and I'd ambushed him there. I'd been doing that a lot lately. Between every class I could, in fact. I'd been going to Milo's locker instead of my own. He hadn't exactly been crazy about it at first. In fact, the first few times he'd tried to pretend that I wasn't there; but now when he saw me waiting for him he'd smile. At least, when Jame wasn't with him. In the three days that I'd been doing this, Jame had been with Milo twice, and he wasn't exactly eager to welcome my presence. Jame wasn't with him this time, though. This time, there was another problem. I hadn't seen Milo outside of school since Tuesday, and all week I'd been trying to persuade him to come to the homecoming game with me and my friends. I'd been confident in my ability to succeed, but now I was rethinking that, since the game was to night and Milo still wouldn't budge.

"What about after the game?" I tried, moving to lean back against his locker. I slid my feet out to touch his, smiling when he promptly took a step back and issued me a look suitable for any pest. "Brandon Sholer's having a party. Come with me."

Milo narrowed his eyes on me. They were half-hidden today, shaded by his hair, which kept falling into his face. I imagined that he was doing his best

to look stern. I countered with my best lost-boy face as I made puppy eyes and chewed on my lip. It proved to be the perfect ammunition when he let out a breath and his features softened some.

"Can I be honest with you?" he asked.

I stood up a little straighter. "Please."

"I am going to the game," he said quietly.

I grinned. "Great; then what's the problem?"

"I'll be sitting with Stratfort," he explained. "My dad's going to be there.

It's Stratfort's homecoming, too, you know. And... Jame's going to be with us, and I have friends on their team. I didn't want to tell you because..."

I sighed.

"You know, Milo, I'm not out to make your life difficult or anything," I cut him off, understanding the situation. Milo didn't want to be seen with me like that. Not that that didn't bother me. It did. But it wasn't like I was about to show up next to him at the game and expect him to explain my presence to his dad and Jame all at once. But he could have mentioned this whole thing sooner. Like, before I'd started to beg him. "It's fine, okay?" I'd expected to make him feel better, so I was a little surprised when he started to look uncertain with himself.

"Are Brandon Sholer's parties any good?" he asked, after a moment of consideration.

"Not as good as the ones Caleb throws," I remarked. "But not bad. You want the address, in case you decide to drop by later on?"

"You can give it to me--but look, I can't make any promises, okay? My friends are throwing parties, too. I don't really know where I'll be."

"That's okay," I replied as I opened my backpack to look for something I could write Brandon's address on. Only, it wasn't okay so much as it was annoying. I knew he liked me. Maybe I didn't expect him to want to properly introduce me to his dad--which really wouldn't have been all that difficult since technically, I'd already met his dad, even if I'd made a bad first impression--but he didn't have to act so... indifferent towards me.

Milo watched me, shifting on his feet as I drew a small map from the school to Brandon Sholer's house. I met his eyes when I presented it to him, but didn't release the paper when he took hold of it, watching me as I cocked my head at him.

"Out of curiosity," I said. "If you happened to see me at the game... would you even say hi to me, like you would any friend, or would you just pretend you didn't even see me?" Milo opened his mouth, but then closed it again. He frowned, biting at his top lip while he looked to me to excuse him from the question. I sighed as I released the piece of paper into his hand. "Forget it. I'll see you later, Milo."

I walked away, not even looking back when he didn't bother to call after me

. Admittedly, I'd wanted him to call after me. It's not like we'd just met yesterday. I'd been trying to get to Milo Trust for months. We hadn't exactly been friends in all of that time, but I suppose I was becoming frustrated by the lack of progress. Especially over the last few days. After going to the spirit rally with him, I'd only seen him in school. Sometimes it felt like that night at my house had never happened, or that we'd never even talked about it. I wished that I knew what he was thinking, or what he wanted from me, or what he thought I wanted from him. I wanted to know what we were to each other, if anything at all. His evasiveness just made that impossible. I probably shouldn't have been complaining, since he had agreed to be seen in public with me on Tuesday night, and I was sure that Jame was giving him a hard time about how I was always showing up at his locker. But still, I was beginning to feel that he was lacking, and it was bothering me enough to prevent me from enjoying the pre-homecoming excitement that had hit our school full force by now.

There were faces painted with school colors, including Caleb's, because he'd taken the opportunity to dress up like a purple and orange clown. He made a good one, too, having left the gel out of his hair. His wavy blond locks complemented the paint job just right. There were mobs of people surrounding members of the football team to wish them luck; there were people looking for last minute dates for the dance tomorrow night; and the drama club had decided to have a bake sale that day. Every time I turned a corner, someone was trying to sell me a brownie. Despite my frustration with Milo, I was still pathetic enough to get him one before I went to parenting class at the end of the day. He'd only looked curious when I'd slid it into his backpack.

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After school, it was definitely a different sort of day as Caleb, Haily, Joe and I dropped my car off at my house, piled into Caleb's jeep and headed to the city park near the school. My parents were already there, along with my Uncle Ray's family, Haily's parents, and a few others that I knew. Chad and Leanna were there, and Chad was trying to convince people to try his extra-spicy chili. It was his contribution to the large assortment of other foods that everyone brought to the picnic.

It was cold and a little windy, and the sky looked white more than it did blue, overcast with clouds. But every year since the park had been built it had been tradition for my family and several others to meet before the homecoming game for a picnic. We'd done it in rain, or in record-setting warm temperatures for October, and even in the snow. It wasn't so much a pre-game gathering as it was a chance for neighbors to get together and reminisce over past years' homecomings, or discuss Halloween decorations and pumpkin recipes. Like my parents, most of their friends grew up in Hewell, and they called Hellver High 'Hellschool' before they ever thought about ho

w they'd have children who would walk the same halls.

Some of last year's students, mostly my brother's friends, had shown up. One of them had brought a football and they were playing a mock game in the thick bed of dried leaves covering the grass beneath the trees as my mother and a few others scolded them when they came too close to the food-topped picnic tables. Usually, I would have been out there with them, but this year

I found myself in the parking lot, sitting in the driver's seat of Caleb's jeep with the heat turned up. Joe was across from me on the passenger side, and we were damn close to becoming completely toasted as we passed his favorite red pipe back and forth.

I hadn't ditched my family and friends to get fucked up, exactly. I'd volunteered to sit in the jeep with Joe to warm up when he'd complained about not being able to feel various parts of his body that he might need later because of the cold. I kept glancing over at him as he smoked, liking the way that he looked in his leather coat and thick black beanie. His face had a pink hue from the weather, and it could have been the smoke going to my brain, but he looked almost like he was glowing, and I found myself remembering how attracted I'd always been to him. That attraction was something I hardly ever thought about anymore, I realized. And that was a shame because when I'd had a little crush on Joe, things had felt a hell of a lot less complicated.

"Joe?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you do, if you know someone likes you... but they act like it doesn't matter every time you try to tell them that you like them, too? And why do people do that, anyway? Like... why do they think what everyone else thinks matters? Joe? Sometimes people are stupid," I finished, nodding for emphasis as I held out my hand and he passed the pipe into it. I jumped a little when the bowl tipped onto my palm and burned me. It didn't matter a moment later, though, when I was bringing it to my mouth to take a hit. When I turned my head to look at Joe again, the right side of his mouth was curled into a lazy smile, and he cracked up.

"Dude, what are you talking about?"

I sighed. "Never mind. I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't know anything... How do you and Caleb make it look so easy, though? Girls are all over you guys and you go through 'em like Pringles. I finally find one... person who I wanna get to know... like, really get to know. More than just fucking... but they pretend to hate me half the time. What the fuck is with that?"

I frowned to myself. That wasn't right. Milo didn't exactly act like he hated me--things were just hard with him. He was different. A good different. I just...wanted more from him. I wasn't sure how to express that without turning into a jerk, though. Which, was the problem. I was the problem. I frowned at that, too.

My thoughts were interrupted when Joe laughed again. I didn't find anything amusing about the situation, but I found myself chuckling too as I pulled another hit off the pipe and then choked around my laughter.

"Wait a minute--who do you like?" Joe asked, seemingly experiencing a moment of clarity.

I sighed. "Never mind."

I didn't object when Joe reached out and took the pipe back from me. "I think you've had enough of this shit," he remarked. "I mean, who the fuck doesn't like you? Half the time you're so cheerful it's sickening, and the rest... you're trying to make other people that annoying, too."

I thought on that for a moment. "You think that's the problem?" I asked. "I'm too happy? Well, you're the expert when it comes to having a stick up your butt. If it's gonna get me laid, where's one I can sit on?" I laughed to myself, my remark having a double meaning, for me at least. Joe cocked his head at me, but a moment later he was laughing, too, and soon, we couldn't seem to stop. We were blue in the face before Haily and Caleb came looking for us. Haily shoved a piece of fruity-tasting gum into both of our mouths, Caleb sprayed us down with the pine-scented air freshener he kept in the glove compartment, and the two of them walked us around the park for thirty minutes before we were in decent enough shape to sit with our families through the football game.

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The freezing wind numbed my face as it hit me, sitting up in the stands with Caleb on one side of me with his fading orange-and-purple-painted face, and Chad and Leanna on the other. At nine o'clock, the stars were tiny glistening specks scattered over the pitch-black sky. Since we were playing against Stratfort, it seemed as if the entire town had turned up to cheer on their team of choice, and I was as loud as everyone else, easily becoming swept up in the excitement as the Hellschool Otters massacred the Stratfort Ravens.

Only, I wasn't paying attention to the game, so much as I was paying attention to the stands. Particularly, the stands where Stratfort students and fans were sitting to cheer on their team, which wasn't having a very good night. Their cheerleaders were doing better than their players, and one of their girls had sprained her ankle during their first routine. Our school was celebrating before the game was even over. By the time the bleachers emptied my friends were more than ready to get over to Brandon Sholer's. My throat was dry from screaming when I said goodbye to my family, and as I walked to the jeep with Haily, Joe and Caleb, I was more than ready to be somewhere with a working heater. But I found myself slowing down as the back of a familiar red coat caught my eye, and I stared as one of the tall streetlights over the parking lot caught a group of people, Milo Trust among them.

He was smiling as Assface spoke to him while they walked behind Mr. Trust, who looked taller in his long black coat as he chatted with a few older men, looking bored. I found myself opening my mouth, wanting to get Milo's attention when he lifted his fingers, which were red from the cold, and warmed them with his breath. But I stopped, frowning, because Milo wouldn't want me to try to get his attention. Not now. I'd been trying not to think about how much that bothered me. But I was bothered. It bothered me that I was bothered and refused to do anything about it because I cared about what he wanted.

"Nelson, hurry up!"

I looked towards my friends at the sound of Caleb's voice. They'd reached the jeep and were waiting for me. Sighing to myself, I headed over, but stopped when I heard my name again, this time, from an unexpected source. "Nelson!"

I spun around, startled to find that Milo had stopped, and was looking right at me. What was even more surprising, was that he smiled at me, and I was so busy deciding how great that was that I didn't even pay attention to the way that Assface couldn't decide if he wanted to frown at Milo or glare at me. I felt the corners of my mouth curl up as I raised an eyebrow at Milo, curious to know what he was doing.

"Hi," he finally said, right before he turned and followed his dad. I smiled after him, wondering if he even had any idea how much something as a simple acknowledgment from him meant to me. It was kind of pathetic, actually, but I didn't care. I also wasn't beyond gloating about it when Jame continued to glare at me, rather than follow Milo. I did what I imagined anyone in my position would have done. I stuck my tongue out at him, and went to join my friends.

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Sometimes when I get happy--really happy, like Mary-Poppins-I've-got-rays-of-sunshine-shooting-out-of-my-ass happy--I tend to lose track of things, like what I'm doing. That one little encounter with Milo had put me in a great mood, and it wasn't very long after that that I was all over Brandon Sholer's two-story house with a bottomless plastic red cup of flat-tasting beer; dancing with girls who I didn't know--whether or not I could hear music; and screaming with members from the football team after I'd allowed Brandon Sholer himself to paint my face up in purple and orange paint.

It was going on midnight by the time I found myself sitting on the darkly carpeted stairs, facing Brandon's living room, which had been cleared to make room for all of the traffic. It seemed that his parents had had the good sense to move all of the furniture against the walls and cover it with old, faded sheets covered in various patterns before they'd turned the house over to their son for the night. I'd been talking to Caleb, but he'd left me there

on the stairs as soon as Rebecca had shown up, and now he was with her on a sofa that was covered in a sheet with a green flower pattern on it, thoroughly examining her tonsils with his tongue. Not far away, Haily was one of the several people in the middle of the living room, dancing aimlessly to music that had so much bass behind it that I couldn't even hear the lyrics, her braid swinging behind her. She was looking rather friendly with Derek Oton, and I might have been happy for her if I didn't know for a fact that she was completely trashed and our boyish-looking quarterback looked about ready to drag her into the nearest dark room. I made a mental note to keep an eye on the situation, but being wasted enough myself, the thought didn't last long as my attention turned to Joe as he came staggering through the front door with Kelly under his arm. As I drank down half of my cup it occurred to me that he was drunk, too. I'm pretty sure we all were.

"Hey Nels, having fun?"

I tilted my head back to watch Brandon Sholer as he moved down the stairs, leading a thin, giggling younger girl with him by the hand. He pulled her into his lap after taking a seat next to me, and I found myself smiling at him stupidly as he flashed his dimples in my direction. "I drank... a lot," I decided.

He laughed. "Are you gonna be sick? I've got a toilet."

"Ah. No," I assured him, shaking my head. "I was just trying to figure out how I'm gonna get everyone home tonight. I think Caleb's fucked up, too."

"Well, you guys can all crash here tonight," Brandon replied. "Derek's staying, and I don't think he'd mind having Haily around." Brandon smirked in Haily's direction, and when I looked to see that Derek had pulled her close during a fast song, and she was all but passing out in his arms, I found myself glaring at Brandon threateningly. When he met my eyes, his widened. "That wasn't funny, huh?"

I shook my head. "No."

He laughed, elbowing me. He hardly seemed to notice it when his female companion left his lap, threw a hand over her mouth and dashed up the stairs like she was ready to heave. "It's cool, man. So are you and Haily together or something?"

"She's my friend."

"So if she's just your friend, what's the problem?" Brandon asked, leaning in as if he wanted to know a secret. His breath was thick with the scent of marijuana and alcohol, and being so close his blue eyes looked almost black.

"Derek's a nice guy. He'll take care of her." That, earned Brandon another glare. "Okay," he relented, smirking at me. "Look, I'm sure she'll be fine." Yeah, I decided. Haily was going to be fine, but that was mostly because Caleb had spotted her and pried himself away from Rebecca long enough to get Haily away from Derek. Derek didn't necessarily look happy, but he wasn't s

tupid enough to argue with a drunk Caleb, and I watched my best friend throw an arm around Haily and lead her towards the front door, probably to get some fresh air. When Rebecca followed them, and Joe left Kelly with her friends to do the same, I started to get up, too. I was feeling a little light-headed, which is why when Brandon suddenly dropped a hand on my shoulder, it felt like dead weight and I went right back down, looking at him expectantly over the lip of my plastic cup as I finished off my drink.

"Hey," he said, "Sam was here earlier and left me some celebratory shit for winning the game. You wanna come hang out in my room for a while?" I cocked my head at Brandon, curious over the invitation, but it wasn't long before my eyes were drifting towards the door again and I was wondering over my friends. When I saw Joe come back inside and head towards Kelly, I looked at Brandon and shrugged.

"Okay, cool," he said, grinning. "Gimme a sec, okay? I'll get us something to drink."

I watched Brandon Shoeler's ass when he stood up and moved down the stairs, but instead of going to the kitchen, he followed after Joe, who now had Kelly with him as he led her out the door. I stood up then, leaving my cup on the stairs. It had been a fun party, but I was starting to feel a little too warm and fuzzy, and when I was drunk, I tended to end up with a case of separation anxiety, and liked to know where my friends were. On my way to the door, one of Kelly's friends ambushed me and I found myself trying to dance with her, but it didn't last long because my intoxication left me uncoordinated, and I kept stepping on her feet, and then Derek Oton ambushed me, wanting Haily's phone number. I told him that if he really wanted it, then he could get it at school on Monday. By the time I actually reached the front door, Brandon was coming back through it, and I'd forgotten that I was supposed to be waiting for him, because he grabbed my arm to keep me from passing him.

"Hey, where ya goin'?" he asked.

"Um... look, it's kinda late," I replied as he released me. "I think Caleb's gonna be ready to go soon, and..."

Brandon smiled. "Oh. They already left."

I paused, those words making absolutely no sense to me.

"What?"

"Haily wasn't feeling good, so they went to take her home," he explained. "Don't worry, I told them I'd get you home, or you can just stay here if you want. A lot of the guys from the team are."

I found myself frowning at that. I won't say that I didn't have an ongoing fantasy of spending the night with the football team... or the baseball team... or swim team; but it wasn't like my friends to leave me anywhere, unless they thought I wanted to stay. I looked at Brandon suspiciously, wondering if

f he'd given them that impression. "They're too drunk to drive," I said. "Rebecca's not. She taking them home. Come on."

I sighed, suddenly regretting the fact that I'd agreed to help him smoke the joint he likely had in his room. My head was starting to spin, and I felt like putting anything else in my system was only going to make me nauseous, and once nauseous, being trashed just wasn't fun anymore. But I found myself nodding anyway, deciding that I could always call Chad afterwards, provided I could remember his number by then. His apartment complex wasn't very far from where Brandon lived, and given that it was Friday night, it wouldn't be too late to call him for a ride. But instead of following Brandon, I turned and walked out the front door, closing my eyes as the cool air hit my face and flowed through my nostrils, refreshing me.

"Nels?"

I heard Brandon behind me and turned back around, forcing a smile. "I'm just gonna take a minute," I told him.

He shrugged. "Sure. Can you find my room?"

"Yeah, no problem," I replied. "I'll be right there."

Brandon nodded before I turned back around, and heard the front door close behind him. I took a moment to just stand there. It was cold, but it didn't feel as cold as it would have if I hadn't had so much to drink. I ran my palm roughly over my face. I was breaking out in a light sweat, and the paint was starting to make my face itch, but I ignored it, hoping that the fresh air surrounding me would have a sobering effect before I went back inside.

Beneath the porch light, I stood at the top of the stairs and looked across the walkway that led straight through the middle of Brandon's front yard to the sidewalk that ran through his neighborhood. He lived in one of the older neighborhoods on the hill. It was a peaceful street, crowded with cars from his party. Like most houses on the block, Brandon's garage was located at the back of the house, and the effect caused the fenceless front yards to appear larger than they were. Some lawns were greener than others this time of year, and Brandon's was one of them. There was moisture in his lawn, and I could smell the musky scent of the grass as I inhaled, slowly moving down the stairs. I looked down the street to where Caleb had parked the jeep when we first arrived. The space really was empty. I'd left my coat in that jeep. I frowned to myself. It really wasn't like my friends to leave me. I wasn't angry about it, really. Just, curious. Even if Brandon had told them that I wanted to stay for a while, they at least would have checked before they actually left. At least, that's what they'd always done before.

I reached the sidewalk, and started walking slowly as I wondered why it was suddenly so hard to actually stay on the sidewalk. It seemed to take forever to reach the end of the street, but when I got there, and still saw no sign of Caleb's jeep, I crossed the street and started walking back towards

Brandon's house from the other side. I was moving slowly, and in the weather I'd stopped sweating as goose bumps rose across my skin instead. When I reached the space where Caleb had been parked, I stopped and stared. It wasn't empty anymore. There was a green Honda there instead, and for a very long moment I just stood there, looking at the dent in the driver's side door.

I cocked my head at it, stumbling when I attempted to take a step forward. I reached out, placing my hand on the roof to balance myself as I reached for a door--any door. I'd walked all the way around the car before I found one that opened, and slid into the comfortable passenger seat, slamming the door on myself.

I closed my eyes and relaxed as the seat curved to my body, and took in that pleasant scent surrounding me, along with warmth. It felt as if the heater had just been running, and as I lifted my feet onto the seat, holding my knees as I rested my face against the cold window, I enjoyed the feeling of being comfortable, spinning head and all.

It did occur to me, that since Milo's car had mysteriously appeared on Brandon's street, there was a good chance that he was looking for me. But I was tired, and decided that he'd have a pretty hard time missing me where I was. Besides, moving just wasn't a good idea anymore.

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There was heat blowing at me, and the hum of an engine when I opened my eyes, horrified to find the world dark and spinning. I felt sick, and wanted to lie down, but the seat only moved back so far, and when the cab light came on above me I squinted my eyes, even the dim light sending sharp pains through my head. But, I became focused. Focused enough to see Milo sitting in front of the steering wheel, peacefully leaning back in his seat. We weren't driving anywhere. The car was running, but we definitely weren't moving. That was just my head that felt like it was spinning out of control.

Milo was still bundled up in his red coat, just as he was when I'd seen him after the game. I smiled at the memory. He didn't smile back. His expression was blank, and his eyes looked tired, but his soft, dark locks were framing his face perfectly. If I thought I could actually move without getting dizzy, I probably would have reached out to touch it.

"You have paint all over your face," he finally informed me. "And, you're drunk--and you don't even have a coat."

"And you sound like someone's mother," I responded with a scratchy throat, slowly sitting up to look out the front window, wondering where we were. I wasn't expecting to see the front of Milo Trust's house. The porch light wasn't on, and it looked like a large shadow against the dark sky, but I recognized where we were. I glanced at the clock, reading two thirty on the dash, and my eyes widened. "Oh shit."

"I couldn't wake you up. I didn't want to bring you home like that, and I co

ouldn't carry you up my stairs."

I glanced over at him, sighing. "Sorry... how long have we been here?"

"Just over an hour," he replied calmly, turning to face his house. "Do you think you can move now? We can go inside, but we have to be quiet because Juanita's home, and she sleeps on the first floor."

"Yeah," I said slowly. I was still feeling pretty drunk, but not so much that I didn't feel bad about this situation. I'd wanted to see Milo more than anything, I just hadn't expected him to show up at Brandon's; and now, I'd destroyed the opportunity that I'd been waiting for. "Look, do you have a phone? I can call my brother. He'll come get me."

"Isn't it a little late for that?"

"He's probably just going to bed, and I'm not really into walking home from here," I replied, turning my head to meet his eyes. "Hey... sorry," I said again. "I didn't think you were going to show up."

"Would that have stopped you from getting wasted?"

I considered. "Probably not."

Milo was silent for a moment before responding. "Why were you passed out in my car, anyway?"

I smiled wanly. "Your seats are comfortable...And, my friends sort of ditched me."

"Seriously?"

"Hmm... no big deal. I think they thought I wanted them to."

Milo waited for more of an explanation than that, but when I just smiled at him, because he looked so damn sexy with that studying expression on his face, he just shook his head at me. "Can you move? Quietly?"

I sighed, and as Milo shut down his vehicle I opened my door and tried to get out, only to be held back by a force against my chest. I landed back in my seat with a grunt, and Milo snorted as I looked down to find that I'd been buckled up at some point. "I said quietly," he remarked, but couldn't quite maintain a straight face.

I rolled my eyes at him and unbuckled. "If my shoelaces are tied together," I warned, "there's going to be retribution."

"Yeah, can you see me shaking?" he remarked, smirking. "Just get out of the car--and be careful."

Getting out of the car, into the house, and up the stairs, was easier said than done--for Milo. I'll admit it. I was acting like a complete ass, or a butt-munch, which is what Milo called me several times on the way. I couldn't quite seem to help it. With my head swimming, it was all I could do to keep one foot in front of the other as I followed my host. I didn't do too bad, until I reached the stairs and almost tripped on the first one. Milo had to put an arm around me to help me up the rest, which I wasn't going to complain about in the slightest. He smelled good, as usual, and I kept turning my head

d to smell his neck. He'd shudder and glare at me, and I'd laugh in response. It was the laughter Milo seemed the most concerned about. He kept covering my mouth with his hand to silence me, and was not amused when I took it upon myself to suck on his palm each time. We made it up to his room, though, where Milo ordered me to wait while he went to get the phone. I was more than happy to, when I realized that he was painting again. His room wasn't as spectacular as the first time I'd seen it, but there were three unfinished canvases present. I was a little too busy dizzy to move from one to another, but I'd backed myself onto his bed, and I studied each one from there.

It looked like he'd been to Hangman recently. As with everything else, his portrayal of an oncoming winter over the lake was done perfectly. The first portrait looked dark--menacing almost, with the storm clouds gathering over the water, and the trees looking sad and lifeless without their leaves. The second was just the beginning of a tree, but I had a feeling that by the time he was finished with it, there would be a dark, haunting scarecrow hanging from its branches. The third canvas was different, but not something that I disliked. In fact, I liked it very much. I saw the scene outside of my kitchen window every morning. It wasn't finished, but I was stunned at his ability to capture detail from memory the way he did. As far as I could tell, not a single apple tree had so much as an apple left behind from summer out of place.

I became disoriented as I studied it. The trip up the stairs and my spinning head was getting to me, and I found myself rolling onto my side, taking comfort on the soft mattress as I made sure that I could still see the portrait, and tried to imagine what it would look like when it was finished, just as much as I tried to imagine what Milo had been thinking about as he painted it. I found myself hoping that it was me; that afternoon we spent together at my house.

When Milo suddenly returned and found me ogling his work, he made a point to turn the easel around, blocking my view. I frowned at this, but didn't comment as I slowly sat up when he approached me, holding out a bottle of water and a folded washcloth in one hand and a couple of aspirin on the palm of the other. I looked over the items momentarily before looking up to meet his eyes, the emerald in them focused on me. "You forgot the phone," I said quietly, and reached out to take the water, and then plucked the pills from his hand. I was learning to keep my voice down. My throat ached from all of the screaming I'd done during and since the game, and I risked completely losing my voice if I didn't. But I guess it didn't matter what I said anyway, because instead of responding to my words, Milo went to close his bedroom door before returning to lift himself onto the foot of the bed, next to me.

I did my best not to spill or dribble any of the water, but I wasn't exactly

coordinated and I ended up with a large wet spot down the front of my white, long-sleeved shirt. Milo laughed at this, and I rolled my eyes at him as he lifted the washcloth. Obviously, I thought, he'd figured that I'd need it. I reached for the small towel, but didn't get the chance to take it as he suddenly lifted it to my face and dragged it over my right cheek. The cloth was damp, obviously not for my mess, and I dropped my hand, staring at him as he pulled the cloth away, taking a good amount of paint with it before he folded it over and brought it back to my face.

I stared at Milo, intrigued and confused by this behavior as he avoided my eyes and continued to rid my face of the paint left on it. And I remained still. As still as I possibly could, as if any movement might startle him away and as the damp cloth below his fingers moved soothingly across my skin, leaving tingling, cool streaks. I enjoyed it. When I closed my eyes, my head only seemed heavy as I leaned into his hand when he moved the cloth over my chin. I could feel his thumb brush over my mouth, and then something softer, as the cloth completely disappeared.

His breath felt warm against my face when his mouth gently closed over my bottom lip. My eyes snapped open, and my vision blurred, having him so close. Milo Trust was kissing me. I smiled against his mouth. It was a horrible time to get light-headed, and I groaned as I was forced to pull away from him to lie on his mattress. I turned back onto my side, waiting for the dizziness to go away as I stared up at him.

"You're still drunk," he observed, sounding neutral.

"I think so."

"Are you gonna puke in my room?"

I smiled lazily at that and slowly shook my head. "I didn't throw up in your car," I pointed out. "And, I can talk in complete sentences. I think."

Milo's bow-shaped lips curled up into an amused smile. "You're not doing too bad."

"Why'd you show up at Brandon's?" I asked him.

"I got bored with my friends. Everyone was just... drunk."

I shook my head at him, as if he'd provided the wrong answer. "You wanted to see me."

"Yeah, when I thought you'd be sober," he remarked, but there was a teasing note in his voice. He suddenly stood up, and my eyes followed him as he gathered the washcloth and the bottle of water, and went to drop them on his desk before he shook off his red coat and kicked out of his shoes. He padded back to the bed in white socks, and my eyes widened when he suddenly grabbed my right foot and pulled my black shoe over my ankle.

"That's my shoe!" I said, reaching for it, and Milo grinned at me as he dropped it carelessly on his floor.

"Yeah, and I don't want it in my bed," he informed me, reaching for my other

r one.

“But you want me in your bed?” I teased.

He frowned at that.

“Don’t push your luck,” he retorted.

I turned onto my back and stared up at him, regarding him rather seriously.

“What are you doing, Milo?”

“It’s three o’clock in the morning,” he said, his eyes focused on my foot; and then quietly added, “It’s too late for you to go anywhere else.”

It took me a few minutes in my current state, but I was able to take in the situation somewhat reasonably. “Your dad?” I asked.

“He won’t be here for the rest of the weekend,” Milo explained, sounding annoyed. “He took off with Emily somewhere after the game.... I... it’s okay. I mean, for you to stay here tonight. Juanita never comes in unless the door’s open.” He suddenly dropped my foot, and I found myself yawning as he crossed the room again, this time moving towards his closet. With his back to me, he ran both of his hands firmly through his hair before suddenly revealing his bare back to me when he lifted his shirt over his head in one swift motion. It fell to the paint-stained rugs on the floor, and without looking back he opened his closet door. “Do you want something to sleep in? I don’t really have that many people spending the night, so I don’t know...” he trailed off, and as he began to fidget with the clothes on his hangers nervously, I forced myself to sit up, ignoring how much it hurt.

“No thanks. I’m okay,” I assured him as I stripped my shirt off as quickly as possible, and then wrestled myself out of my jeans. I clumsily dropped them on the floor and looked down at the red boxer briefs I’d pulled on that morning. I think the only thing that prevented me from pulling them off, too, was the way that Milo suddenly looked back at me and I watched his eyes take a quick sweep over my body. That, and the way that I felt nausea rising in my throat again forced me to simply lie back down. But this time I at least made it to his pillows. My head fell over one of them as I turned back onto my side. The room didn’t move as much when I was on my side. But, the way I was facing prevented me from being able to see Milo. I wasn’t sure I liked that, but I felt too heavy to roll over. I was definitely disappointed in myself. Finally, I was in his bed because he wanted me there and the only thing I was going to do in it was pass out.

His light suddenly went out, and I found myself grateful that some moonlight escaped through his window, slightly illuminating the room. Unless I was asleep, I became much dizzy when it was completely dark, and I sighed as I took in the feel of the soft comforter beneath me, smelling of fabric softeners and Milo. I was already drifting off when I felt the blankets to the right of me being pulled back, and the bed dipping. When I felt a cool hand on my shoulder it took a great effort to force myself to roll to my other side.

I stared at Milo's shadow in the dark. With as much cooperation as I could provide, I allowed him to wrestle me under the covers. And when he pulled the blanket back over me I used all of my remaining energy to reach out, cupping the back of his neck. My thumb brushed over the nape of his hairline as I pulled him to me. I was unprepared for how hard his lips landed on mine. It felt bruising, but I kissed him, anyway, sloppily at best. I felt the weight of his chest, warm and heavy over mine when I managed to get an arm around him, and as his body slid up against mine I could feel his bare leg, the hair covering it rubbing up against mine. I slid a hand down to his hip, feeling that he'd stripped down to a pair of sleek, loose boxers. I sucked in a breath when I felt his fingers moving over my chest; but suddenly feeling unable to breathe I was forced to pull away from the kiss, and as Milo's head fell against my shoulder I could feel his breath hitting my neck, and his mouth move against my skin as he spoke.

"You should go to sleep."

"I can't," I declared. "I feel like I'm irritating you."

I was serious, and a little self-conscious because I really did feel like I was going to pass out, but Milo's soft laughter suggested that he was only amused.

"You do know how to do that," he remarked. "But... it's kinda easier when you're like this."

"Huh?"

"I mean... I don't know. It's kind of annoying that you're drunk. But for once... I feel like I can keep up with you."

I frowned at that, trying to understand. I didn't like the conclusion I came to. "So you don't like me most of the time? Is that why you don't like to see me out of class?"

"That's not what I meant," he said quickly, and then sighed. "It's not that I don't want to see you...I just...I'm trying. I want to try."

He fell silent, and I moved a hand up through his hair, capturing soft locks between my fingers.

"That's good," I decided.

"So maybe tomorrow... I don't really like being around people, Nelson, but if we did something else..."

I hummed a response before I ever got any words out. "Tomorrow's homecoming --I have to go dance with Haily," I mumbled. Milo felt tense against me then, but I couldn't tell if I was imagining it, as I started to drift. But I managed to focus when he slowly lifted his head, just enough to look at me.

"You have a date?" he asked me. I smiled at that. Milo Trust was decidedly very cute when he was jealous.

"She's just my friend. I'll go on a date with you, though."

Milo didn't look amused, and the smile he flashed me was forced, at best. "T

hen... maybe I'll see you there."

I lifted my hand, sliding my fingers up into his hair as I closed my eyes, and the last conscious thought I had that night was thinking that I liked the way his lips felt over mine.

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With my head on the pillow, staring straight ahead, one of Milo's unfinished portraits of Hangman cove was directly in my line of sight, and I studied it carefully, trying to ignore the way that my throat was dry and my head was pounding, while equally trying to focus on the way that a finger was tracing lines over my bare back. For ten minutes now, I'd let Milo think I was still asleep as he drew pictures I couldn't see over my skin. Every once in a while, his finger would dip low and he'd trace the elastic band circling my waist, sending a chill through me, and when he was feeling brave, he'd dip the tip of his finger beneath my red boxer briefs and trace the line there, reaching just above the rise of my ass. I was enjoying myself, if the bulge steadily stretching my underwear was any indication, but I was also afraid that he'd stop if I told him how much, and I was way too hung-over to deal with Milo if he suddenly decided that he wanted me out of his bed, and then out of his house. But then, I had a headache, and I felt like shit, and I probably wasn't giving him enough credit. From what I remembered he'd taken care of me last night. Hell, he'd sat in his car with me because he wouldn't wake me up. Anyone else probably would have left me there in the front seat and gone to bed. Except Caleb. Once when I'd been drunk enough to pass out, Caleb had dragged me into his house, dropped me on the floor, and then he went to bed.

I sighed, and finally let him know I was awake by asking a question that had been on my mind since I opened my eyes and found the light from the window was enough to warm the room. "What time is it?"

Milo's hand withdrew from my back and I felt him shift on the bed. "It's almost twelve."

That got my attention. By now I figured that at least someone would be looking for me. My parents would have at least tried to call my friends to find out why I never came home or called. I turned over to face him. "That's kinda late," I commented, and then paused for a long moment to take in the way that Milo looked in the morning. His thick lashes shaded his eyes, which were only half-open and his skin glowed from sleep. For the length it was, his hair remained relatively neat, but seemed wavier than normal, and could have definitely used a comb, but I liked him that way. I probably would have tried to kiss him if I wasn't aware that my breath was potentially disgusting.

"I can take you home," Milo said. "Whenever you're ready."

I closed my eyes momentarily, trying to determine how sick I was going to

feel if I sat up. When I opened them again, I found Milo's eyes intently on me. "Do you have toothpaste somewhere around here?" I finally asked. I'm pretty sure it was the lecherous way I was suddenly looking at him, and not my words, that had the corners of his mouth turning up before he slowly left the bed and started to move across his room in black-and-gray-checked red boxers.

I got up a lot slower than Milo did, but I managed to get dressed on my own, and he even directed me down the hall to a small bathroom with a green shower curtain and matching rugs. It was a clean little space, and definitely Milo's if the cup full of paint brushes right next to the glass toothbrush holder was any indication. His bathroom seemed a lot more organized than his room had been when I'd first walked into it. He even had a whole drawer full of spare toothbrushes. Not just a couple of them, but an entire drawer. When I asked him about it he quietly explained that he collected them, ever since he was six. It seemed that his dentist had been his first real crush. I'd laughed at that, because I'd been terrified of my first dentist. Milo insisted that I'd gone to the wrong one, because he still saw his regularly. We brushed our teeth together, and when we were finished, Milo flashed a large smile at me. When I was younger, I'd flashed that same kind of smile at my parents after brushing my teeth for the usual inspection. I gave Milo a different kind of inspection.

He dropped his toothbrush when I suddenly turned towards him and my hands went to his waist over his gray t-shirt as I pinned him against the wall opposite the sink--but it wasn't like he'd have to go out and buy a new one. The water was still running, and he was startled, but instead of pushing me away he reached out long enough to shove the bathroom door closed and his fingers settled over my shoulders as his lips parted against mine. Between the two of us, peppermint toothpaste tasted strong as I moved my tongue coaxingly against his. It wasn't a very long kiss, but it was a good one. I just wished that he hadn't heard Juanita moving around downstairs and insisted that he should get me home.

The drive from Milo's house to mine was a silent one, but that was probably my fault. I felt like I hadn't slept at all the night before, the way that my head was pounding so bad that it made me sick. It didn't help that I still didn't have my coat. The sun was bright, but the air was cold, and I was feeling it, even inside of his car. Milo had turned on his heater when I crossed my arms over my chest and snuggled back against the seat; but we were halfway to my house before it even warmed up, and by then I'd come to the conclusion that if I was going to have fun at homecoming at all, I needed a hot shower, bread products in my stomach, and more sleep. And when it came to homecoming, I was still thinking about the dance, which was now hours away, when Milo pulled into my driveway and came to a stop in front of the

garage, right next to my own vehicle.

"Do you wanna come in for a while?" I asked him.

I couldn't even try to explain why he seemed surprised by the invitation.

"Aren't you busy or something--homecoming and all..."

"That's later," I replied. "Wanna come in?" I was feeling tired, and hoped that I hadn't managed to sound short with him.

He seemed to think about it for a moment. "I'll walk you," he offered.

I smiled at that. "My door's just right there," I pointed out. "I think I can make it."

He looked over at me, leaning back in his seat after putting the vehicle in park. "There's some stuff I needed to do today," he explained, and when I openly appeared disappointed, he added, "Maybe later."

I thought on that for a moment before nodding. "Are you going to homecoming?"

"I wasn't planning on it--Jame wants me to go."

"He's going?" I asked, surprised. I rarely ever saw Assface at school functions.

"He has a date with some girl--Veronica."

I tried not to look as shocked at that as I was. I'd heard about Assface having a date about as much as I saw him at school functions. "Well," I decided, "I actually agree with him this time--you should come."

Milo shrugged at that. "Maybe I will; maybe I'll find a date."

My brow flew up at that. "A date?"

"You have one," he pointed out.

"I'm going with Haily. That's different," I insisted, crossing my arms stubbornly.

"No it's not," he replied quietly. "Haily likes you. Everyone knows."

I studied him for a long moment, surprised that he'd notice that about Haily at all. "Does it bother you I'm going with her?" I asked pointedly.

"I don't know," he said, looking away from me. But, before I could respond to it, he quickly continued. "If I go, Jame's gonna expect me to hang out with him."

"So?"

"So, it wouldn't be like..."

"Going with me?" I finished for him, and then shrugged. "It sucks, Milo," I admitted. "But sometimes... it's just good to see you, ya know?"

He cocked his head at me. I just smiled.

"Just make sure your date isn't like... a date," I added, somewhat uncertainly.

I wasn't really even sure if I had the right to say that to him at this point.

"Are we together, Milo?" I asked. "It's hard to tell."

The awkward expression on his face suggested that my bold question had put him on the spot, but I couldn't quite hide my smile when a pink blush color

ed his cheeks. At least he had the decency to look like he was thinking about my inquiry.

"I don't know," he finally replied. It was an uncertain answer, and not one I particularly cared for. But I nodded, and as I opened the passenger door and glanced back at him before getting out of the car, I found myself hoping that that answer would change, hopefully sooner rather than later.

"Hey..." I said as I shielded the sun from my eyes. "I hope you come tonight--but if I don't see you, I'll call."

"Sure," Milo replied, and after a long moment of staring at him, I resisted the urge to ask him in again and let out a breath.

"Thanks for last night," I told him, and then sheepishly added, "And... I'm sorry about last night."

A faint smile crossed his mouth over that. He gave me a slight nod, and after I closed the door I stepped back and watched as he backed all the way out of my driveway, gave a small wave, and then disappeared.

When I got inside, I gave my parents the short explanation of why I hadn't come home. I couldn't drive, and I slept at a friend's house. I would have told them that that friend happened to be Milo, but I wasn't in the mood for questions as I went about trying to make myself feel better. I took a long shower, standing under the water until it ran cold, and then I had three large pumpkin muffins for breakfast before I tucked myself into my own bed--which decidedly, wasn't as comfortable as Milo's--and passed out for a while. A while, was three and a half hours until Caleb barged into my room wanting to know if the god-awful red jacket he'd chosen for homecoming was going to terrify his date. I assured him it would and gave him one of my black ones. It was a tight fit on him, but it worked. He hung around while I got dressed, following me between my room and the bathroom upstairs, and when I demanded to know why he'd ditched me last night, he swore up and down that Brandon Sholer had insisted that I wanted to stay. This reminded me that I'd more or less ditched Brandon the night before, but seeing how just about everyone had been completely wasted, I had a feeling that he wouldn't even remember. Besides, that didn't seem to be as big of an issue as it was to calm Caleb down over the idea that he'd ditched me. He was still talking about it after my mom had taken our pictures and we headed outside to our respective vehicles. Caleb was going to pick up Rebecca, and I was supposed to collect Haily, and then Joe and his date.

"Did Brandon at least get you home?" Caleb wanted to know. "He said you were gonna crash there or something."

"It was fine, Caleb," I insisted. "I was just wondering, that's all. And I was too trashed to go home last night, anyway. I crashed at Milo Trust's place." That announcement caused Caleb to stop just before he opened his door. He looked back at me skeptically. "I didn't even know he was at Brandon's las

t night.”

“He got there after you left,” I explained. “He drove me home this morning, so no worries, okay? I’ll see you at the school.”

Caleb frowned, but waved as I dropped into the front seat of my car and went to collect my passengers. Joe was in an oddly good mood, but I had a feeling that that was because as soon as Kelly had climbed into the back seat with him she mentioned that she wasn’t wearing underwear under the red dress he told her that she looked good in. When I picked up Haily, I spent ten minutes inside so her mom could take pictures of us together. She had chosen a dark green dress with her mother, and I told her I liked it, but I didn’t tell her that that was because the fabric was the color of Milo’s eyes. She seemed to like the compliment, though. And, I was pleased because once we reached the school, I felt like I was with Haily my best friend, not Haily, a girl who liked me, and it was all because she became self-conscious when people began to compliment her hair. She’d left it down, and in her usual braid it was hard to tell just how much she had. She did look pretty tonight, I decided, and told her so as I talked her into entering the auditorium with me.

The student council had done a pretty good job with homecoming. They’d kept it simple, offering various beverages and live music which alternated between a local rock band with a few members that had been in school with my brother, and the school choir, so at least there was variety. Decorations had been left simple with alternating lights and bouquets of purple and orange balloons ready to fall during chosen dances; and along the walls there were tables set up for anyone looking for a break. Caleb had already claimed one with Rebecca, and for the first half hour we were there that’s where I remained, talking to my friends, and saying hello to others who had shown up. When we finally did start to dance, Caleb was already saying that he was ready to leave. He wanted to go down to Hangman, like a lot of other guys, but since Rebecca was up for homecoming queen, we were all staying for her.

Personally, I’d voted for Christina Randelle, the redhead who’d shown up on Brandon Sholer’s arm. But that was mostly because she’d taken piano lessons from my mom, and she’d always been really nice to me--not that I was going to try to explain this to Caleb, who’d recently voiced his dream to nail the homecoming queen. If Rebecca won, I suppose it would make that easier for him. But if there was anything that I figured Caleb didn’t need help with, it was getting laid.

Brandon Sholer waved to me, but I didn’t get the idea that he thought I’d ditched him last night, so I didn’t find it necessary to apologize to him. I was too busy trying not to step on Haily’s dress, anyway, which seemed to have an extra-long skirt. Haily was in a good mood, and it was nice to feel like I could just hang out with her again as we spent our time dancing and making fun of everyone else’s dresses. Still, though, when Ryan Archer asked to

dance with Haily I was quick to bow out and let him. Haily had shot me a dirty look for that, but she didn't look entirely put out about dancing with someone else, especially when Derek Oton was the next to ask her, much to his own date's chagrin. Haily seemed to be getting a lot of attention tonight, and she seemed to like it, so I was happy for her.

Another twenty minutes later and I was back at our table and sipping on my sixth cup of fruity red punch, talking to a few seniors who wanted to know how my brother was doing, when a girl from Brandon's party the night before approached me, wanting to dance. Seeing that Haily was actually dancing with Caleb now, I went with the short brunette. But, our dance didn't last very long. I hadn't even started to get winded before Caleb suddenly had his arm around my shoulders and he was pulling me away and turning me to face a less populated area of the dance floor, pointing at something that he obviously wanted me to see.

"What is she doing?" he asked over the music, his voice sounding blank.

"Who?" I asked, confused.

"Assface," Caleb said. "She's... with... Assface."

I looked at Caleb, not sure what he was talking about. I figured that it wasn't good if Jame Graham was involved, but it was the perplexed and incredulous look on Caleb's face as he stared straight ahead that told me it really wasn't good. I tried looking again, this time searching the crowd for a familiar face with fat cheeks.

Jame Graham wasn't very hard to spot. He was the only one in the vicinity terrifying people with his dance moves. His arms were swinging wildly as he hopped up and down aimlessly, and all the while his body wriggled around like a hypnotized cobra. I'd never seen anything like it, and couldn't quite help the way I laughed. But when Caleb dropped his arm from my shoulders and scowled at me I forced myself to stop and pay more attention. Obviously, it wasn't Jame's dancing that was bothering Caleb. In fact, I doubted that Caleb even noticed the dancing since the girl Assface was dancing with happened to be Ronnie. It took me a minute to figure it out. Like Haily, she didn't really look like herself all dressed up. But, it was Ronnie. Definitely Ronnie. And... Caleb was pissed.

My best friend hadn't talked about Ronnie lately. Every once in a while, he'd mention that she still wasn't talking to him, and while he was at it, he'd mention that he didn't care. But even I noticed the way that his head tended to turn every time we passed her at school. Which is why it was no surprise that he was now speaking through gritted teeth.

"What is she doing?" he wanted to know.

"Caleb..." I said carefully. "Where's Rebecca?"

"She must really hate me," Caleb remarked, still staring at Ronnie and Assface, shaking his head now.

“Milo said that Jame was coming with some girl named Veronica,” was all I could think to say.

Caleb frowned at me. “Ronnie’s name is Veronica.”

“Oh... hey! I didn’t know, Caleb,” I stated when he looked at me accusingly. “I didn’t. Maybe she’s just trying to make you jealous,” I suggested. “She was pretty upset when you asked Rebecca to homecoming.”

“She’s not trying to make you jealous,” Haily said, joining the conversation as she appeared on the other side of Caleb. “If she wanted to make you jealous, she would have shown up with anyone else looking like that. It would have worked just fine--and, you would have deserved it.”

“Hey!” Caleb protested, about to cry Judas at Haily.

“Well you would have!” Haily informed him. “You should have been here with Ronnie in the first place. She’s nice Caleb, and you like her. She likes you, too. She’s just mad as hell at you. That’s why she’s trying to piss you off.”

“What?” Caleb demanded. I looked at Haily, as curious as Caleb was. She just rolled her eyes.

“She’s been watching you for the last hour, Caleb,” Haily explained, looking exasperated.

“You saw her with Assface and didn’t tell me?” Caleb demanded, and when his face began to turn red, even under the strobe lights, I found myself moving between my two friends.

“Caleb...” I started.

“I didn’t want you getting into a stupid fight,” Haily informed him. “You know that Jame will just look for reasons to get to you. And you’re with Rebecca--by choice. Deal with it.”

“Haily...” I thought that was a little harsh, true or not.

“Deal with it?” Caleb demanded. “Assface, Haily! Deal with it? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, you blew it, Caleb,” Haily responded. “If you didn’t want Ronnie dancing with him you should have asked her yourself.”

“Maybe I’ll ask her now,” Caleb responded, as if it were supposed to be a threat. He took only one step in Jame and Ronnie’s direction before I grabbed his shoulder.

“Caleb! Don’t,” I insisted, looking at him seriously when he turned to face me. “Please... talk to her later. Just, go find Rebecca.”

“Assface,” Caleb said again, even as I turned him around. Fortunately, Haily was finished scolding him and took it upon herself to help me.

“Come on, Caleb,” she insisted. “We’ll find Rebecca and see when they’re going to do this homecoming thing so we can get out of here. My dress is starting to itch, anyway.”

“I’m gonna use the restroom,” I said. “I’ll catch up to you guys in a few min

utes.”

“Hurry up, Nels,” Haily called after me as we separated. “If we can’t leave I wanna dance some more.”

I found myself moving off to the side of the room, out of the way, but with Haily and Caleb gone, I still couldn’t seem to stop watching Ronnie and Jame. It wasn’t exactly my problem, or even my business, but the two of them together... bothered me. I suppose it was fair to say that a large part of that was simply loyalty to Caleb. It was a territorial thing. I felt like someone I didn’t like was stepping on his. Stupid? Most likely. But at least I could admit it. Only, while Jame irritated me in general, I found myself more annoyed towards Ronnie in this situation. Maybe Caleb had made a mistake, but as far as I was concerned, she was just making the whole thing worse.

That’s why I found myself approaching them. I wanted to prevent more trouble before it started. It didn’t exactly occur to me that I could be causing more of it. As I crossed the dance floor, the lights dimmed into a blue hue glowing throughout the room and the music turned slow, making it somewhat easier to navigate my way through the horde of couples as they all paired off and the building was filled with the soft murmur of quiet conversation along with the strong female voice singing through the speakers.

As I reached Ronnie as she danced with Jame, his back was to me, his tall, thin frame almost blocking her out completely. But as the couple slowly turned, I caught sight of Ronnie’s eyes, which were void of glasses tonight as they widened suspiciously on me. I opened my mouth, likely about to piss Jame off by asking to talk to his date. But when I unexpectedly caught sight of a couple not very far from Jame and Ronnie I froze, forgetting any words that I was going to say in the first place.

Obviously no one had explained the half-casual dress code to Milo Trust, who could have been mistaken for a football player in his dark suit. Or maybe he just didn’t care. And why should he? I reasoned. He always looked perfect, anyway. He hadn’t bothered to comb back his dark hair like he had with his dad’s engagement party. Instead, it was loose, framing his face as his emerald eyes sat downcast at the top of the blonde head of the girl who he was dancing with. I recognized that blonde head. Teresa Milldrum looked more elegant than trashy tonight, but she was still Teresa Milldrum. And she was still clinging to Milo. He was encouraging it, the way that he had his arms around her. This was disappointing. Milo Trust, with Teresa Milldrum. He could have shown up with anyone and he picked... her. I didn’t exactly have anything against Teresa. On most occasions, I considered her a friend. Except for the times that she looked at me like she’d seen me naked. That was always awkward. Now, seeing her with Milo was just plain unsettling. But I decided that I wasn’t jealous. Not really. I just had the sudden urge to stamp my name right on Milo’s ass and fight off Teresa Milldrum and any g

irl who wanted to put her hands on him the way that she was, sliding her palms from his shoulders to his chest, that's all. I didn't care whether or not

Milo thought we were together, this just wasn't working for me.

Maybe I would have lost my mind and said so right there on the dance floor if Milo hadn't abruptly looked up, his eyes meeting mine beneath the dim lights. I couldn't really tell how he looked to see me, but I was pretty sure that he wasn't displeased, and when he started whispering something to Teresa, excusing himself, I came to my senses and glanced back to where Jame and Ronnie were. Ronnie was still staring at me, looking nervous, but Jame hadn't noticed me yet, and for now, that was probably a good thing. At least it was if I wanted to talk to Milo. I backed away from the situation, confident Milo would come to me, and only moments after I found a vacant table off to the side of the room where light was almost nonexistent, Milo was taking a seat next to me and casually looking out at the dance floor while I watched him openly.

"I didn't think you were actually going to show up," I finally said. "I guess you found a date."

Milo turned his head to face me. "I saw you earlier with Haily. I didn't want to interrupt."

"It wouldn't have bothered me," I assured him. "So, I thought Teresa already had a date. How did that work exactly? You called her up and she decided to go with you instead? Doesn't really seem right if you stole someone else's date."

Milo must have sensed something in my tone because he narrowed his eyes on me. "I don't know anything about that... What's your problem?"

I regarded him accusingly. "You're on a date."

"It's no different than you being here with Haily," Milo was quick to respond. I was surprised by the sudden confidence in his voice as he crossed his arms. "I saw you."

"That's completely different!" I insisted. "Haily wasn't trying to breed with me."

Milo's jaw dropped. I would have laughed at the expression if I wasn't trying to be serious. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Teresa. She's definitely under the impression that she's on a date."

"We were just dancing."

"That was more than dancing."

"Not to me."

"Well it was to her," I informed him. "Trust me."

"What do you have against her, anyway?" Milo demanded, beginning to sound annoyed. "I thought she was your friend."

I leaned towards him, lowering my voice as I tried to put my frustrations in to words. "We're together," I suddenly said.

“What?”

“You said you didn’t know if we were,” I reminded him. “But we are. Me and you. Together.” I wouldn’t have been so put off by Milo showing up with Teresa if we weren’t, I reasoned. There had to be more than just attraction there, if I hated it this much. For some reason, I actually cared about Milo. Trust, no matter how difficult he was being.

“Because you say so?” Milo responded, incredulous.

I shrugged. “Yeah. Why not?”

He started to shake his head at me. “You...you’re...”

“I’ve gotta stick around here until they announce the homecoming queen,” I cut him off when he didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. “I was gonna go to Hangman, but I’ll blow it off. Let’s meet somewhere.”

“I have to drive everyone home,” Milo responded, still looking irritated with me. “And I already told Jame we’d stop to eat first. And you can’t just...”

I frowned. “With Teresa? So you’re going on another date with her?”

“I’m not on a date with her!” Milo hissed, exasperated. “Fuck, you’re like... impossible to talk to! And you don’t get to just decide that we’re...together.”

“Until I hear you say otherwise, we are,” I responded reasonably. “Besides, when you’re not avoiding me it kinda feels that way... and you can’t go out with Teresa again.”

Now, Milo just looked pissed. “I’ll go out with whoever I want.”

“You can’t! I had sex with her!” I blurted, and Milo fell silent to stare at me as the anger on his handsome face turned to sheer surprise.

“Did you actually just tell me that?” he finally asked.

I took a moment, replaying the last few exchanges in our conversation and inwardly cringed before I released a breath and met his eyes. “Yeah,” I replied calmly. “It was like a year ago, and we were both wasted, and...”

“Oh, big surprise there!” he remarked.

“So it kind of weirds me out to see my boyfriend show up with her,” I finished, ignoring his outburst.

“Will you shut up?” Milo hissed, looking around as if the only thing that mattered was that no one else had heard that. “You think you’re weirded out?” he started to stand, obviously ready to get away from me, but I grabbed his wrist, just long enough to stop him. He turned to face me, just as I stood, placing us eye to eye. “Nelson, here is not a good place...” Milo started to say, sounding surprisingly calm for someone who looked scared out of his mind.

“I know,” I whispered. “Will you come over? After the dance?”

He let out a breath. “Maybe... and I’m not on a date.”

I felt a smile curling my lips at that. “So are we together?” I asked him, and he frowned at me.

"I thought you already answered that," he remarked, and I sighed.

"I know--it would just be cool if I could hear it from you."

It would also be nice to know if I was actually going to see Milo later tonight. But I didn't tell him that as I passed him, taking a moment to make sure my shoulder brushed against his while I inhaled the faint, clean scent of his cologne. I took another glance back at him, meeting his eyes, but I said nothing more as I walked away. I figured that if Milo met me later, nothing more would need to be said, anyway. If he didn't... then I guess I'd know where we stood. But, I was confident.

It didn't surprise me when Milo caught up to me as I crossed the dance floor, since we were both headed in the same direction. It was more difficult to avoid moving bodies during a faster song, but we managed as Milo watched me suspiciously and I pretended not to notice.

"Where are you going now?" he finally asked.

"I need to talk to Ronnie real quick."

"Who?"

"Uh, Veronica," I explained. "Jame's date."

Milo made sure to step a foot ahead of me, then, and turned to face me warily without stopping. "Why?"

"Look, it's no big deal, okay? I just wanna make sure she's not trying to start any trouble."

"What are you talking about?" Milo demanded.

I sighed. "She's only here with Jame because Caleb didn't ask her and she thinks it'll get to him. It's kinda working, too."

Milo suddenly turned, stopping me with a hand to the chest, and looking more frustrated that he had when I'd suggested that Teresa wanted to have his babies. "Are you shitin' me?" he demanded. "You think she's only here with Jame to make Caleb jealous?"

"Yes," I said. I thought it was completely reasonable.

"Because there's no fucking way that she'd come with Jame because she actually likes him?" Milo's tone was laced with sarcasm, and definitely a warning for me.

"I didn't say she does or doesn't like him. Maybe she does, I don't know,"

I replied. "But that doesn't change that she's trying to get to Caleb." I walked around Milo, continuing on my way, and he moved right along with me.

"Not everything's about you and your friends, Nelson," he said hotly. "What the hell do you plan to do?"

"Yeah, what do you plan to do, Larmont?" An obnoxious, self-assured voice sounded from behind me and I turned, frowning at Jame with his objectionable smile and fat cheeks. Ronnie was right behind him, reaching to pull him back.

"Jame, don't," she hissed, and then looked at me. "I can be here with whoever

er I want, okay?"

I looked at Ronnie. She seemed nervous, and about ready to crawl into a dark corner to hide. "That's not my problem," I told her. "This isn't the way to get his attention, Ronnie." And, it wasn't. Mostly, because she was drawing the wrong kind of attention from Caleb. I knew my friend. Maybe he was irritated with Ronnie now, but it probably wouldn't take much to turn that frustration towards her into anger towards Jame. Maybe Caleb wouldn't hit a girl if his life depended on it, but Assface was a completely different story, and that wasn't a headache I needed tonight.

"Look, this is stupid," Milo said, looking at Ronnie. "Will you just tell him that you're not trying to get anyone's attention? He thinks you're here to make Caleb jealous."

"You act like that'll make him leave us alone," Jame remarked, smirking at me. "Don't you have someone else to pester, asshole?"

I narrowed my eyes at Assface, but Milo ignored him and looked to Ronnie expectantly. Milo seemed to be the only one surprised when she avoided his eyes and looked away, blushing. When Milo realized that he was the only one seeming bothered by Ronnie's lack of response, he looked at Jame. "This doesn't bother you?" Milo demanded.

"Hey, I tried to tell her that Caleb was just another asshole," Jame responded, placing a hand on Ronnie's shoulder, but Ronnie shook him off.

"Just shut up, Jame," she pleaded.

"That would be a good idea," I agreed, and Jame took a threatening step towards me. He was taller, and I had to look up, but it didn't bother me so much as the strong urge to hit him did. It faded, though, when Milo was suddenly between us, pushing Jame back.

"Knock it off," Milo stated. "Jame..."

"Tell him that," Jame responded, gesturing towards me. "He's the one that won't leave us alone, Milo! Why the fuck is he always hanging around, anyway?"

I'm not sure what I expected from Milo, but I looked to him, anyway. I knew exactly how I would have handled this situation with my friends. I had handled this situation with my friends. But apparently, Milo didn't even know where to start as he looked at me, rather desperately. I just stared back, feeling my stomach knot as I waited for him to say something. Anything. I was suddenly feeling very uncomfortable, standing there, waiting. It's not like I wanted him to out himself. I didn't want him to out me, either, but if it was that hard for him to tell his friends that we were friends.... That he liked me; that he didn't want me to leave him alone... I needed to hear something from him.

"Nelson, please just leave."

That's not what I wanted to hear. Not coming from Milo. I think I was stunned

by it. For a whole minute, I just stared at him, not sure what felt worse. The way he'd called me a sick fuck, or this.

"Good, now go away, or I'll make you go away," Jame threatened. I would have liked to see him try. Jame didn't scare me, but it probably looked that way when I took a step back, finally tearing my eyes away from Milo who at least had the decency to look ashamed of himself, to look at Ronnie again.

"Caleb does like you," I told her quietly, not really liking the way that my voice was suddenly shaking. "You've just... gotta corner him. Talking him mad isn't going to help anything."

Ronnie didn't respond to that. She only avoided my eyes. It was strange, because I didn't even really know her, but between her and Milo, I don't think I'd ever felt more unwelcome in my life. I was almost grateful when Teresa appeared to attach herself to Milo's arm, just because she smiled at me.

"Hey, Nelson. What's going on?" she asked, looking around, likely confused over the long faces and Jame's glare.

I just flashed a small, forced smile at Teresa, and decided that someone else could explain it to her as I turned and did exactly what Milo had asked me to. I left.

I didn't leave the dance. I went back to my own table where Joe ignored me to make out with Kelly until Haily found me and said that she'd managed to get Caleb to calm down. She didn't understand why I wasn't happier about that, or why I suddenly seemed so tired when she wanted to dance again and all I did was stand there with my head on her shoulder until she became worried and started pestering me about what my problem was. I didn't tell her, of course. I was too busy trying not to look in the direction where I'd last seen Milo. It wasn't very easy trying to explain to myself that maybe, we weren't together after all.

.....
Rebecca was crowned homecoming queen at the end of the night, and then she became irritated with Caleb when he thought it was a bigger deal that I was skipping Hangman to go home. I blamed it on my hangover, and that I didn't want another one. Which was true. I wanted to be completely sober when I called Milo tonight to tell him just how much I thought he sucked. I had it all planned out. He was going to answer his phone, and I was going to say: Milo, you suck. Because he did. And what he'd done sucked. And it wasn't at all fair that we could be seen as friends up until the point that it became inconvenient for him. Like when Jame Graham showed up. I hated Jame. Assface. I'd probably tell Milo that, too. But of course, before I got to tell him any of this he had to show up and ruin my plans.

I arrived home alone, feeling somewhat lethargic as I stepped out of my car onto the gravel driveway. It was cold enough to see my breath in front of

f my face as I slammed my door and headed towards the house. The porch light was on and my parents were home, and when I got in, I imagined that I'd call Chad before I called Milo. If I explained to him what had happened, there was a good chance that either he or Leanna could offer me some perspective. They usually did. But I hadn't even reached the front porch before I was lifting my arm to shield my eyes from bright headlights moving down the driveway. I watched as the shadow of a car parked next to my own vehicle, and the lights went out before a familiar figure emerged, moving towards me until I could see Milo's face, lit by the glow of light coming from the house. For once, I wasn't happy, or even relieved to see him.

"What do you want?" I asked shortly. He wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be at home, waiting for me to call so I could tell him he sucked.

Milo frowned at my tone, stopping a good three feet from me as he slid his hands into his pockets, looking uncertain but determined as I watched him swallow, and his green eyes met mine directly. "We are... together," he said, and that was enough to get my attention as I crossed my arms against the cold and regarded him curiously. "I mean... I want to try to be," he continued. "But it goes both ways, Nelson. You want to convince people we're friends, so it doesn't look so fucked when we look at each other, I get that. And, I get that you want me to hang out with you and your friends--I'm trying with that. But you have to try, too. Jame is my friend. How am I supposed to explain to him that you and me are cool if all you and your friends ever do is treat him like shit? I know he can be a jerk," Milo said quickly, when I was about to object. "But no more than Caleb... or anyone else, including you."

"Me?" I demanded.

"You," he confirmed.

I narrowed my eyes, ready to open my mouth and explain to him just which one of us was acting like a jerk, but as he continued to regard me seriously I stopped, and just stared back at him.

Despite feeling angry towards him, I considered what he was telling me. I guess I could even understand it, because parts of it, I felt were true. I did want him to hang out with my friends. I wanted Milo to have as much fun with them as I did, and I guess I could understand why he'd be upset if I didn't attempt the same with his. Only, Jame Graham... well, he was Assface.

"Milo, with Jame it'll never work..."

"I'm not expecting you to like him," Milo cut me off. "Just give him a reason to understand why you and me could be... friends. Otherwise, I'm going to start wondering why we are."

"Are we friends?" I asked Milo, wondering why it was so hard to convince everyone else if it was true.

“I don’t know,” Milo admitted. “I think... we’re something else. We’re just, together.”

I’d wanted to hear him say that. Now he had, twice in the last five minutes.

I would have enjoyed it a lot more, though, if I wasn’t still thinking about what he’d said about Jame Graham, and if I didn’t have a sinking feeling that Milo’s request was going to make things a lot more complicated. For me

Chapter 10: Change

by DomLuka

Apparently when you’re out of high school, things like social cliques, who’s making who jealous, and worrying about why someone would want to make someone else jealous were things that you were supposed to stop caring about, according to my brother.

Sunday morning after homecoming, I’d gone to an early lunch with my Chad after church, at the same greasy hamburger place I’d taken Milo to. I told my brother everything that had happened the night before, and when he wasn’t rolling his eyes at me, he was telling me that I should take it easy when it came to Milo. Chad was under the impression that a lot of things that I was worried about, such as worrying about proving to Milo that things could work between us, given the circumstances, was not something that should be occupying my mind. Chad reasoned that if Milo kept coming to me, and said himself that we were together, things were already working out. His advice was to be myself, go with my gut, and take things one day at a time. I guess that was easier for him to say than for me to do.

I hadn’t really felt like myself for the last week. Not with the confusion of trying to figure out where we were going, or what Milo wanted from me. The jealousy I’d experienced at the dance the night before hadn’t been pleasant, either. It wasn’t just seeing Milo with Teresa. It had taken a while for me to realize it, but I was jealous of Jame, too. I guess in a way, Milo asking me to leave in front of him like that, and then what Milo had said when he showed up at my house the night before, gave me the impression that if he had to make the choice, Milo would choose Jame over me, and that was something that he’d been trying to point out. Admittedly, I’d been put out by that until Chad asked me what I’d do if Milo asked me to choose between him and Caleb. Since I could say with a great amount of certainty that I’d tell him to shove it if that ever happened, I guessed that I could understand where Milo was coming from. But I still felt a little better when Chad mentioned that it was a pity that it was Jame who Milo had to be friends with. My brother had never really liked Jame, either. As far as I was concerned, that was saying a lot because generally, Chad liked everyone, and everyone liked Chad.

As far as my gut went, I had no idea what it was telling me to do. All I knew was that lately, it was twisted into either knots or butterflies because a

ll I ever really thought about was Milo Trust. I found myself wondering if t hat was the feeling I'd longed for when I had no possibility of having it, o r if this was something entirely different. It was hard waking up every morn ing, wondering whether or not I'd see him, and worrying over whether or not he'd be happy about it if I did. And there was so much frustration there, to o. Sometimes I'd wonder why I even bothered with him, but then he'd do somet hing as silly as smile in my direction, and all I wanted to do was get to kn ow him better. Or touch him. I felt like I couldn't get enough of either. I wanted to take things one day at a time. I'd been accomplishing that, I gu ess. But, I'd never really had someone to take things one day at a time with before. Even if I was succeeding, though, it still didn't stop me from craw ling into bed every night wondering if today was the day that Milo was going to decide that he was going to stop talking to me because trying was too ha rd for him.

But I wanted to try. If we were together, I wanted to try. I wanted to act li ke it, and stop worrying about what happened next because in all actuality, t hat really wasn't like me. Be myself. Chad was right, being myself had gotte n me this far with Milo. That's where I needed to start, I thought.

So, on Sunday afternoon when I received a surprise phone call from Milo, I took the very short phone conversation in stride as he nervously asked me if I wanted to meet him at Hangman. I decided it was very foolish if he e ver thought I'd say no to him. I didn't even ask why when he told me to br ing a sketchbook, or grudgingly point out that it was ten degrees with the wind-chill that day. I simply bundled up in two sweaters, my heavy blue c oat and beanie--all over my long underwear--and headed down to Hangman Cov e as requested, where I met Milo, forced myself to relax, and did my best to be myself.

We were sitting away from the water, beneath the trees in moist piles of lea ves that had been stomped into the ground; but at least we were out of the w ind. It was the first time in a long while that I'd been to the Cove when t here was actually no one there. And no one, meant no one. It seemed that onl y Milo was crazy enough to be there, in the shade, on a pile of wet leaves w ith the white sand blowing and waves hitting the shoreline that seemed too b ig for any lake to have, beneath a dark, overcast sky. And me. I was probabl y crazy to be out in this weather, too, but I'd wanted to see him, even if i t was just to watch him draw. He'd brought his sketch pad, too, and he'd bar ely looked up from it when I'd found him beneath the trees. I'd spent the fi rst five minutes being there complaining that it was too cold to be outside, and expressing how horrified I was that Milo wasn't even wearing a proper c oat. Just a faded gray t-shirt, worn at the seams, and a matching beanie tha t held his hair down around his face. He'd definitely been there for some ti me before I arrived. His nose and lips were red, and his eyes looked watery

from the wind, but he didn't seem at all ready to leave as his hand moved busily over his paper, drawing everything that he saw. When I asked him to let me buy him some hot soup or something, just so we could get out of there, he'd finally just told me to leave if I wanted to. I gave up and dropped my jacket over his shoulders, deciding that I was better protected from the weather in my layers than he was in that worn-out sweater.

He hadn't objected to that. He'd even pulled the coat further over his shoulders; and as silly as it seemed, the small gesture had me feeling pretty good.

Good, but cold, as I finally took a seat next to him and leaned into his side, against the arm that he wasn't using to draw with. It was odd, but it was the first time that I realized Milo was left-handed, all because I had no problem doodling in my own book being so close to him.

While he sketched the terrain, I of course, took the opportunity to draw him. Only, my drawings were more cartoonish and I'd envisioned him without his hat, the sky warmer, and the wind blowing through his hair. I didn't draw for long. It was too hard to draw with my thick gloves on, and too cold to leave them off. So, I started talking. About anything, really. Nothing about the night before was even mentioned, but that could have been because Milo wasn't very talkative at all when he was sketching. For a while I didn't even think he was paying attention to me until I made a comment about it being so cold that I was pretty sure my dick was inverted from shrinkage and he laughed out loud. We'd been there for an hour before his hand finally started to slow over his sketch pad and I took to doing anything that might irritate him enough to get him to hurry up and finish.

"Just say it," I insisted.

"No," he responded flatly, glancing at me sidelong before his green eyes were back on his work.

"It's just two little words," I stated. "Boy-friend." I leaned closer to him, so that my breath hit his neck when I spoke, causing him to shudder as I lowered my voice. "You're my boyfriend."

I was being corny. Disgustingly so. But, it was fun imagining that he was blushing beneath his already red cheeks.

"Says you," he responded quietly, but I saw a slight smile curling the corner of his mouth.

"Says me," I agreed. "Now you say it." I clapped my hands for emphasis, and Milo laughed, finally closing his book and tucking his pencil away as he tilted his head in my direction.

"I'm going home," he announced, and I frowned at that. "If you're not busy, you can follow me."

I raised a frozen eyebrow at him. "I can follow you home?"

Milo just rolled his eyes at me as he stood up, passing back my coat as he collected his things; but he was still smiling, and I did, in fact, follow him

m home. His house was dark as usual, but warm. The entire way there I'd had my heater running, and I was still frozen solid as I followed Milo--to his kitchen this time, rather than his room. Like the rest of his house, it was rather plain, white in color, and seeming as sterile as my dentist's office. There wasn't even an appliance left out on the counters, except for the microwave. I made myself comfortable on one of the four black bar stools surrounding the island counter at the center of the room, which seemed to serve as the Trust's kitchen table; and when Milo mentioned that he could use a hot shower, I told him that he could go ahead and take one, so long as I could watch. It was easier to see him blush now that he was warming up.

There was no shower, to my very voiced disappointment, but I didn't mind watching as Milo rummaged around the kitchen, obviously having no idea where anything was. I was amused by this as he explained to me that it was Juanita's territory, and with her around he rarely needed to know where anything was, anyway. At least, not a pot that he wanted to heat up some soup in because he swore it tasted better that way, instead of heated in the microwave. I became even more amused that he started heating up two portions even though I kept telling him that I wasn't hungry. It didn't really seem like Milo to push anything. That was my job, so it was an interesting change of pace when he talked me into trying a soup that Juanita made that he called Gazpacho. It looked red and chunky, and less than appetizing, but as it heated, it at least smelled good.

"Is your dad still gone?" I asked Milo as I watched him use a sponge to clean up a few drops of soup that had spilled over the stove.

"He got back this morning. Emily talked him into looking at some wedding stuff," Milo replied, glancing over his shoulder at me as he pulled off his beanie and shook his hair out.

"So where's Juanita?" I asked.

"Her mom's in a nursing home," Milo explained. "On Sundays she goes to read to her."

"Oh... so, what's her deal, anyway?"

"Juanita's?" Milo replied as he slid onto a stool across from me.

"Yeah, like does she really not understand anything I say? What's the deal with that?" I asked as I pulled off my own hat and ran my hand over my hair, not really caring that from the feel of it, it was sticking up in places.

"If you talk slow she usually understands," Milo replied, shrugging. "I mean, she knows enough to get by."

"So why doesn't she speak enough English to get by?" I asked. "Wouldn't it be easier?"

Milo smirked at that. "For who?" he replied. "She figures it would be easier if everyone learned Spanish."

"Right," I said, rolling my eyes. "So, you've known her a while? I mean, yo

u said she's not the housekeeper, so... what does she do?"

"She's just part of the family," Milo said simply. But when I continued to stare at him, waiting expectantly, he continued, "My mom hired Juanita, about two years before my parents divorced. At first it was because my parents were both working all the time, like my dad does now. I remember my mom was always home in time for dinner, but I kinda started hating all of the after-school programs they kept placing me in. My mom got Juanita to sit with me--she thought it would be a good idea to introduce me to a foreign language, and Juanita was really nice..." Milo paused, taking a moment to glare at me, as if he'd predicted the way that my nose turned up at that last statement. "She is nice. And anyway, she started doing other stuff around the house, cooking meals, or staying longer than she had to. My parents started paying her for that, too, and then when my mom got pregnant... well, Juanita was around all the time."

"I thought you were an only child," I interrupted.

"I am," he said quietly. "My mom lost the baby..." I frowned over at him, watching as he scratched at the counter in front of him with his index finger.

"I don't remember a whole lot, just, that's when my parents started fighting a lot. Everything was just... sad, for a while. Then my mom just left."

"She didn't even say anything to you?"

"No. She did," Milo replied. "I mean, I think she tried to make me understand... At first she just moved out of the house and I was moving back and forth... but then she started traveling. My dad kinda took the whole thing pretty hard. He'd take off for weeks and leave me with Juanita. One day he came home from his office and said we were moving to promote this neighborhood, but he was never around to help with any of it. Juanita took care of it all, and when we got into the new house, she just picked a bedroom and moved in with us." Milo laughed to himself, and looked up to meet my eyes, seeming amused. "When my dad asked her what she was doing, she just told him that he was too stupid to live by himself. But I think... she was sticking around for me. Back then, she and my dad always pretended that they couldn't stand each other, but when I got older, and didn't need her as much, he kept looking for reasons to keep her around--it's the only thing I ever wanted to thank him for," Milo finished, sounding bitter.

"You really don't get along with him?"

"I do when he leaves me alone," Milo remarked, and when I regarded him inquisitively, he explained. "After my mom left, it was like he just didn't care. I mean, he never really even took the time to... to do anything. It's like, he wants to forget that he's supposed to be a dad except for when he sees I need to improve with something, or when he's telling me that I shouldn't be picking up a paint brush when I could be studying. I mean, he didn't even tell me that he was going to ask Emily to marry him. I found out when

the announcement showed up in the paper.”

“Ouch,” I said, and Milo nodded. He seemed troubled, maybe even a little angry, which was interesting to see because for once it wasn’t directed towards me. But he masked the look with indifference just as quickly as it had appeared.

“I think the soup’s ready,” he announced, suddenly standing up. “Um... you should really try it.”

I explained to Milo that I’d only eaten a few hours ago with my brother and really wasn’t that hungry; but when he’d pointed out that the soup was hot and my lips were still blue, I gave in, only to find that looking at the concoction was hard enough. I wasn’t sure I actually wanted to eat it. It looked like a bowl of tomato chunkyness. Only, none of the chunks looked like actual tomatoes. Usually I was up for trying new things, but since I wasn’t particularly hungry, and this looked less than appetizing, it seemed to be a struggle as I stirred the steaming mix with a spoon. It was then that I was introduced to a much more playful side of Milo than I’d ever seen in class when he moved behind me to cover my eyes with his hands, telling me that I should try it without looking at it. I’d laughed, and did as he said, deciding that at this gazpacho wasn’t so bad, and most of the chunks were just vegetable, although I was pretty sure that I tasted a hint of seafood every so often as Milo finally took a seat next to me and we slowly ate.

I was the one who led our conversation for the most part, teasing him about how crazy he was to sit out in the cold for so long, just to draw, and asking him about other things that he liked to do for fun. He mentioned swimming, or just being on the lake during the summer, which wasn’t something unusual for people in Heywell. And it didn’t really surprise me when Milo explained that he had a better time on Saturday nights home alone and watching movies, rather than going out with his friends, but I still found myself paying close attention as he explained that he never really liked crowds. He liked things quiet, and simple... and maybe even a little boring. I was nothing like that, I knew. At least, on most weekends I couldn’t sit still, knowing that there was a crowd out there waiting for me. But, I thought, I might just enjoy a quiet, boring night alone with Milo Trust.

I left his house around the time Juanita showed up, feeling a little annoyed with myself because we’d been alone for quite a while and I hadn’t even tried to kiss him. But, despite missing that, I left smiling. I hadn’t known what to expect when Milo had asked me to meet him. At the very least, I thought the issues we’d confronted the night before would have come back to haunt me, but they never even came up. I hadn’t even kissed him, but for the first time since meeting Milo Trust, I felt like we really were... together.

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It was just beginning to get dark outside of the large windows in the kitchen

n, but there was enough light to see that the wind was still attacking the dried grass in the field, and the now-barren apple trees. I could see my dad outside, too. He had a lead around the goat and was trying to get it into the shed for the night. There was the sound of the piano coming from the family room, the parrot squawking along with it as my mom played, and the house was warm with the sweet scent of freshly baked sugar cookies and the more earthy scent of pumpkins. It was the latter that more strongly flooded my nostrils as I used my fingers to scrape out the last of the six pumpkins Chad had picked out.

Usually, my brother and I would do our annual pumpkin carving about two weeks before Halloween. But since homecoming had come late this year; Chad's schedule was busier with his college courses; and I'd been preoccupied as of late; we found ourselves over the long table in the kitchen three nights before the holiday, which was this Wednesday. But then, it had only been this morning that my parents had decorated our front porch with the ghost lights, fake cobwebs, cackling witch and the pop-open vampire coffin that no longer actually popped. It just kind of sat there.

My brother was across from me, looking focused as he finished carving out a cat wearing a witches' hat pattern into one of the larger jack-o'-lanterns.

Chad had a new dye job in his hair. It was still pink, but looked darker than it had when I'd had lunch with him.

He was definitely the better pumpkin carver, which is why he did the actual cutting while I stuck to drawing the patterns for him and cleaning. Of course, most of what I cleaned ended up on me, I noticed, as I looked down at my pumpkin-stained t-shirt and hands. He kept telling me to use the spoon--every year, in fact. But somehow, that had always felt like cheating to me. I'd just finished telling Chad about my day with Milo. I was definitely in a better mood than I'd been in during lunch, and it didn't go unnoticed by him as he teased me the way I'd teased him every time he'd ever had a new girlfriend. I'm sure he considered it payback, but truth be told, I kind of liked it.

I went to the sink to wash my hands before I lifted a black marker and drew a skeleton-head pattern onto the last pumpkin, which was more watermelon shaped than anything, before I passed it to Chad, all the while telling him how I was skipping dinner tonight to go catch a movie with my friends. They were all still a little put off that I hadn't joined them at Hangman the night before, and I figured that going out with them would assure everyone that there was nothing wrong with me. Besides, I hadn't talked to Caleb all day, and I wanted to make sure that he wasn't still too upset over seeing Ronnie and Jame together. When the doorbell rang just as Chad started to carve into the last pumpkin, I found myself groaning, having just dipped my hands into the slimy, stringy mush that I'd been digging out of our jack-o'-l

antennas for the last hour. Chad and I always picked out the seeds and roasted them. No one really ate them but my dad, but it was tradition, nonetheless. It was my brother who looked in the direction that the piano music was coming from. "Mom!" he called, likely hoping that she was around to answer the front door. I just shook my head, dropping all of the pulp onto a paper plate in front of me.

"It's okay," I insisted. "I'll get it."

I washed my hands again, this time making sure to get the gunk off my forearms, too, and as I headed through the house to answer the door, the bell rang twice more, making me wonder if Caleb had shown up early. He was the only one who'd really ring repeatedly if it was cold. If it was really cold, he'd just walk in. No one minded, and I was pretty sure the door was unlocked, so I had no idea why he wouldn't be doing that now. But when I opened the door, it seemed to make sense that Caleb wasn't walking into my house because Caleb wasn't there at all.

There was a woman on our front porch, no longer ringing the bell, but inspecting the ugly, green cackling witch hanging to the left of the door. She'd figured out that there were motion detectors connected to the witch's sharp laughter, and she'd taken to waving a thin, manicured hand in front of it, seeming strangely amused.

I cocked my head at her. From the side, she looked somewhat familiar and for a long moment I struggled to remember where I'd seen her before. She was a petite woman, wearing high-heeled boots that gave her an extra three inches, and she was bundled in a long, black wool coat that matched a more stylish beanie-type hat over her head, covering shoulder length dark hair.

It was when she turned her dark eyes, sharp eyebrows and enthusiastic smile on me that I suddenly remembered who she was and straightened, quite frankly shocked to find this particular woman standing on my front porch. She seemed equally surprised to see me as she released a small gasp and her smile became even wider over her pearl-white teeth.

"Bobby!" she exclaimed.

Well, that was just lovely, I thought as I forced a tight smile in her direction. I'd only met her once, it was months ago, and she had to go off and remember my name. Or rather, the one I'd given her. I tried to correct this--something.

"Oh... it's Nelson," I told her, and when she looked openly confused by that, I added, against my better judgment, "Bobby Nelson... people usually call me Nelson. Or Nels... uh... Bobby's okay, too. I guess." I inwardly cringed, wondering if she was actually going to let me continue rambling like an idiot as she stared at me inquisitively. Finally, she just smiled again.

"You're one of Milo's friends, right?"

"Yes, yes I am," I said quickly, hoping to God that that moment of awkward

ness had passed permanently.

“And you live here?” she asked me curiously.

“Um... yeah.”

She beamed at that, seeming delighted over the idea. “Well isn’t that something!”

“Yeah, that’s something,” I replied, nodding as I continued to stare at her.

“I’m here to look at the property,” she said, as if I was supposed to know exactly what she meant by that. Obviously confused, I raised an eyebrow.

“Huh?”

“Who’s at the door?” my mother’s curious voice came from behind me, and I looked back at her, dressed in her thick plaid sweatshirt with her hair pulled back into a bun, still feeling rather taken off guard.

“She is,” I said stupidly, pointing at Emily Hill.

My mom took one look at Emily and then frowned at me. “It’s freezing out here. Are you going to move so she can come in?” she wanted to know. I blushed at that, looking at our guest sheepishly as I moved aside.

“Oh, thank you,” Emily said, still smiling as she stepped into our house and held out her hand for my mother. “You must be Mrs. Nelson.”

My mother blinked at that, and then regarded me suspiciously. I did my best to look like the picture of innocence. It was a good thing that my mom wasn’t one for asking questions when a certain amount of prudence was required. She smiled back at Emily as she took her hand. “Pamela,” my mom insisted. “And you are?” My mom threw me another disapproving look after that question; obviously, she thought that my manners had left something to be desired this evening.

“Emily Hill. Our boys are friends,” she explained, sending a friendly look in my direction. I found myself unable to return it, suddenly put off by how she put that. I couldn’t help thinking that Milo wouldn’t be very happy if he knew that she was referring to him as her boy, and for that reason, it bothered me.

For my mom’s part, she looked confused, so I pulled myself together and did my best to explain. “She means Milo,” I said. “Um... Mrs. Hill is... Mr. Trust’s fiancée.”

My mom’s eyes widened slightly at that, and this time when she looked at me it was for an explanation. All I could do was give a quick shrug because I was just as confused as she was.

“Oh, well, come in,” my mom insisted, ushering Emily into the house. “Can I offer you something to drink? Coffee, maybe? Nelson, close the door, you’re letting a draft in.”

I did as I was told, and moved quickly to catch up with my mom and Emily, ready to trail along behind them so I could figure out exactly what was going on.

“Coffee sounds great,” Emily replied. “Thank you.”

“May I ask what brings you out here?” my mother asked curiously, glancing back at me again. She probably assumed that it was something to do with Milo.

“Well,” Emily explained, “Evie Cane from the florists’ gave me your address. She mentioned coming to a wedding here and said that your property’s just beautiful, and since Thom isn’t interested in a chapel wedding we’ve been looking at alternative locations all day. So far nothing’s been large enough and I was hoping to take a look at your property.”

“Oh,” my mom replied, less excited about this than I would have expected her to be. In fact, she seemed a little intimidated. I could understand intimidation. There was no way in hell I wanted to explain to Milo that a woman he didn’t care for had stopped by to talk about the wedding that he so obviously detested. “My brother had his wedding here,” my mother explained. “Sheriff Ray Bennete?” The look on Emily Hill’s face suggested that she didn’t know him, so my mother continued, “Also, a friend of mine, Jessica Strocker had hers here... I’m not sure what you had in mind, but I don’t think...”

“Oh, my!” Emily suddenly cut in as we reached the kitchen and she caught the view out the windows. Chad looked up from where he was placing t-lights in our pumpkins and raised his eyebrows. “It’s huge... I’ll bet it’s gorgeous in the summer!”

“Well, yes it is,” my mother replied, just as Emily finally noticed Chad. He was short, but kind of hard not to notice if you asked me. “This is my oldest son, Chad,” my mom introduced. “Chad, meet Emily Hill, soon to be Mrs. Emily Trust.”

Emily looked pleased with that introduction and reached out to shake Chad’s hand, after which my brother looked to me curiously. I shrugged at him as Emily asked my mom just how many boys she had.

“Just these two, and they’re enough,” my mom assured her, while looking between Chad and me fondly. “Nels, do you mind putting on some coffee?” Yes, I minded. Especially since my mom was leading Emily to the back door, and if they were going outside, I wanted to know what was being said. But once again, I did as I was asked while my mother did, in fact, escort Emily out the back door where she introduced her to my father. I did my best to eavesdrop as the three of them stood out in the cold for several minutes with the door cracked open. My brother proved to be productive. Rather than distracting me with questions, he eavesdropped, too, and even plugged in the coffee maker, which I’d neglected to do.

Emily Hill. I wasn’t sure what to think of this at all. I knew I didn’t like it, though, when she started talking about a summer wedding and asking about available parking near our house. Milo wouldn’t like this, and that’s what bothered me. Honestly, Emily seemed like a very personable lady to me,

but obviously he disliked her. I'd just started to get him to meet me outside of school. Boyfriend. Mine. That's what he was, as far as I was concerned. It was a new concept, one that I liked very much after spending time with him today. I hated to think about how he could very well shy away from me and my home if my family got involved in this wedding. I kept shaking my head, wishing I could flag down my parents, until Chad finally dragged me away, ordering me to relax as we set up our carved pumpkins on the front steps. By the time we got back inside, Emily was in the living room with her coffee, talking to my parents as if they were old friends. She was talking about introducing them to Thompson Trust; and by the time I changed my clothes and reluctantly left to meet my friends, I was not at all reassured by the fact that she was still there.

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Sometimes it was better to avoid a problem, I decided. On Monday, I only saw Milo in school, but didn't bother to mention Emily to him at all. I convinced myself that it wasn't necessary--yet.

Last night after getting home, I'd mentioned to my parents that I wasn't very comfortable with Mr. Trust having his wedding in our backyard. But apparently, it would be rude to tell them no if they wanted to use our field.

According to both my mom and my dad, there was nothing to worry about right now because Emily would have to discuss things with Mr. Trust. Plus, they were still looking at locations. So... there was nothing to worry about. Yet. I figured it was a good enough reason not to give Milo news that he wouldn't want to hear. Besides, how could I, when on Monday he didn't scowl at all when he found me waiting at his locker throughout the day? In fact, he looked happy to see me. Even the one time that he had Jame with him. Which brought me to a more urgent dilemma that needed tending to. If there was one thing I'd figured out since homecoming, it was that Caleb was still perturbed over Ronnie and Jame showing up together. Just as I'd imagined, he'd stopped being frustrated with Ronnie long enough to get pissed off at Jame. He was convinced that Jame had been with Ronnie to get to him, just as much as Ronnie had been with Jame for the same reason. I wasn't about to tell him that he was right. He also wasn't attempting to talk to Ronnie about this. Caleb wasn't getting much pity from Haily, Joe or me over this situation, either. We all agreed that it was his own fault. He's the one who blew off a girl he liked. Hell, now that homecoming was over he didn't even seem interested in Rebecca in the slightest. He hadn't even said anything when we all saw her flirting with Derek Oton, our crowned homecoming king, at lunch.

Haily did, though. Not about Rebecca. She had a few choice words over Derek, though. Apparently, she'd given him her number, but now regretted it. That was a disappointment for me. I'd been relieved when Haily began to show a

n interest in another guy. I learned that Joe and Kelly were now exclusive.

It made sense, since every time I saw him, I saw her, too. There had been a time that I hated it when he brought girls around. I'd had a crush, and it was hard to see him with anyone. But it hadn't compared to the annoyance I'd felt seeing Milo with Teresa at homecoming. And it didn't bother me at all to see Joe and Kelly together. I finally understood what they were feeling, beginning a relationship. No one would find Milo Trust sitting in my lap during lunch, but I still had him. Or, he had me. That sounded more accurate, I think, since by Tuesday, I was again worrying about actually keeping Milo.

It was Jame. He hadn't been happy to see me on Monday, and mentioned the confrontation at the dance, asking why I couldn't take a hint. When Milo started talking to me, he'd looked put off by it, while I just ignored him. I may have ignored him, but I still hadn't forgotten what Milo told me. Jame was his friend. I wasn't supposed to fall in love with the guy or anything, but Milo wanted me to tolerate him. He wanted me to be nice. To Assface. There were several reasons why this request was difficult. Starting with Jame being the biggest reason of all.

Assface made it nearly impossible to even endure him. I think the most obnoxious thing was that he was actually attempting to draw attention from my friends when he wasn't with Milo. On Tuesday morning we spotted him in the courtyard with Ronnie. It looked like the two of them were finishing up last-minute homework, but when Jame saw us he put his arm around her and smirked almost challengingly at Caleb. This irritated me, had Haily insisting that the idiot had some sort of death wish, and Joe shaking his head--especially when to Caleb's credit, he walked away from the situation. This wasn't really like my best friend, since Jame was so obviously trying to piss him off, and it was working. But I think it had something to do with the way that Ronnie had become frustrated with Jame and actually shoved him off that brought Caleb to ignore the situation. I guess whatever it was, I was happy about it. It was going to be difficult enough to be nice to Jame when he was such a complete prick that I didn't need the added stress of worrying about Caleb wanting to kick his ass. It was bad enough that I was just about ready to take a swing at our school's fattest face, especially on Tuesday when I had a few extra minutes to meet my friends before lunch, and went to Milo's locker to see if I could catch him.

He was standing in front of his locker with his backpack at his feet as he held a folded-over notebook as he wrote in it. The fluorescent light had caught his hair and it seemed lighter, almost golden, as a pair of sunglasses held it back like a headband. His thick black jacket was open and the dark blue t-shirt beneath clung to him just as well as his jeans clung to his ass. He seemed tidier somehow, lacking the old hoodies that he so often liked to wear. H

e didn't notice me coming and I lightly poked at his ribs as I passed him, disrupting his hand as it moved over his notebook. He seemed mildly irritated with that, but his expression lightened as he turned to face me when I leaned against the locker next to his.

"What're you doing for lunch?" I asked him.

"Pizza," he replied as he closed up his book and stacked it neatly in his locker with the rest of them, and for a moment, I thought about talking my friends into going to Ozario's, instead of Hollander's.

"What are you doing later?" I asked him.

"I'll be home," he said as he closed his locker and then turned to lean his back against it, so that he was next to me. It was difficult not to lean towards him, the way he smelled like he'd just come out of the shower and walked straight through sandalwood smoke.

I met his eyes, smiling. "Do you have a Halloween costume yet?"

Milo snorted at that. "I never dress up."

I feigned shock. "Never? Why not?"

"I don't see the point," Milo responded, raising a curious eyebrow at me. "Do you?"

"Pirates," I said, grinning. "Me and my friends do it every year."

Milo laughed at that. "Do you get to be the captain?" he remarked.

"Nah. I got it last year," I said seriously. "This year Haily gets the captain's hat. I get the parrot, though."

Milo stared at me for a long moment and shook his head as he removed the sunglasses holding back his hair. The locks fell neatly around his face as he hooked the glasses into the collar of his shirt. "Do you go trick-or-treating, too?" he asked, seeming unsure whether or not to be sarcastic.

"No. Sometimes we go out, or to a party--whatever's available. But if you're giving out candy I'll knock on your door." The look I gave him was no less than lecherous. Milo glared, but I had a feeling that he didn't mean it.

"Will you be home alone tonight?"

Milo shrugged. "Don't know."

"Then... would I be interrupting anything if I..."

"You can stop by," he cut me off, and I smiled at that.

"Okay."

There was a moment of silence, where Milo seemed somewhat awkward. "So are you going to?" he finally asked.

"Yeah," I said, straightening as I pulled my backpack more firmly over my shoulder. "Oh... can I borrow your parenting book? I left mine at home and never finished that chapter. I would've snatched Haily's, but she's pretty much moved out of my locker."

"Sure," he agreed, and I watched him bend over to grab the book off the lower shelf in his locker. I'll admit that I was perving on him. But, I always d

id that. And I really did need that book. I figured that I had every right to feel disgruntled by the sudden hand on my back, shoving me in a way that forced me to step away from the lockers and find my balance, just so I wouldn't tumble into Milo.

"Get lost, asshole," I heard Assface's obnoxious voice order, and I spun around to find him smirking at me. I glared. I really shouldn't have let him think that he was the one who'd scared me off at the dance. All that power went straight to his head, and he seemed to have forgotten that I was someone perfectly capable of pushing back. But with Milo standing right there, looking nervous, I tried to be the better person.

"Please don't touch me, Jame," I said. "Ever." I looked at Milo, and held out my hand for the parenting book. He was frowning, but at least not at me. Now, I thought, if he could just bring himself to tell his friend to fuck off, we'd be good. But I guess it would probably be best to just ignore Jame for now, especially since when I looked in his direction he opted to flip me off with both hands. It was way too tempting to tell him where he could shove those fingers, so I turned my attention back to Milo. "Thanks for the book. I'll see you in class?"

"Yeah," Milo agreed, still seeming uncomfortable. "See ya."

I hated feeling like I was being pushed away by Jame. I mean, I did have to meet my friends, but it wasn't as if I wouldn't have appreciated a few more minutes with Milo. I guess those few extra minutes just wouldn't have been very enjoyable with Jame there. I found myself hoping that Milo would say something to Assface that would get him to lay off. If anything, Milo needed to tell him that we were friends, I decided. I could deal with having to tolerate Jame if he did that--so long as Jame-the-Assface Graham kept his hands the fuck off me.

.....
"Milo no dijo que alguien iba a venir. No puedes quedar para la cena. No tengo suficiente comida. ¡Y cállate! El seZor Trust está trabajando en su oficina.."

"Uh-huh, thanks," I said to Juanita as she waved me up the stairs in the Trust's residence. She sounded cranky about whatever she was trying to say to me. I guess I was just glad that she wasn't following me up the stairs.

It was just after four thirty, and I didn't have long to visit Milo before I needed to get going. I'd promised my mom that I'd pick up candy for tomorrow's trick-or-treaters before I went home for dinner. My Uncle Ray was bringing his family over tonight, so I'd agreed to be there. Afterwards I was supposed to go straight to Haily's to study. I didn't want to think about any of that, though. I had so much homework that it was giving me a headache when I wasn't even doing it.

As I reached Milo's room, and pushed open the already cracked-open door, it

looked like Milo didn't feel like dealing with his homework, either. He had several books spread out over his bed, and another on his desk with a notebook right next to it, but Milo wasn't actually near any of it. Instead he stood in front of an easel, paintbrush in hand, and he was working on one of the paintings I'd seen the last time I was in the room. It had only been the beginning of a tree then, and I'd assumed that there'd be a scarecrow hanging from it by the time it was finished. It didn't look like a scarecrow now, though. There was most definitely a dark figure hanging by a noose. Only, it seemed more human than not. Unlike his usual work, the image was somewhat distorted, but the colors suggested the tree was burning. It's not that I didn't like it, I did. I liked everything he did. But this... I guess it was darker; sad to look at. That's why I chose to look at Milo instead. Of course, I probably would have done that even if his painting wasn't depressing. He wasn't wearing a shirt again and his jeans hung low on his hips as he glanced over his shoulder at me. I smiled at him, but he didn't return it as he turned back to his work and lifted a paint-smudged arm to continue with it. "Could you please close the door?" he asked. "My dad's somewhere downstairs."

"Sure," I replied as I gently closed the door behind me and shed my blue jacket to hang on the knob while I studied Milo curiously from behind. He definitely seemed absorbed in his work, just as he had when he was sketching in the cold at Hangman. It was cute, but irritating, I decided as I moved up behind him to watch over his shoulder. Obviously, he thought that was irritating as he glanced back, narrowed his eyes on me, and then unceremoniously dropped his paintbrush into a cup of water. "You're in a mood," I remarked. For the most part, Milo ignored that as he reached for the t-shirt that was hanging over the edge of the bed. At least, he ignored me until I grabbed his wrist, denying him his shirt. I turned him towards me, sliding my hand from his wrist to his shoulder while my eyes drifted down the fading tan that covered the contours of his chest and I chewed at my bottom lip. I met his eyes, and likely would have kissed him if it weren't for the sudden troubled expression masking his face. I frowned at that, sliding my hand down to his bicep.

"What's wrong? Are you freaked because your dad's here?" I asked, remembering the last time he'd pushed me away, just because his dad was in the house.

"I'm fine," Milo replied, sounding a little stubborn. "He's locked in his office, anyway."

He crossed his free hand over his chest and glanced away from me, and I smiled, deciding that this was just Milo being shy as I leaned forward and gently placed a kiss over the corner of his mouth. He smelled refreshing, and his skin felt soft beneath my lips as I closed my eyes and listened to him

inhale a nervous breath as he hesitantly turned his face until his mouth was against mine. He remained like that, his arm feeling tense beneath my hand until I parted my lips and moved my tongue over his, persuading him to open. Milo sighed, and as he slowly kissed me back I deepened it, moving my hands to his bare sides. I could feel him tremble beneath my fingertips as he awkwardly lifted his hands, seeming unsure of where to place them as they first rested on my chest, as if it pushed me away before he found a place for them, holding onto my arms. When he pulled away from my mouth I continued to kiss him, slowly dragging my lips away from his, over his cheek and to the bottom of his earlobe as I slid my hands over his warm, smooth back and pulled him closer; enjoying the feel of his body so close to mine as his bare toes stood over the tips of my high-tops and he gingerly returned my hug, even allowing me to slide a hand up into his hair as I cupped the back of his head and pulled his chin down to my shoulder. It occurred to me that I hadn't kissed him in a few days, and there seemed to be something upsetting about that. To me, at least. I supposed that there wasn't much I could do about it now, but I did find myself wondering how much trouble it would be to find myself alone with him like this more often.

As I moved a hand from his shoulder over his arm, a layer of goose bumps caused the soft hairs there to stand on end; and when Milo moved away from me I released him, watching as he grabbed his shirt and the way that his muscles stretched as he pulled it over his head, messing his hair in the process. I turned to face him when he sat on the edge of his homework-covered bed and regarded me somewhat blankly.

"I know Emily went to your house," he suddenly said.

I opened my mouth, taking a very long moment, trying to figure out exactly how I wanted to react to that, and whether or not he was angry. I most definitely hadn't been expecting it. When Milo simply continued to stare at me I sighed, and then moved slowly to sit next to him, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

"Were you even going to tell me?" he asked, and I frowned as I met his eyes.

"That depends," I said honestly, and when Milo narrowed his eyes, I continued, "She just sort of showed up uninvited, okay?"

"Well, that sounds like her," he said bitterly.

"Milo, she just wanted to see the property... My parents have hosted weddings there before, and... well, I was going to wait and see what happened before I mentioned anything. I figured you wouldn't like it."

"I don't," he responded, raising his voice in a way that didn't seem to be like him at all.

"See, then I was right," I remarked, cracking a smile in a pathetic attempt to lighten the mood. Milo glared at me. He meant it this time. "Okay," I rel

ented. "But can you blame me? I don't even think your dad and Emily are going to use our place, and it was hard enough to get you over there in the first place. I thought you'd freak out if you knew she'd been there." The look Milo flashed me suggested that that was not the right thing to say. "Milo, it's not a big deal."

"The last thing I need is for her to think anything's going on with me and you ..."

"Well she already does think something's going on," I responded, feeling slightly annoyed. "She thinks we're friends. Fuck, Milo--look, I know you don't like her, but she really doesn't seem that bad to me..."

"You don't get it, do you?" he cut me off. "If my dad ever found out that I was..."

"Hey," I interrupted, grabbing for his hand. "Milo, your dad's right downstairs. If you thought that was a problem, you'd be kicking me out right about now; but you're not, because you know that as far as he's concerned, you just have a friend up here. All Emily thinks is that she might want to have her wedding where one of your friends lives. So seriously, why do you do that? Why do you make everything about whether or not someone's going to find out about us?"

Stubbornly, Milo's green eyes narrowed at me as he took on a determined expression, as if he actually had a completely reasonable, and possibly very good explanation for me. Only if he did, he never voiced it as he finally just turned his gaze away from me, shaking his head. But, I decided, that was okay. Milo didn't really need to answer my question because I already understood what his unspoken response would have been. He was afraid. It was that simple. For Milo Trust, even the idea of being out was unacceptable. I could understand the fear. I had the same ones--that I'd lose my friends, that I would never be able to fit in, and that the life that I was generally happy with would end. Of course, I believed that Milo took some of his cautions to the extreme, and that was exactly what frustrated me about him. And there were certain things I couldn't understand, because I happened to have a supportive family behind me and he didn't. It occurred to me then, that Milo only knew one person in the whole world that he'd shared the secret that he'd been hiding his whole life with. And that was me.

I'd be lying if I said that that realization wasn't one that made me feel special. Maybe even a little closer to him, because of what we had in common. But, it also made me sad for him--he had no one else. I found myself lifting his hand to lace my fingers with his as I forced a smile, nudging him so that he'd face me. Those emerald eyes met mine and I leaned forward, momentarily brushing my forehead against his in a subtle display of affection.

"Hey... um, let's not worry about Emily right now. She showed up, but it was probably a one-time thing, and even if she wants to use my place it's not l

like it'll change anything, right? And I mean, if she does, we can always let the goat out. It might have an appetite for white dresses."

Milo didn't smile at that, but his expression did seem to relax a little.

"I hate her," he said quietly. "I hate this whole wedding." I wove an arm around him, not really sure what else to do as I pulled him closer against my side and kissed the lower part of his cheekbone. Milo sighed, running a rough hand through his hair before he suddenly straightened and regarded me seriously. "You'll tell me if she shows up again, right?"

"Yeah," I said quickly. "I'll let you know." Milo studied me, as if he was trying to figure out whether or not I really meant it. I just smiled at him, deciding that it was time for a subject change as I gestured towards the easel he'd been working in front of. "So what's with the depressing painting?" I asked conversationally. He looked over at it, frowning.

"You don't like it." It was a statement, not a question.

"No," I replied seriously. "It's... it's beautiful. Just, sad. Maybe kinda scary." A small smile curled Milo's lips at that. I had a feeling that I'd said something that he liked. I just went with it. So are you going to finish it?" I asked

."

"Now?"

I shrugged. "Why not?" I asked, and Milo looked over at his work thoughtfully, but shook his head. I playfully poked at his ribs. "I wanna watch," I insisted.

Milo turned back to me curiously, maybe even a little skeptically. But, without another word he stood and returned to his painting as I leaned back on his bed and watched, just as I said I wanted to do. He didn't finish while I was there, but he continued to paint, looking concentrated. I did most of the talking, as I had at Hangman, but he did speak to me every once in a while. It was mostly to tell me to shut up, though, when I kept suggesting that he take his shirt back off--so he wouldn't get paint on it, of course.

About a half hour later I was looking at the clock on his desk and announcing that I had to go. Milo offered to walk me out, and took a moment to wash out his brushes. I refused to let him through the door before I kissed him again, deciding to take the opportunity while I had it. It was a short kiss, but good, and I could still taste him when he walked me down the stairs. I never saw Mr. Trust, even if he was supposedly home, but Milo shouted something to Juanita as I pulled on my coat before we headed out the front door.

I said goodbye to Milo on the front steps, not really wanting him to follow me all the way to my car, which I'd parked on the street outside of the gate. He hadn't bothered to put on a jacket and his feet were still bare, which seemed unacceptable for the weather we were having. But he didn't go inside, and I was halfway down the driveway when he unexpectedly called out to me.

“Hey, Nelson?”

I looked back, and then moved to go meet him when I saw his bare feet tiptoeing down the cold stairs and over the freezing cement as he came to catch up to me, his hands in his pockets as he appeared uncertain over something.

“What’s up?” I asked, staring down at his feet and wishing that he’d at least put socks on.

“Have you ever been to a Stratfort party?” he asked.

I raised a curious eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“You said... you mentioned you didn’t really have any solid plans for tomorrow night,” he explained, still avoiding my eyes as he slid his hands out of his pockets to cross his arms against the cold. Jerry--the guy you met at Hangman...”

“I remember.”

“He’s having a Halloween party,” Milo explained. “I might go.”

I stared at Milo for a long moment, and when he said no more, I smirked.

“Are you asking me, Milo?”

Again, he looked somewhat uncertain as he shrugged his shoulders. “I mean.. your friends can come, too. Jer’s cool.”

I blinked at that, and all but scratched my head as I wondered if I’d heard him right.

“You’re inviting my friends?” I asked.

Milo faced me then. “Wouldn’t you just bring them, anyway, if I didn’t?”

I considered the question. “Probably,” I admitted. “Um... are you... you’d put Caleb and Jame in a room together?” I was having trouble here. I was completely stunned that he was actually inviting me to a social gathering of his friends, and add to that he’d just invited my friends, too... well, I thought it was quite possible that the paint fumes had gone straight to my head and now I was hallucinating.

“Jame won’t be there,” Milo said quietly. “He takes his cousins out on Halloween.”

“Oh.”

A long minute passed, and when I said nothing more, Milo chewed his full bottom lip, fast becoming red from the cold, and took a step back. “I guess you can think about it,” he said, and I quickly reached out, briefly touching his arm.

“Hey. Sorry,” I said quickly. “I’m just a little surprised. I want to... I’ve gotta talk to everyone else. Can I let you know in school tomorrow?”

“That’s fine,” he agreed.

“Okay... you should probably get back inside before your feet freeze off,” I suggested.

Milo met my eyes once more, and graced me with the smallest of smiles before

re he nodded, turned, and tiptoed all the way back up the driveway.

.....
I glanced over the rectangular glass coffee table as I finished up my creative writing assignment. Haily was at the narrow end across from me, while Caleb and Joe had their homework spread over the wider sides of the table. The Geld's living room wasn't massive, more like cozy with the fluffy dark green furniture and thick carpeting. I'd always thought it was a nice place to study, especially being full of my friends. Maybe we liked to have our fun, but when it was time to study, we tended to keep each other in line, and I was pleased when I had all my homework finished by ten o'clock.

"What did you guys wanna do tomorrow night?" I asked. "Still wanna go out to eat or something?"

Being a Wednesday night, there wasn't much going on for Halloween. There were a few costume parties around town, but none of them really appealed to me and my friends. That's why I was hoping that they'd be open to this party that Milo had mentioned.

"If I can still be a pirate," Caleb replied without looking up from his book.

"We could go to a party," I suggested.

"Like where?" Haily responded. "It's going to be too cold to be at Hangman, and our parents are probably going to be at most of the parties around here. No thanks."

"There's one in Stratfort Ranch," I said, and this was met with silence. For my part, I flipped open my history book, pretending that I wasn't nervous about this at all.

"And who do we know in Stratfort?" Joe finally asked, sounding more amused than anything.

"Milo told me about it," I replied, still not looking at my friends. The spirit rally hadn't turned out horrible with Milo there, but I still worried that my friends wouldn't like the mention of him, especially after homecoming, and what Jame and Ronnie pulled. "One of his friends is throwing it."

"I'll go with you," Haily said, after only a few moments of silence, and I looked up at her.

Frankly, I was a little surprised. I'd expected that I'd have to talk them all into this. Of course, it seemed that I'd still have to do some talking when Caleb and Joe looked at Haily like she'd lost her mind.

"What?" Haily said, frowning at them. "There's nothing better to do. It's a party."

"I'm not going," Joe stated, sounding unapologetic. "I'm going out with Kelly later tomorrow night, anyway."

"You could always bring her," I suggested.

Joe frowned at me. "I'm not going, Nelson," he reiterated, and I frowned back at him when he gave me a look suggesting that he was refraining from say

ing something else that I might not like. I turned my attention to Caleb, who shook his head at me.

“Sorry... I don’t think so, either, Nels. You’re the one who keeps telling me to stay out of trouble. It would probably find me there.”

“Jame isn’t going to be there,” I told him, and Caleb met my eyes again, looking thoughtful. “I met the guy having the party a few weeks back,” I continued. “He seemed okay. It’s just an option, anyway, but I’m probably gonna go.”

There. That was simple enough. I was going to a party with Milo Trust, and they could decide for themselves if they wanted to go with me.

“Like I said, I’ll go with you,” Haily said. “What time will it be?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “I’ll get the details tomorrow.”

“Can I still be a pirate?” Caleb suddenly asked, and I smiled at him.

“It is a Halloween party.”

“Are you serious?” Joe asked, now looking disapprovingly at Caleb. “You’re going to Stratfort?”

“I’m thinking about it,” Caleb responded in a tone that suggested it wouldn’t be smart for Joe to start shit with him over this.

Joe just shook his head. “Whatever.”

“So that means you’re thinking about it, too, right?” Haily remarked, eying her cousin.

“Just shut up,” Joe mumbled. “I’m not talking to any of you.”

I smiled. I was going to a party with Milo Trust, and all of my friends were going with me. Five minutes later, the same thought placed knots in my stomach as I listened to my friends make fun of anyone or anything from Stratfort, and I suddenly found myself wondering if this was even a remotely good idea.

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Everything was fine. I was a social individual. I did well in crowds, even if I’d never met anyone in them before. When I was younger, I’d never quite understood the concept of not talking to strangers, and that hadn’t changed. But I was nervous. I told myself that was stupid, but it was no less true. This was a big deal--me and my friends going to a party in Stratfort. But, that was because Milo had invited us. This was a big thing for him. I knew that. It made this a big deal for me, because if anything went wrong, Milo would probably regret ever inviting us in the first place; and given my luck, he’d want to go back to pretending we were only acquaintances in Mrs. Bates’s parenting class.

I tried not to think about it. Everything was going to be fine. Sure, maybe Joe couldn’t shut up about what schmucks Milo and his friends were; and maybe Caleb was threatening bodily harm if he so much as smelled Jame Graham; and Haily insisted that she wanted to hang onto me all night since she would

ldn't know anyone; but everything was fine. I was going to get to see Milo.

I'd get to know more of his friends than just Assface, which likely meant that I'd see he liked normal people, too. And, I made a pretty damn good pirate.

Our costumes were pretty simple. We'd always had to improvise because October was a cold month, so the four of us stuck to old white dress shirts. I'd never been fond of the lace cuffs, but the ratty-looking vests that my mom and Leanna had pieced together for us two years ago were pretty cool. They were close to black in color and matched the torn-up sweat-like pants that ended just below our knees. I'd learned long ago to wear long underwear beneath mine. This year, since Haily got to wear the large black-rimmed hat we'd found years ago, Caleb and I had tied rags over our head while Joe stuck to a cleaner-looking black bandana. Caleb had a fake beard that was three shades darker than his hair and Joe had fake earrings because he was too chicken to actually poke any holes in his body. I was pretty fond of my eye patch, except for last year when I got drunk and lost all depth perception.

I had bruises from continuously walking into things. And, as I'd told Milo, I got to wear the fake, morbid-looking red parrot on my shoulder. Its tail was missing, and so was its right eye. I loved that thing.

But, the best part of our costumes was our assortment of fake swords. Caleb and I drove Haily crazy every year when we'd come out of nowhere and initiate a fight with one another, whether we were in a restaurant or just walking down the street. Joe tended to pretend he didn't know us when we did things like that. But just like the rest of us, Joe could admit that there was something fun about dressing up in ridiculous costumes to celebrate the holiday.

According to Milo, he wanted to end up at Jerry's place around eight. It took some convincing on my part, but he'd agreed to let us pick him up. Joe and Caleb had agreed that they wanted to take separate vehicles, just in case they wanted to leave early, and I didn't even argue about it since Joe was already annoyed that Kelly had opted to take her little sisters trick-or-treating, instead of going with him, and Caleb was under the impression that he would definitely end up in some sort of fight at this party. I told him that he was being ridiculous, and hoped that I was right. Haily was being pretty cool, though, if I didn't think anything of the way she kept telling me that

I made a hot pirate when I reluctantly allowed her to put makeup on my eyes. We met at my house early, after school. We had dinner with my family and for a few hours we watched scary movies while helping my parents hand out candy to early trick-or-treaters. Caleb liked doing that, but complained that all of the little kids were so bundled up in their coats that we couldn't even see their costumes. But he talked me into feigning a sword fight for them in the front yard, nonetheless.

At around seven thirty, Haily rode with me while Joe and Caleb drove behind us, and I led the way to Milo's house. I pulled halfway into the driveway when I spotted Milo with Juanita beneath the porch light, while Caleb pulled along the street. The Trust residence didn't seem very big on Halloween decorations, but they were definitely pulling in large groups of kids as they passed my car with their pillowcases to collect their candy from Juanita, who was smiling for once, and to my surprise, dressed as a large orange pumpkin. I was a little disappointed to find that Milo wasn't in costume at all, rather an ironed green sweater and new-looking blue jeans. Haily noticed this too, and regarded him as if he'd committed some sort of crime as he waved to Juanita and headed towards my car. When she looked at me from beneath her large hat, I just shrugged.

"He said he didn't dress up."

Haily made a thumbs-down gesture, shaking her head, while I focused on Milo, who suddenly stopped between my headlights, looking through the front window at Haily and me. His brow went up momentarily as I waved to him, and when he walked around to let himself in the back seat, he was shaking his head and biting back a smile.

Haily and I both glanced back at him, unfazed, as he slid into the back seat and looked between us with a bemused expression on his face until his eyes finally settled on me.

"You actually dressed up," he finally said, as if he didn't quite believe us.

"I told you--pirates," I replied, nodding.

"But this isn't a costume party," Milo said, as if it was supposed to be obvious. Haily and I exchanged confused glances before I looked back at Milo.

"But you said Halloween party," I reminded him.

"Halloween means costumes," Haily agreed.

"Not this party," Milo replied, still looking rather amused. "Look, if you guys wanna go home and change first..."

"Change?" I mocked shocked. "There will be no changin'."

"Iieeee," Haily drawled. "Can't pillage if we change. I need me sword." She tapped the plastic one currently in her lap.

"Caleb would be mightily displeased if he couldn't ask the young ladies to take a ride on his ship," I added. Haily giggled.

"You mean my ship," she replied, indicating her hat. "I'm the cap'n."

Milo was looking at us like we'd left half of our brains at home. "No one else is going to be wearing a costume," he informed us.

I just smiled at Haily. "So what do you think cap'n? Should we tell the boys there's no costume party?"

Haily responded with a mischievous grin. "Nah. I say surprise 'em, and landlubbers can walk the plank!"

I laughed at her, happy that she didn't care about completely fitting in wh

en it came to having fun. Like she'd said before, she'd probably be hanging around me all night, being around so many people that she didn't know, but she could care less about what they thought of her if she showed up in a tacky pirate costume.

"Suit yourselves," Milo said, shaking his head. But, at least he was smiling as he gave me directions to Jerry's house. I wasn't too worried about Caleb being upset that we were the only ones in costume. Joe was going to be livid, but Haily and I both knew that, and every once in a while, she liked to put her cousin on the spot, so I wasn't too worried about it.

Jerry lived on the opposite side of Stratfort from Milo, right near the private school, which was about a quarter size of ours. There were cars lining the street and a wide driveway leading up to the tall house in front of us, decorated with Halloween lights and jack-o'-lanterns. But, not as many as there'd been at Brandon Sholer's.

As I suspected, Caleb wasn't bothered at all that we were the only ones in costume. In fact, I think he liked something about that. Joe, however, was livid as Haily and Caleb dragged him towards the house ahead of us. I found myself hanging back a little with Milo, trying to pretend I didn't notice as he continuously looked my costume up and down. I was happy to see that he seemed amused more than embarrassed, and if I was surprised that he'd invited us in the first place, I was even more surprised when he stopped me outside the door. I stood still, biting at my smile as he carefully removed my eye patch, and then pulled it onto his own face, blinking at me curiously from his left eye. I grinned at him, removing the reddish-brown rag I'd tied over my head, and after much debate, he turned so I could put it on his. Caleb knocked on the front door like nothing bothered him, but Milo made sure to be ahead of us as Jerry opened it, wearing normal street clothes, as he took us all in, his eyes settling on Milo before he promptly burst out laughing, but was quick to add, "Nice costumes!"

I remembered Jerry being friendly when I'd met him at Hangman, and I was glad that nothing had changed as he scratched at his left, dark sideburn and grinned at me. "The hot chocolate guy's here!" he remarked, and my friends regarded me curiously as Jerry gave my shoulder a friendly slap before inviting us all into his house. Milo introduced each of us, as if he'd actually known us all for a while, and surprised me with his more outgoing mannerisms around Jerry he led us straight down to the basement, where the party seemed to be confined to.

It was an interesting setup in the wide space of the basement. There was music playing loudly, but we hadn't even heard it until we reached the bottom of the stairs, and he had three long sofas set up, an entertainment system where a large group of people were gathered to play video games, and a full-sized pool table in the back corner. It wasn't exactly like the parties that m

y friends and I were used to, and I could see it in their faces, but Jerry being as outgoing as he was seemed to make it easier as he moved through the room with us, introducing us as we went. Except Caleb. Caleb found the jello shots right next to a group of girls and made himself right at home.

Haily did tend to stick with me. I probably wouldn't have minded if Milo didn't glare at me every time she grabbed my hand. And Joe finally let his guard down enough to enjoy himself when he joined a group at the pool table and went about hustling them out of all their money. With Haily practically attached to my hip, I stuck with Milo, noticing that a lot of people were happy to see him. They all mentioned the same thing: that he hadn't been around in a while. This made me curious, because Milo seemed like a loner by nature; but apparently, there were friends that he'd seen on a regular basis when he was still going to Stratfort. I also found that I really liked Jerry. It was as hard not to when he spent enough time trying to talk to Haily that she actually let go of me for a good thirty minutes, and he even got Caleb involved in a conversation. It was the first time since I'd met Caleb Spangler that he actually looked content in the company of a guy other than Joe or me. Jerry's was one of the cleanest parties that I'd ever been to. There was an assortment of alcoholic beverages on hand, but it almost seemed like most people were afraid to touch them. It was an interesting change, but not unenjoyable. For everyone, actually. Not one of my friends mentioned leaving early, but since it was a school night, I noticed most people leaving around ten thirty. We went at eleven, with Jerry actually telling us to come back. I think we were all a little shocked when Caleb actually collected Jerry's number so he could invite him to the next party that he decided to throw.

I'm not sure how I pulled it off, but when we left, Haily ended up riding with Caleb and Joe, leaving me to take Milo home on my own. I was grateful for the extra few minutes with him, even if he did seem a little tired and distracted by something as he removed the eye patch and rag from his head, throwing them on my back seat.

"Is everything okay?" I asked him. We were about a block away from his house, and he had his forehead against the cool window as the heater blasted us in the front seat. "We didn't embarrass you or anything, right?"

Milo looked over at me, seeming confused for a moment before he shook his head. "No. That was actually... good," he decided. I smiled, happy to agree with him.

"Good enough that you'd wanna come over for a while?" I tried. It was a pointless question. I already knew what he was going to say.

Or maybe, I thought I knew what he was going to say.

"Okay."

My eyes snapped over to Milo, who was looking straight ahead, and obviously full of surprises tonight. But he didn't have to tell me twice. I was turn

ing away from his block and heading towards the hill within minutes. Although, I couldn't escape the feeling that something was very off about Milo agreeing to come over to my house so late on a night before he had school in the morning. When I finally asked him, he simply told me that he wasn't ready to go home because he didn't know if Emily was going to be there. Apparently, his dad had planned to spend the evening with her at the house, and that's why he'd gone to Jerry's party in the first place. I would have preferred it if he'd told me that he'd agreed to go home with me because he couldn't get enough of me, but hey, I'd take what I could get. I only wished that he was in a better mood. It wasn't that he was cranky--more, troubled, I think. It was difficult to get him to smile, even at my jokes as I drove him to my house; so once I was home, I tried the next best thing. Ice cream and sugar cookies.

My parents had already turned off the porch light and gone to bed, so we were quiet as I raided the kitchen for dessert, and then enlisted Milo's aid in taking the small television and VCR from my dad's office, which we set up in my room and watched a Halloween movie that was only scary because it had the Olson twins in it. Needless to say, I was paying more attention to Milo than I was to the movie. He hadn't needed much encouragement to eat his ice cream, and since it was warm in my room from the heater being turned all the way up, I'd gone to the restroom to wash the makeup from my eyes and trade in my pirate wardrobe for sweatpants and a t-shirt. I'd come back to find Milo'd lost his sweatshirt and was sitting on my bed in a white undershirt, his jeans, and a pair of white socks, since his shoes were now next to my bed. I'd been doing everything possible to get as close as I could to him ever since, which in all actuality, shouldn't have been that hard since my bed wasn't very big, and we'd spent most of the movie sitting on it with our backs against the wall. But that still didn't stop me from asking Milo to put our ice cream bowls on the floor, and when he went to do it, I sneakily moved over so that then he leaned back, it was against me. I'd startled him, but when I placed a hand on his chest and pulled his weight back against me he'd nervously laughed, and didn't object to it.

Milo was tense at first, staring at the boring movie like it was the most interesting thing he'd ever seen while I spent my time trailing my fingertips up and down his arms and neck until he relaxed enough to lean back more heavily, resting his head back on my shoulder. His hair felt soft against the side of my face and he smelled like soap as I turned my head to lightly kiss his ear, sending a noticeable shudder through him.

I watched his thick lashes lower as I moved my fingers to his hair, combing it back as my free hand slid over his chest, and I could feel the muscles of his abdomen flexing beneath my palm as I moved lower, stopping at the hem of his jeans, only to lift the bottom of his shirt enough to feel the soft skin b

elow his navel. I touched him slowly, tracing his skin above his jeans as he made a point to seem uninterested in it, remaining still, staring at the television sitting atop my desk. But I didn't need a verbal response from Milo to know that he was affected. It felt like forever was passing us by, but eventually my subtle attention was greeted with a steadily rising bulge in his pants, causing him to lift his knees in an effort to hide it beneath his pants. My own arousal was a bit more difficult to conceal, I imagined, the way that it was pressing out against my gray sweatpants, the head of my cock brushing at his lower back.

I could feel Milo's shoulders stiffen when I lifted his shirt more deliberately, fisting it at his chest, just between his pectorals, but he didn't stop me as I moved my other hand down his stomach over warm skin and traced the thin dark trail of hair beginning below his belly button. His hips arched in surprise when I slipped my index finger past his jeans into loose-fitting boxers where the soft hair thickened and I could feel the weight of his shaft, against the top of my digit.

Milo gripped at my wrist, holding back my more intrusive hand, but released it a moment later to hiss in a breath when I dipped my head to suck a sweet spot of skin below his ear into my mouth. His hands moved to my knees, lifted on either side of his body, and he gripped me there, trembling as I shoved down any caution and snapped open the button of his jeans, determined to get at least a step further than the last time that I'd had him in that position. I didn't fail. I lowered his zipper as I released the skin of his neck, nipping at the spot with my teeth before I moved to his earlobe, pulling it gently between my lips as he tilted his head into me, his breathing quickly becoming rapid from the contact.

With his pants open I slid my hand beneath his boxers, reaching for him. His length was velvety and hard beneath my palm as he arched up against my hand and released a soft moan. He tilted his head, pulling his ear from my mouth and he closed his eyes as my fingers moved over his cock in light strokes and my lips moved to cover his, teasing him open until his tongue came against mine. He groaned against my lips when I released his erection to wrap an arm around his neck as I shifted out from behind him, lowering his body to the mattress as I moved over him, my knees sliding between his. I deepened the kiss, moving my tongue into his mouth as I moved my hands to his waist, sliding one around to the small of his back; and as I moved it lower I hooked the back of his pants, pulling his jeans and his underwear down past his ass slowly, taking the time to allow my fingers to graze over the firm, soft flesh of his cheeks.

Milo gripped my shoulders, his fingers digging in as I broke the kiss to move my mouth to his neck, all the while sliding my hands up naked hips and lifting his shirt until it hooked beneath his underarms. My mouth moved t

o his chest and I felt his nipple harden beneath my tongue before I moved lower. I was met with the sound of a muffled moan from Milo when I took his cock in my hand again, squeezing gently as I dragged my mouth down over his navel. I had to hold his hips to the bed when my lips closed over the head of his organ. I glanced up to meet emerald eyes and saw him watching me, unsure of whether he should be fascinated or frightened as I moved my tongue over the smooth texture of him. I went down quickly, ready to experience one of the many things I'd been forever curious about.

I experienced too much.

I probably shouldn't have been shocked that I managed to choke my first time. There had been no disclaimer explaining that feeling in any of my magazines. Of course, it was embarrassing, but if Milo noticed, I couldn't tell when his hand moved to the back of my head and he arched up. I thought quickly, which was rather hard to do under the circumstances, but managed to make up for my clumsiness with my tongue, licking his length as I fisted the base of his organ, earning another groan from him. I took him back between my lips, slower this time. Determined, but cautious.

Hell. If girls like Teresa Milldrum could do it, so could I. I just had to remember what I could fit into my mouth. I went slowly this time. I paid attention, finding that he liked it when I sucked him in. To make up for what I was lacking with my mouth, I used the hand God gave me as I experimented with his body, glancing upwards occasionally as the sight of his heavily lidded green eyes rolling back and his hips arching excited me within the confines of my own pants. I wasn't expecting the experience to be over so quickly, but I was more turned on than disappointed as I tasted the salty substance on my tongue, and before Milo even recovered I was over him, with his hands in my short hair, seeking out his tongue with my mouth. He shuddered beneath me, his skin suddenly moist from sex as my hands began to wander over him, sliding from his hips to his chest as my hard member pressed heavily into his softening one beneath my sweat pants.

When Milo moved his hands to my shoulders he was gripping so tight that it was difficult to tell if he was trying to shove me away or pull me closer, but it resulted in my knees straddling his half-clothed limbs as I continued to kiss him, leaning in closer when he moved an arm around my neck. When he gripped me through the soft material of my pants I released a surprised gasp and dropped my face to his neck, my mouth sucking at his throat to muffle my own strangled whimper; but my sucking turned to soft kissing as he loosened my drawstring and I felt his shy fingers reaching, closing around the head of my erection.

Milo shifted out of his pants as he placed a hand on my chest and pushed gently as I allowed him to guide me to my knees, and when I reached them, I pulled him to me, sliding my hand down his back, and then teasingly over

his ass while my mouth fluttered over his shoulder and I felt his rush of warm breath against my ear. He moved almost uncertainly as I felt him struggle to lower my pants, and then he met my eyes briefly before he lowered them, a light blush coloring his cheeks as I took it upon myself to remove my shirt, deciding it suddenly felt hot in my bedroom. Before the material was even over my head I felt his fingers moving over my stomach, tickling as they sent a chill through me, and when I'd rid myself of the garment I lowered my arms to rest my hands on his back, sliding them down over his shirt just as he lowered his head and I felt his lips come into contact with the head of my erection. His shyness and caution was more teasing than anything as I felt his tongue, wet and warm against my skin before he moved down my length--not far, but enough to cause my knees to shake as I resisted the urge to press my hips forward and my hands moved to his head and my fingers tangled in his hair. Like me, he used his hand for any extra compensation, and the combined sensations brought me slowly to the edge. As my eyes rolled back and my body tensed against my oncoming release I mumbled a few words of warning to him, but things seemed dark and fuzzy between then and when I had Milo on his back again, with his mouth moving beneath mine.

.....

My eyes were heavy with grogginess, and my body relaxed over Milo as his hands rested lightly on my back and his chest heaved beneath mine. I found myself kissing his neck every few moments, not wanting to move. If I moved, he'd get up. Leave. I didn't want him to do that. Everything felt just... right, the way it was. But, I had to. Eventually smothering him simply wasn't on my agenda, and in the last twenty minutes after the film playing on the television faded to the credits, and then to static, my throat had become very dry and I imagined that Milo's was the same. I dragged my hand over his bare chest as I did force myself to move off of him before I stood and pulled up my pants. Looking down on him, his body stretched and bare below his waist, he seemed sleepy, but relaxed. Content. My mouth curled into a small smile when he lifted his eyes to meet mine, and I found myself moving towards my dresser, retrieving another pair of sweats, which I brought back to the bed and placed gently over his now flaccid member. It's not that I was trying to get him to put clothes on faster. I guess I figured that if I offered him something to sleep in, he'd take the hint and sleep here. In my bed. "I'm gonna grab us some water," I said quietly. "You're not gonna like, disappear again, right?"

Milo's brow knit, and some of his troubled expression from earlier reappeared on his face, causing me to wonder what he was thinking about. But, when he gave me a slight nod I decided that I could trust him not to disappear in the two minutes that I'd be gone. I leaned over him once more before leaving the bed, leaning into his palm when he reached to touch my face as he r

eturned my light kiss.

The rest of the house seemed cold in comparison to my bedroom, but then, that could have been because I'd become accustomed to the feel of Milo's body so close. I missed the warmth, sort of like I did after forcing myself out of a warm bed first thing in the morning. I roamed the house for a few moments, making sure the draft I felt wasn't coming from an open window before I returned to the kitchen for two glasses of water. But I only got around to pouring one, which I left on the table when I took a glimpse out the window and saw a white sky glowing over the field, and the shadow of Milo Trust standing on the back deck, shirtless and wearing my pants. His breath fogged the cold air and the first snowflakes of the year drifted over him in such light flakes that even the slightest breeze pulled them off course.

I moved through the back door quietly, and he jumped a little when I slid a hand over his back, standing close to ward off some of the cold. He turned his head to meet my eyes in the dark, seeming subdued as I sighed and rested my chin on his shoulder. "If you want me to take you home," I said quietly, "you have to say it first."

My words were met with a long silence as I closed my eyes, not really expecting to hear anything at all as I rested my hands on his sides. But then, along with the wind that sent an icy chill through my body I heard his voice, close to me.

"I'm your boyfriend."

My lips turned up into a smile, but it had faded by the time I opened my eyes, straightened, and met his eyes. "I still don't have to take you home right now, though, right?"

He shook his head slowly, rolling his eyes at me as I pulled him back into the house, closing the door to shut out the cold before I grabbed the glass of water, laced my fingers with his, and took him back to my room.

Chapter 11: Confrontation

by DomLuka

Standing nearly two feet taller than my brother, his roommate, Greg Hugh, still looked good. It's long since past the days that Greg could unnerve me with one little look, but with his short dark hair, narrow blue eyes, a charming smile and his tall, toned body, he was most definitely still worth looking at. I was actually a little disappointed to see him go as I waved him out of the two-bedroom apartment that he shared with my brother. Apparently, he was meeting his parents for lunch and didn't want to be late.

It was Sunday again, and after an excruciatingly slow church service, I'd found myself driving my brother home because Leanna was going to spend a little extra time with Grannie Tenny at the retirement home. My brother had gone to change. He never felt comfortable in ironed clothes. I would have left then, but Greg had been there, getting ready to go leave and I'd spent five

ive minutes helping him pick out a shirt to wear. Although, I'm not sure how much help I was. I wasn't paying attention to the shirts as much I was paying attention to Greg when he took them off.

I looked up as Chad came from the hall leading to both of the two bedrooms in the apartment. He looked much more like himself in faded jeans and a black band sweater. He'd pulled his hair out of his ponytail and the pink strands looked knotted in the back where the band had been.

"Aren't you going home?" he finally asked as he plopped down on the white sofa furnishing the small space of the living room, along with the entertainment center and a large, beat-up gray arm chair. Chad lifted the remote, and eyed a football game on the television before he started flipping through channels.

I thought about my brother's question for a long moment before I slid over the arm of the sofa and got comfortable next to him. "No."

Chad glanced at me. "No plans today?"

"Not really," I replied, staring at the television. It looked like every channel he flipped to was playing commercials.

"Your friends busy or something?"

I turned my head to look at him, and smirked. "Am I buggin' you?"

"You will be when Leanna gets here," Chad responded meaningfully, but then smiled, elbowing me. "You're cool right now. I'm just wondering why you're still here, that's all."

"I don't know what's going on with Haily and Joe, but Caleb's baby-sitting his niece," I explained. "I'm not really in the mood to go do anything, any way."

"What about Milo?" Chad responded. "He's busy, too?"

"He's with Assface," I said, annoyed by that. Not because I didn't think Milo should hang out with Jame. They were friends, and that was his choice. I guess I just hated it that I couldn't see Milo when Jame was around. When I told Chad this, he wanted to know why I let Jame stop me. It was hard to explain to my brother, who would have serious issues if anyone ever made it difficult for him to see Leanna, that Jame was simply so hostile towards me that I preferred to avoid him. I wasn't running from him. He didn't intimidate me, but I could hardly enjoy any time with Milo if he was around, not to mention I was pretty sure that when Jame and I were near each other, Milo felt uncomfortable about it. Part of me wanted to say that that was Milo's problem, and he needed to figure out how to stand up to his friends.

But, I felt guilty for even thinking that since, in all other areas, he was trying. The Halloween party even had my friends warming towards him. At least, Haily was under the impression that Milo wasn't so bad, since she'd been clinging to me as I followed him around Wednesday night. Caleb thought Jerry was a pretty cool guy. He didn't seem to have an opinion about Milo, w

hich was perfect, since with the majority of the male population, Caleb either hated them, or had no opinion. Of course, Milo still had a strike against him, being a friend to Jame Graham. I had no idea what Joe was thinking. He'd acted like he was having a good time on Wednesday night, but Thursday at school he couldn't stop talking about how stupid it was--and worse about the people who had been there.

But, Milo had made an effort. I guess I was still trying to figure out how to make one when it came to Jame Graham, when I really, really hated him. As it was, I'd decided that it took way too much energy to even think about him and stopped talking about him. Chad was more interested in how Milo and I were getting along, anyway, and as we talked, I found myself about complaining about Emily Hill showing up at our house. Chad thought she'd seemed nice, too, and was a little surprised that Milo couldn't stand her. I explained that Milo's relationship with his dad wasn't exactly a good one, and how Milo was terrified of what would happen if his father ever found out he was gay.

"Milo thinks his dad would flip if he knew."

"Not everyone has our parents, Nels," Chad pointed out, yawning. "I mean, look at Leanna's mom, she's always looking for reasons to tell Lee what's wrong with her. Why do you think she spends so much time with us?"

"I know. But... Milo's different, you know? He can't really confide in a lot of people...or, he won't. I don't know," I said, scratching my head. "I guess it just bothers me. He's alone most of the time--always worried about what someone else is going to think of him."

"He can talk to you, though, right?" Chad pointed out, and I gave my brother a wan smile.

"Yeah, but that's different. It's not like either of us has met anyone who's gay before. I can talk to him about things like that, and I mean... he can talk to me, but it's not the same, you know? It's like, he knows I accept him because we're not that different. But, there's no one else..."

"So, bring him home more often," Chad suggested. "It's not like none of us don't know what's going on with you two."

"I know... and I've kinda been thinking about that," I admitted. "I mean, I think Milo knows that Mom and Dad...and you know what's up, but I don't want Leanna bring it up with him if it's gonna freak him out."

"So... don't bring it up, then," Chad replied. "Just bring him by, Nels. Let him get comfortable. He'll figure out that it's not a big deal to us."

"Maybe," I replied thoughtfully, realizing that it couldn't hurt to get Milo around people who would accept everything about him.

We were suddenly interrupted when my brother's front door swung open, and Leanna walked in as if she lived there, dropping her purse on the floor and hanging her coat next to mine. She looked flushed, and her glasses were so

foggy from the cold that she just took them off and slid them into her sweater pocket.

“Hi, Nelson,” she said when she spotted me on the sofa with Chad, who as always, looked happy to see her. “I thought you were going home.”

“I am,” I told her, but made no move to get up as I watched Leanna walk around me to lean down and kiss Chad. My brother grabbed her when she did so, pulling her down into his lap to prolong it, and I watched as they made out like I wasn’t even there. I supposed that they wanted me to leave, but really, they weren’t bothering me any, so I kept watching, clocking my head and wishing that I could see Milo.

“Hey, Leanna?” I said, as if she wasn’t busy with my brother at all. “Can we talk?”

Chad’s the one who pulled back from his girlfriend to narrow his eyes on me. “Weren’t you leaving?” he asked pointedly. He’d been complaining about not seeing Leanna as much as he wanted to lately, with his heavy schedule and all that charity he liked to dish out, so I wasn’t really surprised that I was pestering him now. But, I opted to ignore it when Leanna swatted his shoulder and looked at me.

“Sure,” she replied. “What did you need to talk about?”

“Blow jobs.”

Chad seemed to choke on something, and raised his brow at me from behind his startled girlfriend.

“Blow jobs?” he repeated.

“Yes,” I said seriously, and then looked at Leanna, deciding that she’d be more help with my question than my brother. “I was wondering how to do it. I mean, I know how, but it was harder than I thought... Or, I guess I should say more difficult....”

“Okay!” Chad said loudly, pushing Leanna off of him so he could escape. “This is one of those things I don’t need to hear.”

“That’s why I’m not asking you,” I pointed out.

“No,” Chad replied, as Leanna tried really hard not to laugh. “You’re my brother asking my girlfriend how to...” he paused for a moment, suddenly looking both thoughtful and disturbed as he looked between us. “Actually... you’re probably asking the right person,” he remarked, and Leanna glared at him, blushing as she straightened her short hair. “Okay. You’ve got five minutes,” Chad stated, pointing at me. “Then you’re out of here. I’ll be... somewhere else.”

I waited patiently as Leanna laughed at Chad as he retreated down the hall, shaking his head, and when she finally turned back to me I regarded her curiously.

“So, is there some kind of trick to it?” I asked, and when she opened her mouth but couldn’t seem to get any words out I added, “Don’t worry. I won’t

ask you to draw any diagrams or anything.”

.....

It was thirteen minutes before school ended on Tuesday. Usually during this time, Mrs. Bates would have us reading, or she'd be going over what we'd covered during the day, not telling us to put away our books and pay attention. I glanced over at Milo, who was holding his head in his hand as he turned his attention to the front of the room. He looked tired. In fact, he'd looked tired every time I saw him today. The day before had been the same, but today was worse because I couldn't even get him to smile. At least not really smile. He'd force little ones in my direction every time he thought I said something that was supposed to be funny.

Like Milo, I turned my attention to Mrs. Bates, who was counting heads. She only did that when she wanted us to split up into partners, and since she always told us to choose someone from our own table, I already knew who mine was. She confirmed my suspicions a moment later when she spoke. Only today, something was different as she explained that in two weeks the semester was going to end along with all first semester classes, including hers, and that we'd be taking the first half of our final exam this week. She had one of the guys closer to the front of the room lift two cardboard boxes that had been sitting next to her desk so she could unload the contents. The room was met with mixed reactions when she began to unload dolls of both genders and several nationalities from those boxes, all a little bigger than Caleb's newborn niece.

“Aren't we supposed to be taking home eggs or something?” I remarked before I could stop myself, and Mrs. Bates raised her eyebrows at me.

“This was in the budget this year, and much better,” she informed me as she lifted one of the dolls and rocked it in her arms like it was a real infant.

I frowned as she approached me with the thing, and the room was met with snickers as she passed it down, ordering me to support its head. “Congratulations, Mr. Larmont, it's a girl.”

I glared at Milo, who'd found a reason to laugh for the first time that day, and as Mrs. Bates returned to her desk to lift more dolls, I set the toy on the table and jumped when a horribly loud wailing sound started coming from it, causing my teacher to turn back around.

“You never leave an infant on a table, Mr. Larmont. Pick her up. You'll find a key sticking out of her back, you'll have to turn it until she stops crying,” Mrs. Bates told me, and as I did as she said just to get the thing to stop, she walked around the room, passing out dolls to half of the students in class. Haily looked interested in the one she got, while Milo looked pleased that he didn't have one. I just complained that my wrist hurt from holding the key, which really wasn't that easy to turn. That's when Mrs. Bates told me I should get used to it, because I'd have to turn the key every time it cried,

and not only that, but I'd have to feed it and change it, too. I wasn't sure how that was possible, exactly, but she continued by passing a stack of diapers and a special bottle to everyone who had a baby. When I was finally able to release the key without my doll crying, several others started up, including Haily's, and they all got the same instructions as I did before Mrs. Bates explained that we had to log every time the baby cried and why it was crying; then she told us that if anyone felt like cheating it would be a bad idea since she'd know if there was neglect or abuse involved. "No dropping your baby," she finished.

Mrs. Bates demonstrated several ways to take care of the dolls, and then five minutes before class ended she instructed everyone who already had a doll to choose a partner, and for once, it was anyone in the class. Guys were pairing up with girls, but since Haily already had a doll, that left one obvious choice for me. I looked at Milo, smirking. He didn't look like he was going to enjoy this assignment very much.

"Hey, daddy," I remarked, holding out the doll, which was dressed in a lot of pink.

Milo shook his head.

"No," he stated, and when I saw him eyeing a few girls looking for partners around the room, I frowned at him. I could understand his desire to fit in, but no one was going to pick on him for having a male partner because first, there were other guys or girls pairing up with the same sex because it was more convenient, given the location of where they lived, and second, I wouldn't let anyone pick on him. But, I didn't have to convince him of this because a moment later the situation sorted itself out when Milo and I were the only ones in class left without a partner.

"Guess you're stuck with me," I remarked, and held up our doll to find its lifelike blue eyes looking back at me. "It'll be interesting trying to explain to my dad why I'm taking this to work with me tonight," I mused, remembering that my dad had asked me to help out in one of the bakeries.

To my surprise, Milo shoved the bottle and diapers into his backpack and then took the doll from me, tucking it under his arm as the bell rang.

"I'll take it tonight," he said. "We can switch tomorrow before lunch."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"If you ignore it while you're working it drops both of our grades," he said reasonably.

"If you say so, daddy."

He glared at me. "Don't call me that."

"Okay," I agreed, cracking a smile. "But can I call tonight? You know, to see how little Sabrina's doing?"

"Sabrina?" he repeated, his eyebrow lifting.

I made a point to look as hurt as I possibly could. "Our baby!"

“You’re an ass,” Milo remarked, but he was trying not to laugh. “And if you even mention this doll when you call, I’m hanging up on you.”

I bit at my smile as he left the table with our assignment, glancing back at me in the process and graced me with just enough of a smile that said he didn’t mind being my partner at all.

Who cared about the damn baby.

.....
Wednesday morning, snow blanketed the lawn surrounding the school, steaming off the warming asphalt in the parking lots and surrounding streets in a way that made everything seem pleasantly messy. I headed towards the entrance of the main building with Caleb. Joe wasn’t far behind us, arguing with Kelly about whether or not he was seen flirting with Jennifer Powell yesterday after school; and Haily had gone to track down the blond freshman from our parenting class, Tim, because he’d ended up as her partner. They’d made an arrangement that Haily would take their assignment home every night if he took care of it during school hours; and given her mood this morning, I guessed that she was ready for him to take his turn.

“So?” Caleb asked as we headed up the stairs.

“You actually want me to comment on that?” I remarked. He’d had another dream. This time a fish grilled him up and ate him for dinner, and it didn’t make any sense to Caleb because he’d had pork last night.

“Not really,” he decided. “So do you wanna do something tonight? I’ve been kinda bored.”

“Sure. Like what?”

“Swimming?” he suggested. I paused just outside the doors to spend an extra moment looking around at the snow and to feel the cool temperature over my skin before he rolled his eyes and shoved me forward. “The hotel has that indoor pool,” he explained.

“Okay. I guess. I’ll have that baby from parenting, though. It’s my turn.”

“Whatever. Bring it. It’s not like it’ll bother anything.”

“If you say so,” I agreed. I didn’t bother asking how Caleb planned to get us into the hotel pool, which wasn’t generally open to the public. He wouldn’t have brought it up if he didn’t already have it worked out.

“How did you end up with Milo as a partner, anyway?” Caleb asked.

“He’s my friend, and I asked him,” I replied, unapologetic. I glanced at Caleb as we entered the school, raising an eyebrow as he looked straight ahead while we navigated our way through the crowds. He was flicking at the cleft in his chin, looking bothered about something. “You’re not still on the Milo thing are you?” I asked, regarding him somewhat grudgingly.

“Huh?” He glanced my way, shaking his head. “Nah. Whatever. Hey, meet up with you at lunch? I wanna see if I can find Ronnie before class starts.”

When he started to walk away without waiting for a response I reached out,

grazing his arm. He stopped and looked back at me, his chestnut eyes looking expectant.

"Have you talked to her?" I asked.

Caleb shrugged. "Some, yesterday. We're cool. Friends, you know?"

I offered my best friend, who looked somewhat uncertain about that, a small smile. "Yeah, okay. I'll see you at lunch."

I watched as Caleb disappeared through the crowds, making a mental note to ask him later what was on his mind. It was no good asking when he was still thinking about the things that bothered him. He'd either get angry, or blow it off. I looked back and waited for Joe as his tall, dark frame moved through the sea of students to catch up to me. It seemed that he'd ended his argument with Kelly by walking away from her.

"Bitch," he muttered as he reached me, and I sighed. I guess that was one relationship that was over.

"So you wanna go swimming tonight?" I asked. "Caleb's talking about the pool at the hotel."

"Sure," Joe replied, stepping into pace beside me, and then proceeded to complain about all of the time he'd wasted with Kelly until the first bell rang, and we parted to go to class.

The day felt like it was moving along a lot slower than normal. It wasn't of ten that I couldn't wait to go home from school because I was bored senseless. But, it could have been that way because people were quieter than usual. With finals next week everyone was buried in their books, in and out of class, it seemed. I wasn't like that. I studied if it was part of an assignment, or if I really needed to in order to learn something. I changed nothing for finals. I figured that if I was passing my classes, I'd pass the test coming up, too. At least, I always had before. But few others seemed to think that way, including Milo, who was reading through a history book and taking notes when I caught him at his locker. He had our assignment with him, at his feet. Our class wasn't the only one walking around with plastic dolls that peed this week, and when I'd seen a few girls walking around with theirs in carriers earlier, I'd thought it was stupid. When Milo did it, it was just cute. Even cuter when he said that the carrier used to be his. He even had a little blanket, blue with a green-frog pattern over the doll, although, he said that that was Juanita's doing.

I asked him if he wanted me to take it early, but he insisted that he was fine until lunch, and thought that that should be our routine. I had no objection as I went to class, just as the doll started crying, and the next time I went to look for Milo to relieve him of duty was right after I told my friends that I'd meet them at Hollander's for lunch.

Caleb had asked if I wanted them to wait, but since Joe was hungry after skipping breakfast, I had no problem going on my own. I reached Milo's locker a

little early, and leaned against it as I waited for him there. I'd only been there for two seconds before I started getting bored. It really was one of those days. But the problem was solved a few moments later when an unexpected body, tall and trim, fell against the locker next to me.

"Hey, Nelson."

Brandon Sholer's blue eyes looked tired today, and his blond hair was a perfect mess on his head, but he still worked up enough energy to flash at least one of his dimples at me. My guess was that he was swept up into all this studying business, too.

"Long week?" I remarked.

"I'm just ready for break to be here," he replied, sighing.

"Only a week and a half away," I pointed out. "Do you have plans?"

"I have family coming in for Thanksgiving," he explained. "You?"

"All my family's pretty much in Heywell."

"No, I mean, do you have plans?" he asked, cracking a small smile.

"Oh... well, I'm gonna eat a lot," I provided, and he released a small chuckle as he straightened and pulled his red backpack tighter over the shoulders of his team jacket.

"Okay. Well, if you run into any good parties or anything, look me up. I'll probably end up getting bored."

"Sure... see ya, Brandon."

He gave a small wave and I watched him walk away, my eyes drifting to his ass. It was always fun to watch Brandon walk away.

"Get the fuck outta the way, asshole."

I frowned. That voice was not one that was going to make my day better. Jame Graham wasn't his usual irritating smiling self today. But he was his irritating aggravated self as he made a lame attempt to stare me down. I crossed my arms, and leaned more heavily against the purple locker behind me as I did my best to look uninterested while facing him. It seemed the cold didn't agree with Jame at all, and his large, round cheeks were red and windburned. I might have made a diaper rash comment, but decided that it wouldn't be right if I was really trying to tolerate him.

"I'm just waiting for Milo so I can get our assignment," I replied. Maybe if I talked to him like a human being, he'd start to act like one. No harm in wishful thinking, I guess.

"Wait somewhere else. You're in my way."

"How am I in your way? This is Milo's locker."

"Well I left something in it. Move."

With that tone, I almost didn't. Almost. I moved aside, but not far. Just enough to get out of his face, and then as he proceeded to open Milo's locker, he made sure to purposely and obviously block the combination from my view, much to my chagrin. It wasn't that I wanted to know it that bothered me, mo

re like Jame's attitude. I tried to ignore it, looking down the hall as I continued to wait for Milo, but when Jame suddenly slammed the locker door, I turned my eyes towards his again.

"Problem?" I asked tightly when I found him glaring at me. It wasn't in the cute Milo way, either.

"Yeah. You're still here."

"I told you, I'm waiting for Milo, and I'm trying to ignore you, so why don't you return the favor, huh?"

"What do you want with him, anyway?" Jame suddenly demanded. "You know, just because his name's Trust doesn't mean he'll do you any favors. He's not like that, and he doesn't need someone like you hanging around."

I frowned at that, not liking the way that everyone seemed so hung up on Milo's last name. "You care about his name more than I do. He's my friend, Jame. I hang around my friends."

"He told you to get lost."

"No he didn't," I argued. "So why don't you just back off? I'm not leaving until Milo gets here, and you don't know anything about me, so stop acting like you do."

"I know I don't like you. That's enough, so why don't you get out of my face?"

Jame must have been confused, because I wasn't the one in his face.

"And why don't you go breathe on someone who doesn't think your breath smells like someone's asshole," I remarked, quickly becoming irritated.

"And why don't you go to hell?" Jame retorted, taking a step closer that I'm sure he meant to be menacing.

"Will you stop trying to intimidate me?" I asked, believing that it was a reasonable request. "You look like an idiot."

I'd never been happier to hear the loud sound of a wailing infant as Milo appeared in the hallway, mixed within a large group of students, all headed to their lunch breaks. He handed me the carrier as soon as he reached us, not seeming to notice the tension between Jame and me.

"Your turn," Milo stated, and then glanced at Assface as he turned to open his locker. "Hey, Jame." I placed the carrier on the ground and lifted the doll, having unbuttoned the back of the onesie it was wearing to reach the key, which I was dismayed to find, didn't work. "You've gotta feed it," Milo informed me as he opened his backpack and handed me the special bottle. As soon as I stuck it between the doll's lips, it stopped, but I found that I had to physically hold it there to keep it that way.

"How long does this take?" I asked Milo, ignoring the way that Jame was regarding me with a certain amount of disgust on his face.

"Only a few minutes," Milo replied as he took it upon himself to unload the remaining diapers from his backpack and place them in mine. "I think the

whole things on a timer, but there's no way of knowing when it's gonna go off. Can you keep it 'til tomorrow? Same time?"

"Yeah, it's no problem," I insisted, removing the bottle from the doll's mouth long enough to discover that it was still crying.

"Can we go now?" Jame asked Milo, looking impatient.

"Just a sec," Milo said as he unloaded a few books into his locker. I found myself staring up at him, wondering why his hair looked so straight today as it hung around his face, which was drawn into a rather exhausted expression. Like he could feel my eyes on him, he glanced down at me briefly, and felt my lip curling into a helpless smile.

"What are you doing for lunch?" I asked.

"I think we're just hanging around here," Milo replied, and glanced to Jame for confirmation. "Aren't we?"

"Yeah. We are," Jame responded, sending a scowl my way. I ignored it, suddenly deciding that Chad was right. It might have been easier to just stay away when Jame was involved, but this whole thing with him was getting old fast, and I felt the need to make a point.'

"Want some extra company?" I asked Milo, who in turn looked both shocked, and a little uncomfortable with my question. But, he shrugged, anyway.

"Don't you have plans or something?" Milo asked.

"Yeah, he does," Jame stated. I ignored that, too.

"No. I can hang around here."

Milo seemed to think on it for a moment. "Sure, if you want."

"What?" Jame demanded.

Milo turned towards Jame and asked the same question, only in a different tone. "What?"

I smiled at that, deciding that if Jame didn't drop his attitude, he was going to be the one who looked like a jackass in front of Milo, not me. Milo even waited until I had the doll under control before we headed to the cafeteria.

Jame had his arms crossed the whole way there, looking more than a little pissed.

I figured that staying at school for lunch wasn't that big of a deal. My friends had probably already ordered at Hollander's anyway. They'd probably think that I got held up or distracted, and wouldn't miss me at all. Besides, it had been days since I'd actually spent any real time with Milo, and I was in the mood for it, even if Jame was there.

It had been a while since I last ate in the school cafeteria. Actually, now that I thought about it, I hadn't been there all year. I'd forgotten how noisy it could be, and how bad the food actually was. I ended up with fish sticks, juggling my tray and my parenting assignment as I followed Milo and Jame to a table in the center of the room. They reached it first, though. I kept running into people who had taken a break from their studying long enough to

o say hello. Some of them even followed me to the table, causing both Jame and Milo to look up nervously. They didn't seem used to having a whole lot of people around, except for the few girls that were already there. But, I was kind of grateful for the crowd. It distracted me from the way that Jame kept glaring at me, and every once in a while, leaned over to whisper something--likely nasty about me--in Milo's ear as they sat across from me and Peter Forest, who had decided to join us.

It was only twenty minutes into lunch when everyone around the table started to slowly disappear, going off somewhere to enjoy the rest of their break. This left me with both Milo and Jame. They were both silent--Milo out of nature, and Jame out of anger towards my being there. It was mostly an awkward silence, and I found myself attempting to fill it with conversation, which unfortunately, wasn't as easy as it usually was for me. I tried talking about simple things, like how it sucked everyone was studying so hard. But when I mentioned that I wasn't making a huge deal out of it, Jame told me that he hoped I failed my final. When I asked Milo if our assignment kept him up late because I knew that Haily had seemed tired after her baby experience, Jame decided to tell me Haily had more boobs than brains. I responded by telling him that he had more ass on his face than cheeks. Milo had frowned at all of this, but I didn't care. I was becoming frustrated with Jame.

Enough was enough, especially when Milo asked how many bakeries my family had and I started to tell him about them, only to have Jame say that he'd seen my dad and couldn't understand why he was so fat from eating muffins and cookies since he couldn't bake worth a shit, anyway.

"Shut the fuck up!" I finally snapped, glaring across the table at Jame.

"Nelson, don't..." Milo started, but I didn't care. He was lucky that I wasn't across the table choking his fat-faced friend, whose triumphant, obnoxious smile had returned.

"Why don't you just give it a rest?" I demanded, looking at Jame. "I haven't done anything to you, but I swear that'll change if you open your mouth again."

"Am I supposed to be afraid of that?" Jame remarked.

"Just knock it off," Milo ordered, but this time he seemed to be talking to both of us.

"Sure," Jame told him. "Just as soon as you tell this bitch to get lost."

Milo looked at me, and I met his eyes, but this time my expression was cold.

I wouldn't be happy if what he'd done at the dance was repeated now. He needed to tell Jame to back off, simple as that. But, he didn't. He didn't tell me to get lost, either. Instead, Milo found his own way of dealing with things as he suddenly stood up.

"I'm gonna go find another soda," he announced. I wasn't sure what to think when he left Jame and me alone together. I was angry about it, I think. But

at the same time, I was sort of glad it happened, because as soon as he was gone I faced Jame directly.

“I’m not going away, so either deal with me or go away,” I stated.

“I don’t have to deal with shit.”

“You know, I’m not doing anything to hurt you--or him. What the hell’s your problem?”

“You and everything about you. Just leave me and my friends alone.”

“Milo’s my friend too,” I said, shrugging. “He has the right to choose his own friends.”

“He doesn’t even like you.”

“Well then why don’t you take that up with him?” I responded. “I don’t wanna start shit with you, Jame, but if you can’t be less of an asshole then it’s gonna happen.”

“Yeah? Well fuck you.”

“Nice,” I remarked, rolling my eyes at him, but before I could get anything else out, I caught sight of a familiar blond not far behind Jame, and as I caught Caleb’s eyes, I froze in place, the expression on his face telling me one thing. He didn’t see me sitting there having an argument with a guy who I couldn’t stand. Caleb saw his best friend, having lunch with his worst enemy.

I was out of my seat in an instant, ignoring the way that Jame snickered when he realized what was going on. Leaving my parenting assignment on the table, I rushed across the room, passing rows of orange tables as I tried to catch up to Caleb, who’d already started to walk away.

“Caleb!” He didn’t respond, and I had to run to catch him at the door. “Caleb!” I tried again, catching him right at cafeteria exit. He paused then, and I was met with his hand as he put it up as a wall between us. He turned his head and met my eyes sharply, his dark and furious.

“Don’t,” he snapped, and I froze, the tone one that he’d never quite used on me before, shocking me enough that all I could do was stand there helplessly as he walked away, not even bothering to throw me a backwards glance. I stood there for what felt like a long time, trying to sort out the knots in my stomach as I wondered what was going through Caleb’s head. When I did turn back to the table, Milo was standing there, looking concerned as I furiously began to gather my things and the baby carrier, while Jame just looked smug.

“You okay?” Milo asked me hesitantly, and even I was surprised at how angry I was when I lifted my eyes to meet his.

“What the fuck do you think?” I demanded, and without another word, I walked away from Milo Trust and his asshole friend, unsure if I was more outraged by the way that Caleb had just walked away from me, or the way that Milo let me walk away without telling Jame Graham to go to hell.

.....

I wasn't liking this baby assignment for parenting class. I'd only had the thing for an hour and a half and it had gone off twice at inconvenient times: first, when I was late for class, and second when I was trying to change for gym. I got a small break during Mrs. Bates's class when all dolls had their batteries recharged. It hadn't taken very long for me to start feeling guilty about snapping at Milo. He hadn't made eye contact with me for the first thirty minutes of class. Unfortunately, I couldn't talk to him because Mrs. Bates had us reading silently. And I needed to talk to him. It was my fault I'd hung around knowing that Jame Graham would be there, and knowing that he was going to say things that would piss me off. I hadn't counted on Caleb, but I could fix that later, and it wasn't exactly fair to expect Milo to solve every little problem I had. Besides that, the whole experience had me wondering what kind of shit he took from Jame after hanging out with my friends--if Jame even knew about it.

When Milo had taken to holding his head in his hand, looking like he was tired of holding it up, I wasn't sure if I was what was bothering him, or if it was something else, but I took the opportunity to write a note on a piece of notebook paper and slide it over the table in his direction. Milo eyed my handwriting rather than me--large blue letters spelling out I'm sorry with a frowning face beneath as he pulled it in his direction with two long fingers. When he did meet my eyes, I was a little surprised to find that Milo looked more confused than anything; but when I flashed him an apologetic look to match my writing, his expression softened, he gave me a slight nod, and then went back to his reading.

I watched him through the rest of class, deciding that his mood was no different than it had been the day before. When I asked him if anything was wrong, he told me that he'd had a headache bothering him for the last few days, and he hadn't been sleeping right. I guessed that our parenting assignment had something to do with that last thing. Either way, his explanation seemed to explain enough and as he left at the end of class I said I'd call him.

Haily, who'd been eyeing me all through class, snagged my arm as soon as I was out of the parenting class trailer. She had her assignment--a boy--tucked under her arm, while I still had Milo's carrier. She was frowning at me, and I didn't need to ask to know what her problem was. She told me anyway, though.

"What's going on with you and Caleb?" she demanded. "He was pissy all through lunch; you never showed up; and when I saw him before Mrs. Bates's class he told me that you could go to hell when I asked if you guys were planning to go swimming, like Joe said."

"I don't think we're going swimming anymore, Haily," I replied, and her frown deepened.

“That wasn’t my question, Nels. Seriously. What happened?”

I sighed, glancing at her sidelong. “He saw me having lunch with Jame Graham earlier.”

Haily’s reaction to that was to be expected as she looked at me as if she’d heard something wrong. “You were where?”

“When I went to get this stupid thing from Milo,” I explained, tipping the carrier to indicate the baby, “we started talking and I decided to hang around and eat in the cafeteria with him. But Jame was there--and he was being a total fucking prick. I swear sometimes I think we should just let Caleb kick his ass and be done with it.”

“Okay...” Haily said slowly. “Then what’s Caleb’s problem?”

“Milo walked away for something,” I explained. I was beginning to feel exasperated. “When Caleb saw me I was alone with Jame. He probably got the wrong idea.”

“But you were still at lunch with Assface,” Haily pointed out, acting as if she couldn’t quite understand the concept as she threw her head back to swing her braid over her shoulder.

“I was having lunch with Milo,” I informed her. “Jame was there. And, whether or not I was fighting with him--Caleb’s being an idiot. He’s acting like I attacked him or something. I was sitting at the same table as Assface. Big fucking deal. I still don’t like the guy. I was there because of Milo.”

“Haily looked about ready to side with Caleb, but instead, she simply shook her head at me. “Do you want me to try to talk to Caleb for you?”

“I can tell him he’s being a jerk myself,” I informed her.

“If you say so,” she replied, sounding irritated. I could understand why. I was irritated, too. Caleb and I never fought, and even if I believed I could fix this, the feeling still wasn’t a good one as apprehension over it worked my nerves.

“It’ll be okay,” I finally decided aloud. “I’ll talk to him.”

But I didn’t get the chance to talk to Caleb as I’d hoped to when we reached the parking lot. Joe was there, looking as confused as Haily and me as we realized that the spot Caleb usually parked his jeep in was vacant. At least as I took my two remaining friends home, Haily had the good sense not to tell Joe what was going on. I had a feeling that Joe would love a reason to tell me why I shouldn’t associate with Milo Trust, and I wasn’t in the mood for it. I was more concerned with Caleb now, anyway. At least, the more I thought about it, the more it didn’t make sense. I could understand why he’d be upset over what he’d seen. Angry over it. True, when Caleb got angry, he didn’t exactly have a tendency to wait for explanations, so I wasn’t surprised that he hadn’t in this situation. But what he did do, was yell. Or hit things. In my case, I would have expected the former. Not the way that he’d walked away and decided to avoid things. That just wasn’t his style.

And frankly, it had me pretty damn confused.

I planned to call Caleb to try to talk to him as soon as I got home, but as I pulled down the gravel drive, still wet from the recent snow which was still apparent in places where puddles usually formed, a black Mercedes parked in front of the garage where I usually parked caught my eye, and suddenly, I was dreading my phone call to Caleb a lot less than what I was pretty sure that I'd find in my house.

I had the infant carrier, my temporary daughter strapped into it, and my backpack as I stepped into the house and was greeted by the scent of something brewing in the crock pot and the sound of feminine laughter. I moved far enough down the hall to peer into the living room, horrified as I saw my mom on the sofa with Emily Hill, one of our many photo albums between them.

"Oh, look at that dress!" Emily exclaimed, pointing to one of them. "That's so beautiful."

"Have you thought about what kind you want?" my mom asked her, and I openly frowned into the room. Neither of them noticed me, though. Not before I heard the sound of a knife hitting a cutting board coming from the kitchen and I headed to it, where I found my dad chopping potatoes over the island counter near the stove. He must have gotten off work early, because with his glasses perched on his nose his dark, thinning hair looked shiny and damp from a recent shower, and he was in one of the button-up shirts that he favored when he wanted to be comfortable. I marched right up to the opposite side of the counter and placed the carrier with the doll on it, and he looked up, just in time to find my eyes pointedly on him. But his attention was automatically drawn to the carrier and an alarmed look came over his face, not that I made a show of noticing it.

"Is Miss Hill going to have her wedding here?" I demanded.

"What is that?" My dad wanted to know, pointing at the carrier, but before I got the chance to respond, he'd stopped what he was doing, wiped his hands on a paper towel and rushed around the counter to look down at the doll in the pink onesie, still covered in the little frog blanket.

"It's my parenting class project," I explained, noticing the relieved and somewhat amused expression on my dad's face. "Dad, is she?"

He was still staring at the doll. "Huh?"

"Emily, is she... damn it!"

I glared at the doll as it began to make that awful wailing sound, and my dad took a step back.

"What's it doing?" he asked as I lifted the thing up and searched for the key in its back. It didn't work, so I tried the bottle next as I cradled it in my arms. That did.

"I have to feed it," I explained, and frowned at the look on my dad's face.

"It's homework!" I said defensively. "So is she having her wedding here, or not?"

My dad just stared at me. Or rather, me holding and trying to feed a plastic doll, for a very long moment before he finally shook his head and went back to the potatoes.

"I'm not sure, Nelson."

"So why is she here?" I asked.

"Your mother offered to show her the pictures from your Uncle Ray's wedding."

"Why?"

"So Emily can see how things could look if she did want to have her wedding here," he said, beginning to sound exasperated.

"Dad..."

"Don't get all worked up about this, Nelson," he insisted. "They're just looking at pictures."

"Fine. But why can't you just tell her she can't have her wedding here?" I asked. "There are plenty of other places..."

"Because," my dad replied, cracking a small smile, "like your mother would say--that would be rude. You really shouldn't be worried about this, anyway."

"Dad, I know she seems nice, but Milo..."

"I know," my dad replied, smiling gently, in a way that at least let me know that he wasn't ignoring my concerns. "But Nelson, there's a possibility that he's just not sure about her. You know, it took work to get along with you boys when I married your mom."

"It was not."

"Well, maybe not that hard," he admitted as a reminiscent look crossed his face and he adjusted his glasses. "But for a while, I remember you and your brother were pretty suspicious of me."

I frowned at that, mostly because I didn't remember. "If we were, we wouldn't have said yes when you asked us if you could marry our mom."

"Before that," my dad explained. "You guys weren't so sure about having a man around the house, especially Chad. It took work--but we ended up okay. It could be the same for Milo and Emily after they spend some time together. Maybe they just need time."

"Okay," I replied. "You have a point... But I'm more worried about Milo now. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get him to come over already? If he starts hanging around here..."

"Nelson, I really doubt that she's moving in with us, okay? I promise, if anything changes, you'll be the first to know. Please stop worrying about it. And... why don't you keep me posted on Milo, okay? If it becomes a problem, I'll talk to your mom."

I sighed, knowing that there was no way that my dad was going to just go get rid of Emily. Hell, if I were him, I wouldn't either. She really did seem nice, but the fact that she was visiting my house didn't help things as far as Milo was concerned. I wasn't exactly interested in upsetting him, but I'd promised to tell him if things changed with Emily. I wasn't sure if this qualified as change or not, but I had a sinking feeling that I should tell him about it, just in case he found out later, which he probably would, like the last time, and end up angry with me for keeping it from him. When I picked up the phone a while later to call him, I just hoped my dad was right, and there really wasn't anything to worry about. But I never got the chance to find out, because out of the four times I called throughout the evening, there was no answer. Having to wait only made what I wanted to talk to him about feel harder.

At least there was no suspense when it came to Caleb. He hung up on me when I called him.

.....
It was snowing again. It wasn't enough to really stick to anything, and wouldn't have been bad if the overcast sky didn't seem so close that it felt like it was boxing us in. The air was still, and students around school were once again busy cramming for finals. It all made for a quiet Thursday, except for when the silence was occasionally interrupted by the sound of a wailing baby, mine included. I was getting tired of my assignment. As it was, it had woken me up four times after I went to bed, and I was ready to get rid of it. My day wasn't made any easier by the fact that Caleb still wasn't talking to me. Haily and Joe hadn't called me for a ride, but Caleb's jeep was in the usual spot. He just wasn't waiting for me at the stairs like every other day. Haily and Joe were, though. Haily looked concerned, but Joe seemed none the wiser as he spent his time before class flirting with every girl he could after his fallout with Kelly. It really didn't help that my classes were dragging by, and I didn't see Milo at all when I went to his locker. I wasn't trying to pass our assignment on to him early. I just wanted to see him. I was starting to feel a little lonely, not having spoken to Caleb yet. It didn't seem to matter that I talked to practically everyone else I'd run into.

I'd told Haily to try to get Caleb to Hollander's for lunch again, and that I'd meet them there after meeting Milo, but as I waited at Milo's locker again, I had no idea how successful she'd been, and Milo was running late. It made me worry, since I hadn't seen him all day as it was. When the crowds thinned, and there was still no sign of him, the doll started to cry again. I sighed to myself as I placed the carrier on the ground and went to inspect what was wrong. This time, the diaper had turned blue, meaning it was wet and I knelt down to change it before I turned the key on the doll's back, which stopped the aggravating sound in just a few moments. I was settling it back

in the carrier when a worn, dirty black tennis shoe nearly hit me as it stepped over the carrier, knocking it completely over. I grabbed for the doll, able to catch everything before it toppled over. I glared up at the perpetrator, not at all surprised to find Jame Graham as he went to open Milo's locker, looking like nothing in the world was bothering him.

To hell with pleasantries.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I demanded.

He glanced down, likely trying to appear cool with that subdued expression that didn't look quite right on his face, given those fat cheeks of his. He looked like a blow fish.

"Get lost, Larmont."

I moved the carrier aside, and made sure it was behind me, and away from Jame as I stood, facing him.

"Why don't you fucking make me?" I retorted, beyond perturbed with him at this point. Seeing how I hadn't seen either of my two favorite people all day, and I could reasonably blame him for one of their absences, it wasn't a good day for Jame to be picking a fight with me.

Jame's brow lifted as he turned to face me, and I found the amusement in his eyes to be infuriating. He looked at me like a pest. Not even a little threatened, like he did when it was Caleb standing in my place. I suppose it had always been like that with Jame where I was involved. I'm not sure why I suddenly found that so insulting. He took a step forward, and my eyes narrowed on him as I wondered where he got the impression that I was actually going to back down. He started frowning when I didn't.

"Get the fuck out of my face!" he ordered.

"But it's so big," I remarked. "Makes it kinda hard."

Jame bit at his lip, and I watched as his face scrunched up into something aggravated. "I am so sick of you and your fucking friends!" he spat, and I actually had to wipe some of it away from my face.

"Well for someone who's sick of my friends you sure make a point to try to get their attention!" I pointed out. "Trust me, nothing would make me happier than getting the fuck away from you, but I'm not doing that until I see Milo, so I can give him our assignment."

"Well you can't, so back off."

"He's my friend too, Jame. I'm not going anywhere." Even as I said it, I found myself frowning, wondering why I was the one who always had to tell him that Milo and I were friends. Hell, the way Milo was hot and cold with me around him, it was no wonder he needed the constant reminder.

"Then you have a long wait," Jame responded, raising his voice as he slammed the locker, now drawing attention from the slow stream of students still moving through the corridor. "Milo didn't come to school today."

He was in my face again as I absorbed this information, looking at me like i

It was my fault.

“Why?” I asked.

“None of your fucking business.”

I glared at that, and Jame smirked triumphantly. But, whatever victory he thought he had over me was short-lived when his eyes widened in shock as a hand met his chest a moment later, shoving his back into the lockers.

I was a little shocked by that myself, and by the shoulder nudging me away. What I wasn't very surprised by, was that it was Caleb with his palm pinning the startled Jame to his locker, nor was I shocked that my best friend was so red in the face that it looked like a vein was about to pop right out of his forehead.

When Jame finally snapped his jaw shut, he lifted his hands to grab Caleb's wrist in a pathetic attempt to get the blond off of him. When Caleb didn't budge, Jame opened his mouth, likely to say something obnoxious, but smartly rethought it when Caleb stepped so close to him that they were practically nose to nose. Looking around at my peers, who were now gathered around us, I reacted as I always did.

“Caleb, stop it,” I insisted, reaching up to grab at his shoulder. He didn't budge, but he didn't shake me off, either. He was too busy staring down Jame, who finally managed to find his tongue.

“Get off me!” he shouted.

“Caleb!” I said, raising my voice. “Forget about him, okay? Caleb!”

“Is there a problem?” Mr. Danner's nasal voice demanded, just as I managed to pry Caleb away from Jame. Everyone, including the crowd, turned to face the short, pudgy teacher with a bad black-dye job in his thinning hair.

I found myself grateful that it was well known how Mr. Danner hated everyone equally, because when Caleb and I shook our heads, so did Jame as the teacher looked around suspiciously. “Fine, then break it up before everyone here gets to spend lunch mopping up the gymnasium.”

People reluctantly scattered. So did Caleb and Jame, after sending one last glare at each other. I lifted the baby carrier, glancing down to see that my assignment was still safe inside it, and rushed to catch up to Caleb. He didn't look at me, but he did slow down and allowed me to match his pace. I kept looking at him as he seemingly led us towards the main entrance to reach the parking lot, but I wasn't sure what to say to him. In fact, I wasn't aware if we were actually talking yet or not, and it made for some awkward and unknown territory until Caleb finally did the talking for us.

“I hate him, Nelson.”

“I know you do,” I replied, unsure of what else I was supposed to say.

“You wanted me to ignore him, but I can't. Every time I turn around...”

“I know.”

Caleb abruptly stopped to face me as we reached the front entrance, not see

ming to care who had to walk around us--or in some cases, between us--to get out the doors.

"I wasn't mad at you yesterday," he said.

I took a moment to process that claim, and would have crossed my arms if I wasn't juggling an infant carrier. "Yes, you were."

Caleb frowned at me, like I was missing the point or something. "Okay, I was. But I talked to Haily. Now I'm not."

"Oh, that's just perfect," I responded sarcastically. "You listened to what Haily had to say but you wouldn't even talk to me?"

Caleb sighed, and when he suddenly turned and headed down the stairs towards the parking lot, I followed. "I knew that you weren't actually getting cozy with Assface," Caleb explained. "I just... I was having a bad day, alright? There was... shit going on, and when you didn't show up for lunch I wanted to come back here and see if I could find you. You weren't supposed to be with Assface."

"He's Milo's friend."

"Then Milo has serious issues," Caleb informed me. "Look, it threw me off, okay?"

"So you didn't talk to me all day?"

"I told you I was having a bad day."

"Is this your idea of an apology?" I remarked, and Caleb looked my way, his expression concerned.

"You know it is!" he stated, and then softened his expression towards me. "I'll baby-sit for you." I raised an eyebrow at that, but he didn't have to tell me twice as I handed over the baby carrier, perfectly willing to say goodbye to it and its contents for the rest of the hour, since it seemed that I'd have the doll around longer than expected. Caleb took it with no problem, and glanced over at me again. "We're good, right?"

I shrugged. "Yeah... so why were you having a bad day? Is it Ronnie again?"

Caleb shrugged indifferently. "It's a lot of things. Julie's in her own place, so now my parents are back on my case again."

"Finals?"

"Uh-huh."

"You need any help?" I asked. I wasn't a tutor, but I did know a few of them.

"No. I'm just tired of studying, ya know?"

"So let's go out this weekend," I suggested.

"Before finals?"

"Why not?"

Caleb seemed thoughtful. "Yeah. Why not? I'm talking to Ronnie again."

"You told me. Everything okay there?"

“No. And yes,” Caleb replied. “We’re friends, I guess.”

“And that’s a problem?” I asked, eyeing him curiously. “You know Caleb, if you asked her out she’d say yes.”

“No shit,” Caleb snorted, shaking his head. “But I’m not going to. It would fuck things up. Plus, I tried to talk to her about what happened at homecoming and she told me that she actually hangs out with Assface.”

“So?” I responded, and Caleb frowned at me, incredulous. “I get that you don’t like him,” I explained. “I don’t like him, either, but I don’t go around ready to strangle everyone who wants to hang out with him. I mean, it’s their own business, right? Like, if you suddenly started showing up everywhere with him, I still wouldn’t like him, but it’s not like it would change anything between me and you.”

“Hey--I said I was sorry about yesterday. And, that would never happen.”

“I know, Caleb. I’m just trying to make a point. If Ronnie is friends with Jame, you shouldn’t let it screw things up. She’s still Ronnie. If she’s friends with Assface, she’s probably been friends with him a lot longer than you’ve known about it. What’s the big deal?”

Caleb lowered his eyes, seeming to think about that for a while, but he never commented as we met Haily and Joe by our vehicles. Haily was happy to see Caleb and I were together. Joe finally wanted to know why we’d been fighting in the first place. Caleb told him to shut up, and together, the four of us went to lunch.

I might have been more bothered by my encounter with Jame if it wasn’t for the fact that everything seemed right with me and Caleb again, and I didn’t really care enough about Assface to waste my energy being angry with him. But, that didn’t mean that I wasn’t worried about what he’d told me. Or at least, one thing he’d told me. There was no explanation for why Milo wasn’t in school. He was simply absent, and after not being able to get hold of him the night before, I was prone to wonder what was going on. I definitely wanted to see him--or hear from him. It wasn’t just to get rid of the baby, either. I had things I needed to say to him. There was Emily Hill, and unfortunately, Jame Graham, too. It really didn’t help that I was worried about him being angry with me. I decided that I’d go see him after school. At least then I could figure out what was going on. Only, I got to figure that out before school even ended.

I was in Mrs. Bates’s class, listening as she went around the room, asking people to share their experiences with the dolls thus far, when the trailer door swung open, bringing in a gust of cool November air that had me looking up in time to see Milo as he entered the classroom. Mrs. Bates spotted him, and I found myself sitting up in my seat, my eyes on him as he spoke quietly with her, handing her over a note. She looked in my direction, gave him a nod, and a moment later Milo was heading in my direction as Mrs. Bates

continued with her class.

I looked him over as he got closer, the way he was bundled in a heavy black coat. Usually, black was a good color for him, but today he seemed pale, his dark hair limp around his face. He gave me a nod in recognition before his bloodshot green eyes focused on his baby carrier, and the doll in it, which I'd perched on the table in front of the seat he usually sat in.

"I'm just here for the doll," he whispered, his voice sounding a little scratchy as I continued to study him. "Sorry I couldn't meet you earlier."

"That's okay," I replied carefully. "Are you sick?"

He shrugged. "Just the flu. I'll be back tomorrow." He placed his hand on the carrier to lift it, but so did I, causing him to pause and meet my eyes.

"Don't worry about it, Milo. I'll keep it."

"It's my turn," he responded, obviously being stubborn as he checked to make sure the diapers and the bottle were there. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I opened my mouth to object when he lifted our assignment, wanting to tell him that we needed to talk. But the way Mrs. Bates looked in our direction stopped me, and all I could do was frown after Milo as he left, deciding that he was going to see me a lot sooner than tomorrow.

.....
I think when someone was sick, it was supposed to be protocol to bring that person soup. But, in Milo's case, I figured that Juanita had that covered, so I attempted a different approach.

When it came to being prepared if her kids got sick, my mom was like a walking pharmacy. That's why, after I'd finished up about half of my homework around four thirty, just before it got dark, I raided our medicine cabinet. Milo hadn't exactly said what his symptoms were, so that left me to grab just about everything from cough drops to fever reducers to heartburn medication before I made a lame attempt to make it cute by piling it all into an old yellow and blue Easter basket. When I was on the way to Stratford, I decided that the whole thing was more stupid than it was cute. But even if he didn't like it, at least it was something Milo could laugh at. Or smile. I guess I would have settled for either, given what I needed to talk to him about.

I'd decided not to bring up Jame. I was going to feel bad enough for bringing up Emily, a topic that would likely make him feel worse than he already did. But I had to. The one visit was probably no big deal, just as my dad said. I had to tell him about it anyway, though, before he heard it from someone else. At least, as I rang his doorbell with my medicine basket, topped with some wrapped slices of my dad's freshly baked banana bread, that was the plan.

But plans change. Just like mine did, a few moments later, when Milo's front door opened.

I'm sure that there were plenty of times when I could have showed up at my c

loseted boyfriend's house that he would have considered a bad time. I was pretty sure that this time made the list. I'm not sure how long I stood there, like an idiot, staring in disbelief at Jame Graham as he held the front door open. I shouldn't have been startled to see him. If anything, I knew that.

But after my confrontation with him earlier that afternoon it seemed easy to become unnerved by his presence, even so much that for entire moments, I entirely forgot that he was supposed to be Milo's friend and found it very difficult to comprehend the way that he was standing there. Milo, just behind him, drew my attention as he released a short cough. His eyes were on mine, looking drowsy and painfully red, but still concerned.

I tried to recover quickly. I was there for a reason, after all. "Hey," I said, focusing on Milo, who started to step forward. But, before he could reach me, or I could get any more words out, my eyes were on Jame Graham as he moved between Milo and me, his face furious and so close to mine that I could smell the salami he'd had for lunch.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he demanded.

I raised an eyebrow at him, not appreciating the interruption. "Just here to see the father of my child," I remarked, just before I felt pressure on my shoulders as he pushed me.

As soon as I realized that Jame wasn't going to stop with just shoving me, I dropped the basket and various pill bottles rolled over the dark cement patio, some down the stairs and over the snow-covered lawn. The ingrate had clearly lost his mind as he gripped the front of my heavy blue coat and stepped on the banana bread, cussing about the nerve I had. He might have been taller than me, and angrier than me, but his eyes widened when I grabbed his thin wrists and dislodged his unwelcome hands from my clothing with virtually no problem at all. He attempted to pull his wrists from my grip but I refused to let go before I swung him around until I was standing between him and Milo's front door, at which point I shoved him away from me, alert for any more attacks that he might want to make from the moment that my hands left his wrists.

"Don't be a fucking idiot, Assface!" I snapped. "I don't want to fight with you but that doesn't mean I won't!"

"Good!" he retorted, blindly pulling back his fist. I'm not sure what part of me he planned to hit, but I had my hands up in an instant, ready to stop him as I moved forward, roughly pushing him back again. I caught his attacking fist in my palm and tilted my head back to avoid his other hand, which reached threateningly for my neck. I felt his thumbnail scrape my chin, and a ridiculous kick to my knee before I became severely aware of Milo's body moving between us, pushing at Jame as much as he was at me. His head was low, as if he fully expected either one of us to hit him at any moment.

"Stop it!" he shouted, his voice sounding somewhat uneven, a little like mine

e had when I'd first reached puberty. "Jame, just leave!"

I blinked at that, taking a startled step back, mostly because if he were going to tell anyone to leave, I thought it would have been me. Obviously, Jame thought the same thing because the look he shot at Milo was one of hurt outrage.

"Milo!"

"I'm serious," Milo responded, lowering his voice. "I can't do this right now."

"You expect me to leave you here with him?" Jame demanded.

Without so much as glancing back at me, Milo startled me again. "I want him here. I'll talk to you later but right now you just have to go home."

Jame shook his head, glaring at me. I didn't feel the need to gloat this time, but I watched as Milo finally moved forward and grabbed Jame's shoulder, leading him down the walkway. It seemed that Jame was taking Milo's car as Milo led him to where it was crookedly parked in the driveway, and the two began to argue just loud enough for me to hear it. It was mostly Jame, outraged that I was staying, and Milo telling him that his head hurt too much to argue--but I was his friend, and I wasn't going anywhere.

I'd been wondering if Milo had been saying something along those lines to Jame. I'd hoped he would. But, it seemed like this was really the first time, and I actually became uncomfortable as I watched the two of them arguing. I hadn't felt like an intrusion when I'd first arrived, but I did now because obviously, both of them were upset as Milo talked Jame into getting into the green Honda.

I looked around me, the blood that had rushed to my head during the confrontation slowly draining away as I caught sight of a broken basket, scattered medicines and smashed banana bread. I knelt down to pick it all up, suddenly wanting to preoccupy myself with the task in an attempt to give Jame and Milo the illusion of privacy.

I found that my hands were shaking. I really didn't like fighting, and maybe I'd had enough of Jame Graham, but I didn't like that Milo sounded so distressed over arguing with him. I found myself wishing that I could fix it. But, I will admit that when I heard the Honda's engine come to life, and I saw Jame pulling out of the driveway in Milo's car, I did feel a little relieved that he was gone. Milo didn't, though. He was frowning as he headed back towards me in his black sweats and white socks, which were now wet from walking through wet patches on the driveway. He was pale, even more so than he'd been when he stopped by the school, and something seemed unnatural about the tiny beads of perspiration breaking out over his face in the freezing temperatures. I had the beat-up basket and its contents, minus the smashed up banana bread which I'd dropped in the outdoor waste can, when I stood to meet him.

“Hey,” I said quietly, disturbed that he hardly seemed to have energy enough to meet my eyes as his drooped to my chest. When Milo just stood there, without responding, I held out the basket. “I wanted to bring this to you... and pick up the doll. It’s both our grade, remember?” I highly doubted that it was still a good idea to bring up Emily.

“Okay,” he said simply, after a long moment of me staring at him worriedly. But then, without making any attempt to grab the basket he walked around me and then into his house, leaving the front door wide open behind him.

“Milo?”

I turned, stopping at the door as I watched him head up the stairs on his own. I looked around the dark house, towards the living room, wondering where Juanita was. I guessed if she was there, she would have made an appearance around the time that Milo had been throwing himself between Jame and me.

I let out a breath and decided to go in, closing the front door quietly behind me before I followed the wet footprints all the way up the stairs, and reached his room around the same time that he did. I closed the door behind us and walked slowly over to the desk to put the basket down next to the baby carrier and our assignment, which he had in the same place, while Milo was more focused on his bed, where the dark sheets were tangled with his burgundy comforter. He allowed himself to fall onto his mattress face first, hugging at his pillow as he turned onto his side. I frowned over at him, not really sure what to say or do apart from perching myself on the edge of this bed where I lifted his ankles one at a time and rid him of the wet socks covering his feet, which had become cold to the touch. He was still as I straightened out his blankets and covered him, making sure to tuck in his cold toes, but he turned onto his back, tiredly looking up at me as I made myself comfortable at his side and gingerly took his fingers in mine.

“I’m sorry you don’t feel good,” I finally said, unsure of where else to start.

“I have the flu,” Milo informed me, and I found myself cracking a smile at the pout on his face.

“What kind of flu is it?”

“The everything kind.”

“Cool, ‘cause I brought every over-the-counter drug I could find in my house. Want something?”

Milo’s mouth turned down, and he slowly shook his head as his expression became more serious, and mine followed.

“I’m trying,” I told him. “With Jame...I’ve tried, but I don’t know if I can put up with his shit, or if I want to.” I ran a rough hand through my hair as I tried to figure out what more I wanted to tell him; but before I could figure it out, his fingers were moving against mine where I held them and I found him focused on me when I met his eyes.

“I know,” he said quietly. “I told him you’re my friend.”

I smiled. “I heard--thanks for that, Milo.”

Milo wasn’t returning my smile. In fact, as he faced me, he only appeared more troubled. “I should have done it yesterday, when he was saying all of those things at lunch--I’m sorry.”

I stared at him for a long moment, some anger over the things that Jame had said about my friends and even my family the day before returning, but it wasn’t exactly directed at Milo as my eyes softened on his. “I think I like you when you’re sick,” I remarked, and then laughed out loud when he managed to glare at me, even with his eyes drifting shut. I leaned down, and the skin of his forehead felt hot with fever against my lips, but I didn’t care as I tucked him in up to his neck and then leaned down to whisper in his ear. “Call me when you can,” I said. “We need to talk.”

He gave a slight nod, but didn’t open his eyes again as I left his bed, moving to gather the doll for parenting class, wanting to get it out of there before it managed to disturb him. I was just placing the broken basket of medicines closer to his bed, in case he decided he wanted it, when his bedroom door swung open and I looked up to find Juanita, startled as she stood in his doorway with a humidifier under one arm and a plastic grocery bag full of gatorade in the other. Not knowing what to do, I gave her a slight nod as I stepped away from the bed, taking the baby carrier with me.

“I was just leaving,” I said quietly, and she regarded me curiously as I headed towards the door and passed her with the baby carrier. But not before she looked at Milo--passed out and tucked into his bed--stepped aside, and flashed an approving smile in my direction.

Chapter 12: Not A Guy

by DomLuka

Milo’s everything flu turned out to be a even worse than it first appeared, and he was out for the rest of the week. I’d tried calling every night to tell him how our assignment was going, but I only managed to get him on the phone twice. The first time he couldn’t stop coughing long enough to have a conversation, only managed to tell me that he was contagious and not to come over before he hung up on me. I resisted the urge to call him back, even though there were several ways in which I wouldn’t have minded catching the flu, all of them involving being in close proximity to Milo. The second time I’m pretty sure he fell asleep while I was in the middle of telling him how Caleb had ‘babysat’ for us twice. I’d left out mentioning that it was probably because my friend still felt bad about our mini-fight, but I don’t think Milo heard any of it, anyway.

Because he was sick, there was no reason to pass by his locker during the day. I wanted to do everything I could to avoid Jame Graham. I felt like it was the least I could do, since I didn’t doubt that when Milo wasn’t so busy b

being sick, he'd be plenty stressed out over my and Jame's confrontation. I didn't want to make it worse. That's why I made a point to make sure Caleb was avoiding Jame, too, just in case Assface was stupid enough to cue him into the fact that he'd tried attacking me.

Caleb's mood towards his worst enemy lately had me worried more than usual, but it wasn't as if Jame were helping the situation; he'd taken to staring everyone of us down every time the opportunity presented itself. Even Haily had been the beneficiary of his cold looks lately, but in her case I don't think she minded as much as the rest of us since it meant he wasn't hitting on her.

On Friday, I'd just turned our doll in to Mrs. Bates, just as relieved to do so as everyone else in class, when the door to the classroom trailer opened, letting in a strong gust of wind that interrupted the pages of our opened textbook, and it was pulled closed just as fast, as soon as Milo Trust was standing on the right side of it.

He was late, but didn't bother going to Mrs. Bates first. She didn't seem to appreciate that, but continued talking about our written exams next week, seeming satisfied enough that he was already on the way to his seat.

His green eyes sought out mine on his way across the room, and I couldn't help the smile that stretched over my face any more than I could help the way my fingers reached to pull out his chair for him. In my task to avoid Assface at all costs, I'd been completely ignorant of Milo's return to school.

A frayed but clean hoodie and a soft-looking pair of jeans covered his tall figure. There were dark circles under his eyes, his dark hair was messed from the wind, making me want to reach up and ruffle it, and his nose was still slightly red from being sick, but at least he could breathe through it as he demonstrated as he sat, inhaling deeply through his nostrils. I found myself staring for a moment, thrilled to have him back and wondering if there was something wrong with me for thinking he was hot even with the evidence in his appearance that he'd been ill.

Milo noticed the attention of my gaze and the high arc of his cheeks colored to match his nose as he sent me an awkward glance.

"Don't worry, I think we passed," I whispered.

Milo's gaze drifted to the stack of dolls on Mrs. Bates's desk, and then back to me somewhat guiltily. "Sorry I didn't help."

I bit at my lower lip. "Want to make it up to me?"

Milo rolled his eyes, and obviously a week wasn't long enough for him to forget that he liked to ignore me at times like this as he reached for his textbook from his backpack and looked at mine to see what page he was supposed to be on. When I didn't stop staring at him he finally narrowed his eyes and gave a sharp nod in the direction of Mrs. Bates, indicating that it was time for me to pay attention to something else, but I saw the corner of his mouth

h twitch in amusement.

I behaved myself for the rest of class, most likely to Milo's relief, but I still wanted to talk to him and found myself leaning closer to his ear when the class was thoroughly distracted learning what our weekend homework would be. "Can you come over after school?" I whispered.

He looked at me, dark brows drawn together as his mouth turned down, not giving me much hope for his answer. I think I looked disappointed, even more so when Mrs. Bates shot us a perturbed glare and I had to lean back a safer distance. Milo opened his notebook, and since I hadn't heard our teacher to tell us to write anything down my gaze drifted towards the way his fingers moved over a blue pen and he wrote perfectly arched letters on the white paper.

Meeting with dad.

I met his eyes, understanding, even though I really didn't. I'd have to remember to ask him what these meetings were about. I didn't like the sound of it this time even more than I hadn't the last. Mostly, because this time it was seriously monopolizing my time with my boyfriend, who I'd hardly talked to in a week. And maybe because I'd never gotten around to mentioning Emily's second visit to my house... or the way she'd stopped by last night, too. Truth be told I didn't really want to tell him, but I'd promised.

Holding out my palm I waited until he got the hint, slid his notebook between us and handed me the pen.

Later?

Milo looked at what I'd written as soon as Mrs. Bates wasn't looking and I heard him release a gentle breath before he met my eyes and slowly shook his head. My lip curled at that and I moved the pen over the notebook again.

Need to talk.

Milo regarded me suspiciously and I found myself pressing my lips together in amusement. I wrote, Talk, and whatever you were just thinking. I lifted an eyebrow at him, and he rolled his eyes. Taking back his notebook and pen he went back to ignoring me for a few minutes. Actually, it seemed like more than just a few minutes because for the first time since the semester started, Mrs. Bates announced that we were dividing into groups of four for another one of her games and we could leave our own tables to do it. Seconds later, Haily was sliding a chair between Milo and me, tossing her braid out of her way. Milo was the one who got hit by it this time, but he only looked mildly annoyed as he looked across the table and asked Tim to join us. The rest of the class seemed to drag on from there, probably because I was biting my tongue, wishing I could get Milo's attention even for a second. But when we weren't paying attention to whatever Mrs. Bates was trying to teach us, Haily was talking my ear off about our weekend plans, which I hadn't been aware we had until I started paying attention to her. Caleb's sister

had finally talked her husband into letting her baptize the new baby and while I remembered Caleb mentioning it a while ago I hadn't heard anything recently. Obviously, Haily had, and obviously, I was going to be there. Brandon Sholer was also celebrating his birthday and had asked her to come only that morning. Haily was telling me that tomorrow night Caleb was going to pick all of us up at six o'clock to go when I noticed Milo eyeing me warily. I guess after the last Brandon Sholer party I'd been to he was allowed to look at me like that. I smiled at him. "Are you going?" I asked.

Haily looked at Milo expectantly, too, which I guess was better than the usual suspicious glances she was prone to assaulting him with.

"I don't think so," Milo replied, not very surprisingly.

I bit at my lip, promising with my eyes to try to change his mind later.

Then the bell rang, and I felt helpless when Haily grabbed my arm, ready to get the heck out of Hellschool as I looked back at Milo, still wanting to talk.

"Nelson?" Milo called, and I stopped so fast to turn and face him that I nearly threw Haily, still attached to my arm, to the ground.

"Hey!" she objected, taking the time to elbow me.

"Sorry," I said sheepishly, and then looked at Milo.

Unfortunately, he seemed cautious as he regarded Haily, and I doubt what he wanted was my notes for the last week when he asked for them.

"You don't want his notes, trust me," Haily said, surprising both of us, I think, and Milo and I exchanged glances when she unzipped her backpack to look for hers.

Not bothering to stop her, because first, her notes probably were a lot better than mine, and second because she seemed momentarily distracted, I looked at Milo and tried to sound as casual as possible when I said, "Emily stopped by my house again."

Haily looked up. "Who's Emily?" she asked, holding out her purple notebook for Milo. He took it almost carefully, like it might bite him. I'm not sure if it was because Haily was giving him the offering or because his mind was on my words. At the moment he seemed particularly difficult to read.

"His dad's fiancée," I said carefully. "She's thinking about having her wedding on our property."

Haily's eyes brightened at that. "Thompson Trust is getting married at your place?"

I opened my mouth to object to that, but Milo spoke first. "Yeah. I heard he's telling my dad this morning."

I looked at Milo, surprised, and hoped I didn't look as ill as I suddenly felt. Not only was he against his father's wedding, he was pretty damn opposed to having it anywhere near me, too. I was instantly worried, wondering in what ways this might affect us. It was like I was forever wondering where I

tood with Milo Trust, even though lately, I could admit that he was making more of an effort where I was concerned. Finally telling Jame off was a nice step in the right direction, but when things came down to his father I wasn't sure of how tolerant he could be.

Haily laughed happily. "That is too cool. It's probably going to be huge. Do you get to be there, Nels? I mean, it's your house."

I opened my mouth, liking the opportunity to tell Milo that I absolutely, wouldn't be anywhere near that wedding, but again, he beat me to it.

Sliding Haily's notes neatly into his bag he heavily shrugged his shoulders, more in defeat than in acceptance of the situation. "You can all come. I can invite whoever I want."

Haily grinned, and might have gone as far as thanking him if he wasn't already walking past us.

"Do you think there will be a dress code?" Haily asked. "Probably. Nels..."

"Haily," I cut her off, "can I meet you in the parking lot?" I didn't wait for an answer, I was already going after Milo. It didn't take much to catch up with him because the classroom trailers were far enough from the school that the crowds were thin.

As soon as I was away from the warmth of the heater inside I was assaulted by icy wind and found myself frowning when I noticed that other than his hoodie, Milo hadn't bothered to bring a jacket. I felt like my own mother, wanting to lecture him over the fact that he'd just been sick and should stay warm, but instead as I reached him I dropped my hand on his shoulder, causing him to spin around in alarm before he realized it was me. "Are you okay?" I asked.

Milo frowned at me. "I've really got to get home," he insisted.

I sighed. "What about Emily?"

His frown deepened, his eyes giving away that he was just as sore about the woman's decisions as I suspected he was. "I'd rather not be around her, okay? So..."

If she was going to be around my place, he wouldn't be. I was quickly growing frustrated. "Milo... shit." Over his shoulder I spotted Assface, coming in our direction, and suddenly I felt the need to rush. A glance over his shoulder told Milo exactly what my problem was and he opened his mouth, probably to dismiss me. "Let's do something this weekend," I blurted. "Doesn't have to be at my place, or yours. Tomorrow night."

He eyed me. "Brandon Sholer's party is tomorrow night."

I forced a smile. "It'll be perfect then. Everyone else will be there. Please?"

He cocked his head, his eyes lowering in confusion as he thought that over.

"You want to skip it?" he asked.

I nodded. "Tomorrow night?"

Milo didn't seem ready to make any promises, but as Jame neared he finally said, "I'll call you."

"Okay," I agreed, and then smirked at him. "Just remember that if you don't I'll probably just show up."

He glared at me, but seemed more amused by my threat than anything. I stood there for a few moments, watching as he met Jame and walked away. I really, really wished that I was the one he'd been walking away with.

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I'd gotten home from school furious with my parents, but they beat me to the conversation by saying that they didn't see how hosting a wedding was going to affect me and Milo in the slightest. Maybe I agreed with them there, but it wasn't really me who cared in the first place. It was Milo, and that mattered just as much.

"Nelson, please don't be angry," my mom pleaded. Her hair was pulled back into a long braid not unlike Haily's, only she'd tied a rag over the top of her head to hold it all back. Dressed in paint-colored overalls she had a roller in hand, having randomly decided that she wanted to paint the upstairs hallway an odd shade of green. The paint fumes were already getting to me, and not in that pleasant way it did when I was around Milo, and her tie-dyed overalls were making me feel dizzy when I looked at them.

"Please, please tell her no," I begged. "Mom, you don't get him... actually, I don't get him, but I know it would probably be a lot better if they just had their wedding somewhere else."

My mom frowned. Obviously, she wanted to be reasonable. She always wanted to be reasonable, but that always seemed a little harder for her when she thought I wasn't. Like now.

"I didn't want to bring this up," she said, "but they are paying to have it here, just like they would anywhere else."

My eyes widened slightly. "Mom, are we..."

"Everything's fine, Nelson," she insisted, looking a little exasperated with me. "But college doesn't pay for itself, and quite frankly..."

"I won't go to college," I quickly volunteered.

She narrowed her eyes at me in a way that suggested that was entirely unacceptable. "Quite frankly," she continued, "this is none of your business. I'm not going to say no... not that I'd be offended if Emily chose to have her wedding somewhere else."

I frowned and finally dropped the backpack I was still carrying to reach for a brush when my mom continued rolling paint onto the wall. She was quick to swat my hand away the moment I got near the paint. "Don't you dare, you look too nice in those clothes to go ruining them."

I sighed. "Mom..."

"Have you even tried talking to Milo?" my mom interrupted. "More to the po

int, has Milo tried talking to Emily?”

I made the same face I thought he would over that suggestion. “Why would he?”

She looked at me pointedly. “Because believe it or not, if he told her he didn’t want them getting married here, she’d probably listen to him. Not that I see what the big deal is... but I’ve had a few sit-downs with her and she actually pretty... sweet. Very nice girl. I also know she’s very aware that Milo doesn’t care for her very much, and she’d like to get to know him better. Maybe he just needs to give her the chance, because regardless of where Emily and his father get married... they’re still getting married.”

Okay... maybe I could see the reason in that. All of it, actually. And I think I was qualified to know just how hard it was to get to know Milo Trust. Going on five months later and I was still working on it. But still, it seemed to me it would be easier when it came to continuing to get to know him if I could just... “You can’t just tell her no? Really?”

“Really.” Given her tone, that was simply the end of that. Damn it.

.....

It was snowing and wasn’t supposed to stop until sometime tomorrow, but I still found myself out on the back deck, my blond head quickly collecting the snowflakes as I attempted to see past the storm that was dropping over the field. I held the phone to my ear, not really knowing what to say to Milo Trust, who’d just informed me that we wouldn’t be meeting tonight.

“I’m not afraid to drive in this,” I said quietly, really wanting to see him and worried that he was about to let a little bad weather get in the way of that.

Okay. A lot of bad weather. But I wasn’t ready to give up that easily.

I heard Milo sigh. “I have to hang out with Jame.”

My eyes narrowed as if I thought he could see it. “Why?” I asked, doing a terrible job of keeping my tone neutral.

“You know why. I have some things I need to sort out with him after you...”

“None of that was my fault,” I said defensively. “I swear, I’m trying to avoid him.”

“I know,” Milo said before I could add something insulting about Assface to that. “I’m going to talk to him.”

Regardless of all my wishing that Milo would give Jame Graham a firm talking-to, I felt his timing with it completely sucked. “Fine. Will you come by when you’re done... or call me? It’s not like Emily is here now.”

“I don’t know, it’ll probably be late.”

I closed my eyes, my nostrils inhaling a smotheringly cold breath of air. The happiness that had hit me when he walked into class yesterday afternoon was fading fast as my insecurities over him mounted. Hot and cold. And Jame. Well, screw Assface. “Milo... will you at least say it?”

“Say what?” he asked, his tone as suspicious as it was confused.

“That you don’t want to see me. Or something. Because if that’s the case I’d really like to get to the part where I get to be mad at you for it.”

“You’re already mad at me,” he pointed out, not seeming remorseful or even put out by it. “And I’m not going to say that. If it’s not too late, I’ll call you when I get back.”

“Fine,” I said, unable to help my hostility over it. I hung up on him, deciding it would be better than him hanging up on me if I kept arguing with him, which I would have liked to do. Maybe I could understand him needing to spend some time with Jame... a little, anyway. But not tonight.

I’d already blown off my friends for the evening, but suddenly I needed to get out. I’m not even sure I wanted to be around if he did happen to call. Maybe then he’d understand what being blown-off felt like.

I dialed Caleb, and felt lucky when he said that Haily and Joe were already at Brandon Sholer’s. Caleb was running late because he was babysitting for his sister and the movie she’d gone to was running later than he thought it would. He also said he wasn’t sure he wanted to take his jeep out in the storm because he was due for new tires. I told him I’d be there in thirty minutes or so, depending on the roads, to pick him up.

It took me almost an hour, but that was probably because I slid off twice, the second time getting stuck for a good twenty minutes, but by the time I reached Caleb his sister was back and he was in a good mood, which put me in a good mood. We even took the time to do a few donuts in an empty parking lot, taking turns at the wheel before we continued on our way as Caleb told me about sledding earlier that afternoon, which I’d missed because I was waiting for Milo to call. He talked about how he wanted to go again as soon as it stopped snowing and I agreed it sounded like fun.

Leaning back in the passenger seat, Caleb suddenly laughed, his mouth turning into a wide grin above his cleft chin. “Oh--don’t say anything about Joe’s face.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What happened to his face?”

“Haily.”

“What did he do to her?” I asked, already amused.

Caleb shook his head. “Dude, it’s what she did to herself. She thought you were going to be there, you know?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“You haven’t noticed how she’s been changing her... look lately?”

I shrugged at that and pretended to be very focused on the road, which really, I needed to be because of the car in front of me sliding all over the place. It was true that Haily was looking more and more like other girls, but I wasn’t above denying everything I may or may not have noticed. Safer that way.

Apparently, Caleb didn't need my confirmation to continue, however. "She was wearing heels," he explained. "New boots."

My eyes widened at that. "Sledding?"

Caleb nodded gravely. "I think she twisted her ankle every time she took a step, and then her and Joe collided and one of them ended up across his face."

He's freaking out about it leaving a scar," Caleb seemed rather amused by this, but when he saw my horrified expression he shook his head. "It's, like, a scratch. Trust me, he'll survive it."

"Then what's the big deal?"

Caleb grinned again. "Right between his eyebrows. Looks like he's got a unibrow. He's freaking out about it, tried to cover it up with a band-aid but that only made it look worse."

I had to smile at that. Couldn't help it, despite the fact I liked the way Joe's face was as much as he did. But it was something he'd freak out over. In fact, I was surprised he'd even go out in public. I remember him once calling off school for three days in a row over a pimple.

"And you really don't want me to say something?"

Caleb's chestnut eyes gleamed at me. "Nah... definitely mention it."

We reached Brandon's house without incident, except for the half hour it took us outside the liquor store for Caleb to talk someone into buying him a bottle, the gift he intended to give to Brandon. We were definitely late by the time we reached the house, and while all the lights were on and we could hear music coming from it in the otherwise quiet neighborhood, there wasn't nearly as big a turnout as the last time I'd been over. I'm sure they were rather had a lot to do with that, but then Haily had mentioned Brandon had invited a lot less people because it was for his birthday. But that didn't mean his guests were having any less fun. I doubt any of them were having as much fun as their host, though. Brandon met us at the door, and much to Caleb's chagrin, wrapped us both in a hug at the same time.

He smelled like pot, and a lot of beer. Caleb was quick to tell him happy birthday with a firm pat on the back and then escaped his arm, leaving the full weight of our favorite wide receiver fully on my shoulders. He grinned at me, his straight blond hair falling in his face under a shiny red birthday hat. His tanned complexion had a pink hue to it, probably because it was a little on the cool side in his house since there were windows open to air out marijuana, and smoke from a cigar in someone's mouth; and the tightness of his sweater clung to his toned body, which was currently so pressed against mine that I could feel the heat of it through my coat.

"You came," he said happily as he reached up and brushed away the large flakes of snow that had collected in my hair just between my car and his front door.

I grinned at him because he made a happy drunk, and then moved my arm around

und him when I realized he didn't seem very steady on his feet.

"Happy birthday," I said, finding the nearest chair, which he quickly plopped into.

Brandon pointed at me. "You, should get a drink."

"Sure, Brandon. Thanks," I replied. I had no intention of doing that. I fully planned on driving away from his house tonight. I just wanted the excuse to move into the house so I could find Joe and Haily. Maybe tease Joe a little about how he should borrow Haily's tweezers. But I wasn't even three feet away before Brandon turned in the gray recliner, which rocked under his weight and threatened to spill him onto the floor. "Hey, you coming back over here?"

"Yeah, I'll be right back," I promised.

He gave an approving nod, and since he was completely backwards, his knees on the chair, he only had to reach back and pat his ass... or maybe he was aiming for his back pocket? "Good," he said, 'cause I've got something for us."

I bit back my smile, unable to help where my mind wandered. No doubt, he was probably referring to something other than his ass, since he probably smoked as much pot as Joe did. "I'll be back," I said again, and then turned to find my friends.

There really weren't many people at all. Less than twenty, anyway. Less of the football team than I'd thought there would be, and an otherwise mixed crowd that consisted of more guys than girls. Likely the weather, but I wasn't exactly the guy in the crowd who was going to complain about this. I spotted Caleb quickly enough. He'd found Ronnie, who seemed to be hiding under her glasses as she watched him open Brandon's birthday present, looking much happier in Caleb's presence than the last time I'd seen her, and it didn't take long to find Haily, because she was no more shy about throwing her weight at me than Brandon seemed to be. I caught her, my eyes drifting past her to where I spotted Joe, who flipped me off the moment I looked amused over the new addition to his face. I blew a kiss at him, laughing, and he disappeared somewhere out of sight to let me know he wasn't pleased with me, but I was confident that it wouldn't last long.

"I thought you were staying home," Haily said as she released me, but made a point to grab onto my hand as she poked at my chest. I found myself grabbing her wrist, not really caring for the way that finger started moving over it. Still, I forced a smile as I studied her, guessing that she'd had too much to drink. Her dark hair was falling loose from her braid where her fingers had pulled at it, and brown eyes regarded me thoughtfully while the curve of her mouth was lifted into a happy little smile. She was wearing a jersey that would fit Caleb, but once again she was wearing more girlish pants, and quite possibly the same heeled boots that had made Joe so miserable.

“I changed my mind,” I replied. “And I’ve gotta get Brandon a drink.”

“Oh, they’re in here,” Haily replied, and with her hand still in mine she led me to the kitchen.

Maybe I’d wanted to find Haily and Joe, but already Haily seemed to be enough to handle, and knowing that Brandon--while he’d probably forgotten that he was waiting for me--would be happy enough to see me when I got back.

I was already thinking of using him as a buffer between Haily and me. Besides, it was his birthday anyway, and I don’t think I’d ever hung out with him for more than ten minutes at a time and I was willing to do it for the experience alone. Brandon Sholer was always entertaining, even if I was just looking at him, and at the moment I wanted as many distractions from Milo Trust as possible. Haily, too.

Haily had mixed a drink as soon as we got into the kitchen, trying to talk me into one too as I looked over Mrs. Sholer’s decorative choice of black-spotted cows that made up the theme of her kitchen. I declined the drink, and Haily was happy enough to carry Brandon’s back to him while I frowned at her hand holding mine, wondering how much trouble I’d have letting go of it. I wiggled my fingers. Definitely a lot of trouble. I wasn’t holding her hand back. The two of us ended up on a love seat just across from Brandon. I’d left Haily plenty of room, but she ended up against me, thigh to thigh, the weight of her leaning into my side. Strange, how most times I wasn’t anywhere near uncomfortable in such close proximity to others. This time I was leaning half over the arm of the sofa while Brandon Sholer looked on, the corner of his mouth curving in a way that suggested he was amused by some inside joke. I tugged nervously at the stud in my ear, wishing someone would let me in on it.

Haily smiled up at me, and I smiled back--because she was Haily. Then I picked up a conversation with Brandon like I did it every day, and soon the topic turned to plans for the upcoming break from school as Brandon lit up what he had for us. It wasn’t his butt.

I became interested in what he was saying, and after a while as Brandon moved to seat himself on the coffee table across from me to get a little closer I found myself relaxing, enjoying the conversation that turned from one topic to another, but that could have been because Haily had rested her head on my shoulder and her eyes were steadily drifting shut. Somehow, she seemed less threatening that way.

As usual time seemed to pass by quickly while I was occupied with others, and I found myself growing tired as I glanced at the silver-framed clock on the wall, wondering how long ago my parents had gone to bed. Wondering if they’d picked up the phone with Milo Trust on the other end of it, wondering about me. A glance across the room showed that Caleb had moved on from Ronnie, but that could have been because she was no longer anywhere in s

ight. Likely, she'd gone a while ago when a rather large group had decided it was time to brave the weather and go. I found myself frowning towards my friend, despite the fact that he had found another group to occupy himself with, Joe among them. Caleb didn't seem right. I know he hadn't for a while, but the setting of Brandon Sholer's party made it much more obvious as he caught my eyes and tapped his wrist, indicating that he wouldn't mind going at any time now. That wasn't like Caleb. He always wanted to go. I shot him a subtle nod, but turned my attention back to Brandon as his voice reached my ear.

"You cutting out on me again, Larmont?"

I turned to Brandon, who'd needed cutting off from the open bar that could be found in his kitchen a while ago and flashed him a small smile. "I don't think you'll mind. It's pretty late."

He rested his elbows on his knees where he sat on the coffee table, his blond lashes shading his cheeks as he grinned at me, his birthday hat sagging over his forehead so badly I took pity and reached out to help him take it off. "Stick around," he said as he lifted his fingers, grazing my wrist as I pulled the ridiculous hat away.

"Maybe some other time," I replied. "I've got to get Caleb home tonight."

I heard the breath that Brandon released, lazy and content, just the same as his smile as his blue eyes regarded me. "That's what you said last time. That you'd stick around." Despite his inebriation, and Haily still leaning against my shoulder I felt the sheepish blush crawling over my cheeks and found myself leaning towards him as I moved a hand over my face. "Sorry about that. I was pretty wasted. Don't even remember the last time I was here at all that much. But I remembered the way I'd found Milo Trust's Honda, and the way he'd taken me home. I remembered falling asleep next to him, cursing the fact that I'd let myself get so far gone that I couldn't even concentrate on touching him, and then waking up with him in the morning, and I didn't feel sorry for a damn thing. I hated him. Milo. For doing... this to me. Maybe if I went home and checked the phone... maybe if he'd called..."

"I remember," Brandon replied, his hand reaching out to more to scrape my knee than to pat it. "You were supposed to stay." He looked down at his hand, lifted it again, and I watched him watch it as it landed back on my knee. Stayed there. I found myself smiling in amusement, wondering who would stick around to tuck his drunk ass in tonight and wishing I had less morals than I'd developed since meeting... or, becoming obsessed with, depending how you looked at it, a certain dark-haired boy with green eyes who kept me on my toes way more than necessary. Who said he was my boyfriend. If I could stop thinking about that guy for even a second, I might have taken advantage of this situation with Brandon Sholer. Because in case I haven't made it clear, this was Brandon Sholer. I didn't know anyone who didn't

want to see him naked. Even if all it involved was tucking him in... and why wasn't I volunteering for this again? Oh. Right. Hung-the-fuck-up. "Was I?" I found myself asking, glancing down as Brandon's hand drifted just the slightest inch, towards my thigh. I really hoped he wasn't off balance. Ready to pass out. I found myself wanting to reach for him, get him balanced. "You okay, Brandon?"

Eyes cast down, blond lashes fluttering, he opened his eyes, blue meeting mine, and smirked the way Caleb did when trouble was on his mind. The kind of trouble he was ready to instigate. The look of Brandon caused me to cock my head. Maybe that was because I didn't know him. Maybe it was because something about that look on his face was just plain adorable as he wet his bottom lips with his tongue, his eyes seeming way more assessing than they seemed capable of being in his current state. "I hear your friends call you Nelsons... all the time. Do you like that better than Nelson? I like Nelson."

I cocked my head at him, further amused, and maybe a little interested in where he was going with this. Confused about it. Fascinating topics for drunk people: my name. Interesting. Neat, maybe. Was neat even a word anymore, or had it been completely replaced by cool?

"Brandon," I said as I caught his wrist to keep him from falling forward a little too much, as his hand was already halfway up my thigh and I doubted he'd be pleased about that if he were sober. "You ready to call it a night yet?"

A smirk slid casually over his face, his eyes blinking slowly as his body tilted forward. I thought I might have to catch him, then Haily suddenly stretched next to me and Brandon's eyes fluttered, alert. Haily's eyes opened as she turned her face in my direction. A slow smile shaped her mouth, and for a moment I returned it like the most natural habit in the world as she lifted her hand to my shoulder.

"Hi, Nelson," she said quietly.

Amused, I opened my mouth to respond to her sleepy greeting. But, her kissing me interrupted it a little bit.

Almost kissing me, I suppose. I saw it coming and turned my head, causing her to catch just the corner of my mouth. Soft peck, pressure of her glossed lips feeling soft but almost permanent on me where they met my skin for more than just a fleeting moment. Still, she seemed proud of the gesture while I felt horrified, staring at her as if that would help take it all back. Because that... this could not happen. And she was studying my face with such interest... her eyes met mine, her smile grew wider, and then fell just as quickly the very moment she caught the stunned and not-so-pleased look on my face.

But what she saw, what she sensed from me was nothing compared to the way her brows dropped, her eyes widened and her mouth parted in such... rec

ognition maybe, as if that moment she'd simply figured it out.

I wasn't the one she wanted to hold hands with. Kiss. Return her affection.

I couldn't do that, and as I felt my heart, strong and persistent as it vibrated through my chest I heard myself praying for the miracle that involved Haily finding happiness with someone who wasn't me. Maybe then that look on her face would disappear. Maybe then she would forgive me.

"I'm sorry, Hails," I heard myself whisper, and just as quickly I was on my feet, on my way across the room and telling Caleb Spangler it was time to go home.

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It stopped snowing by Sunday afternoon, the wind had died down and the neighborhoods were full of kids in snowsuits taking advantage of the sunshine, despite the cold. Coming off the hill on my way to church, the town looked bright as sun reflected off the dusting on rooftops, the mountains and ice clung to the trees. The view left plenty for inspiration today, and I became annoyed with myself when I started wondering what Milo was doing with all of it.

He hadn't called me. I hadn't called him, either. He knew I wanted to see him, I decided that left it up to him to do something about it, since for all I knew he was still with Jame Graham, and I wasn't welcome anywhere near him when he was with Assface. Not until Milo told me otherwise, anyway.

I wanted him to tell me otherwise. Suddenly him just telling Jame that we were friends didn't seem like enough. I wanted Milo to show him.

I kept wishing that he'd just call. He needed to be the one this time. But when Sunday wore on minute by minute, I realized it probably wasn't going to happen, and like everyone else in my family who'd skipped church that morning, just after noon I'd dressed for the baptism of Caleb's niece.

My parents had gone on their own, and I didn't bother calling Joe or Haily to see if they wanted to ride together. Haily for obvious reasons. I knew I needed to talk to her, but at the moment things simply felt too awkward. I did sit with them during the ceremony, though. And I didn't say a word. To anyone.

But, I wasn't the only one. Caleb got to be godfather, which pleased him even despite the way he seemed just as depressed as he'd been the night before, and he looked exhausted and had missed a button on his shirt. Joe spent the entire time with the palm of his hand awkwardly covering the scab on his face, and Haily didn't seem interested in teasing him for it as she continuously looked in my direction, sometimes uncertainly, and others determined as all hell. Freaky.

I did the expected thing and pretended not to notice, just like I pretended not to hear her when she called out to me after the ceremony, when I was on my way to my Buick, ready to get out of there. I slipped on the ice in my es

cape, nearly knocked over two people including a priest and saw the look on Haily's face right before I reached the safety of my car. That was so going to catch up with me.

Right. Running from her, I realized, was probably a bad idea. Maybe not the most immature thing I'd ever done, but probably close. But last night after her display of unreturned affection, the devastated look on Haily's face and the way I'd oh-so-casually blown her off I came to the conclusion that I was terrified of her.

I missed being back when things were considerably less complicated between myself and Haily. Like, before she started noticing boys and started looking for new ways to fit in with her three closest friends. Before she started noticing me. And I couldn't figure out how that had happened in the first place. I mean, given Haily's past relationships with guys I didn't think she was the kind of girl who had a type. Even if she did, it really shouldn't have been the type that likes other guys. Like me. Not that she knew that, but still. She wasn't supposed to like me. I wasn't sure how to tell her that without hurting her feelings. Seemed to me running away from her until she was downright furious with me seemed a lot easier. I know. I'm an asshole. But, a scared asshole, so I hoped for leniency.

And this was probably the worst time ever to try to deal with Haily. I had too much Milo on the brain. Seriously overdosing here. When it came to Milo, maybe on some levels I could relate to what I was putting Haily through. It sucked not knowing where you stood with someone. It sucked not knowing if someone felt the same way you did--and I felt a lot. Except, when Milo wasn't returning my calls it was hard to tell exactly where those feelings were leading me.

When I was around him I could never stay angry for long where Milo Trust was concerned. All it took was to look at him and I was fascinated all over again. I'm sure that was pretty shallow on several levels. Couldn't seem to help it, though.

It's whenever I was away from him that things became a lot more serious. Like, the way that especially recently, I worried for him. I worried about his dad taking more paintings out of his room, I worried about Emily Hill taking the smile off of his face--or one of the few smiles Milo ever had on his face--and I worried about Assface convincing him he should never, ever lay eyes in my direction again. I worried about Milo listening to him.

The ridiculous separation anxiety I was prone to on occasion kicked in when I reached my empty house and found myself turning on lights despite the brightness of sun and snow beaming through the large windows when I reached the kitchen. I poured myself a glass of milk and picked up the phone. He still hadn't called. Maybe it was time for me to take a hint. Maybe I'd do that after I gave him a piece of my mind.

Eyes narrowing as I pulled at my short hair in frustration I started dialing, only to be interrupted by the chirping of the phone in my hand.

“Hello?” I might have been a little eager to answer there, given the way that as soon as it was against my ear it rang again. I cringed, pushed the talk button, and tried again. Calmer this time. I think. “Hello?”

“Heads up,” Caleb said, “Haily’s on her way to you.”

I groaned.

“You didn’t tell me you kissed her,” he said, sounding rather amused. Normally I would have been happy to hear him sounding more upbeat than he’d been all day, but at the moment I missed the Caleb who wasn’t Mr. Depression.

“I didn’t kiss her,” I snapped. “She kissed me, and she missed... mostly. Shit.”

Dude... just, tell her you’re not interested, okay? She’s really upset.”

But I ran away from her. How much more not interested could I get?

“Who’s she with?” I asked.

“I let her borrow my jeep.”

“You’re such a prick.”

Caleb laughed at me, I hung up on him and found myself running towards the living room, pulling back the blinds and peering cautiously out the window.

With any luck, it wasn’t too late to abandon ship, or in this case, house.

I just needed more time. Just a little more time. How come there was never enough of that, anyway?

I turned in search of my coat and was about ready to just leave it and freeze my ass off when the phone in my hand rang again. I was ready to bite Caleb’s head off. “Hello?” I spotted my jacket where it had fallen behind the chair I’d likely thrown it on when I came in and reached for it.

“Nelson?”

Straightening, I blinked a few times, by ear straining against the phone. Not Caleb.

“Now you call?” With the phone between my shoulder and my ear I pulled my coat over my shoulders on the way back to the window.

“Sorry,” Milo said. “I got stuck with Jame and his mom last night because of the roads.” He sounded sleepy, and my mind wandered to the way he woke up with messy hair and adorably droopy eyes, and then I thought about him doing that over at Jame Graham’s house and remembered to be mad.

“I would have come to get you.”

I heard his sigh, exasperated. “Because you showing up there would have been a great idea,” he remarked. “Look, do you still want to meet?”

“Where?” I asked.

Milo was silent for a moment and then, “Can you pick me up?”

At the front door, I leaned against it, some of the tension I’d been feeling t

owards him slipping away as I realized he had no intention of ditching out on me. Couldn't, if I was driving. I liked that idea. "Look for me?" I didn't want to run into Juanita, or anyone else. Just Milo.

"Yeah."

He hung up, and I dropped the phone on the sofa, checked my pocket for my keys and opened the door, where Haily was reaching for the bell. Crap.

She stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the next, her arms wrapped around herself against the cold and she forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes, not the way it should have been. "Hi. Can I talk to you?" she asked, but she was already moving into the house, and I was stepping aside to make it easier for her.

Like all my friends she made herself at home enough that she headed through my home without me while I slowly closed the door, my eyes searching for a brief moment of solace before I pulled my coat back off and followed after her. She wasn't in the kitchen, so the next place I headed was down the stairs to my room where the door was wide open, her coat was lying on my unmade bed and she was holding an old sketch of herself that I'd done.

"Haily?" I said quietly. "This sort of isn't a good time. I'm supposed to be somewhere."

She put the picture down delicately, turned to face me as her brows drew together and her brown eyes became determined, pointedly in my direction. "I want to know why," she said flatly, crossing her arms and regarding me as if I were supposed to know exactly what she was talking about.

Of course, I did. But I also figured a little beating around the bush had never hurt anyone.

"Why what?" I asked, tugging at my earring as I looked for other things in my room to focus on, starting with a stack of papers on my bookshelf that looked suspiciously like homework that should have been turned in on Friday. Oops. Picking it up I stacked it neatly and went in search of my backpack, not altogether unaware of the way Haily was following me with her eyes. "Don't be a jerk," she snapped, successfully getting my attention. "I want to know why, Nels."

I sighed, eyeing her warily. "Haily, if this is about last night, we shouldn't even worry about it, okay? You'd been drinking..."

She looked ready to spit. Probably on me. That look alone cut me off and I barely prevented myself from wincing over it. "Well I haven't been drinking today," she said, suddenly coming towards me. "If that makes a difference."

.. She reached for me, I threw up my hands in defense. "Haily!"

Her step back was instant, and the pained look on her face made me feel cold.

"I'm sorry," I said, suddenly wanting to reach for her. She shook me off, sh

ook her head, and glared at me again.

“Like I said, Nelson, why? And don’t even start off with it’s not you, it’s me ...”

“But it is!” I insisted, not really helping when it came to getting that look off her face. That hurt, furious one. “Haily... fuck!”

I was suddenly feeling frustrated, and she returned it with indignation, probably not understanding what I had to be sore over.

“You know, I thought you liked me,” she snapped. “You’re one of my best friends, and you told me I was pretty more than once!”

“You are pretty,” I promised her, deciding that it would be unwise to contradict that, leading her on or not leading her on. “And I do like you... as a friend.”

“But when it comes to girlfriends you like girls like Teresa Milldrum more?”

“No,” I insisted, wondering why Teresa Milldrum was always the name coming up. “Look, Haily... can’t you see it would be a bad idea? What if we broke up? Don’t you think it would change things?”

“No.”

Oh, shit. She actually believed that.

“We’ve known each other for too long for it to mess up our friendship,” she insisted.

“Haily...” I didn’t know what to say to her. Couldn’t convince her of the one excuse I’d hoped to use. Which Joe had given me, actually. Maybe if things were different I wouldn’t have come up with it on my own, because Haily was a great girl. She really was. Maybe if things were different we would have been together a long time ago. But things weren’t different, and the next thing I thought to tell her was at least true. “I’m not attracted to you.”

Wrong thing to say. Wrong thing to say.

Uh-oh.

I’d starve to death before I dug my foot out of my mouth over that one, I could see it on her face, and the tension in her shoulders as an angry red crept into her cheeks, but it didn’t seem to be anger she was feeling as she shook her head, and headed towards my bedroom door. More like, hurt and utter humiliation. So not what I was going for.

“Oh my god. Haily.”

She didn’t stop. Didn’t even look back. I probably didn’t deserve a look back.

Strange things, friends. The really good ones. The ones that forgave stupid shit. Like Haily, who’d forgiven me for plenty of wrongdoings in the past. She was definitely one of the good ones. She was halfway up the winding staircase. I couldn’t see her anymore, but what seemed to matter just then was that she was still there, and I wasn’t okay with her walking away like that.

is. Not thinking what she was thinking. "Haily!" I called, snatching up her coat and stomping towards my door. "Haily! It's because you're not a guy!" There was a silence that seemed severe, as if my ears were ringing against it, and then I heard her footsteps, drawing closer until I could make out her shadow in the hallway as she stomped back in my direction so forcefully that I found myself taking measures to retreat. Her boots came into view, and then the rest of her, her expression turning sort of... indignant, I guess. Okay... not so much what I was expecting.

She looked between me and her coat, still in my hands, and in a moment of decisiveness, snatched her coat from my hands and then returned her cold stare to my face, where I waited, terrified. Wanting to run again. Was this the reaction I'd been dreading? Painful silence? Maybe. And her eyes narrowed, and her mouth opened...

"Well no shit, Nelson!"

I blinked at her a few times, not sure that I cared for the tears that suddenly sprang to her eyes, the way they glossed over. I'd seen Haily cry plenty of times, but I'd never caused the tears before and I didn't like it. She had me feeling defensive.

"It's not like I asked to feel this way," I said quietly, and to my horror, she became even more upset.

"You're so shallow!" she snapped.

Huh?

"You are!" she reiterated, as if arguing with the look on my face. "I'm trying, you know? I like guy's clothes. So what? Maybe if you could see past that for a second, you'd get that I really am trying! I wore lipstick yesterday, but you weren't even around to see it. God, you're such a jerk!" she looked me up and down accusingly. "I really hate that I like you, you know?"

"What the..." Oh. Oh! Well... what the fuck, anyway? I finally come out to one of my friends and she has no idea I'm doing it. "Haily!" I reached for her as she turned towards my door, braved the way she spun around when I caught her arm and hoped that if she decided to hit me that it wouldn't hurt as much as I thought it might. "You don't get it," I cut her off when she opened her mouth, likely to yell at me some more. "I'm not saying I haven't noticed you're changing, I guess. And, you shouldn't change whatever makes you comfortable, not for me or for anyone," I said honestly. She was losing patience with me, so I dropped her arm and let out a breath, my eyes meeting hers sincerely. "It's not because... Haily, I'm not attracted to you because you're not a guy. Because I like guys as much as you do."

Okay. Now that was the reaction I'd been expecting to begin with. The way she was looking at me. You know, like my ass was suddenly growing out of my head are something.

“What?” her tone was breathless, her voice throaty, as if she’d just stopped running. I decided all that stomping around she’d been doing could be the cause. Better than assuming it was all my fault.

I tugged at my earring, let out a breath. “I’m gay,” I said, feeling apologetic over it.

Waiting for her to say something was nearly intolerable, and when her color paled considerably I found myself reaching out for her, only to have her raise her hand and wave me off. “No. Don’t touch me,” she insisted.

I let my hand fall and watched helplessly as she backed up a few steps, back into the hallway until her ankles hit the stairs and she sat on them slowly.

I took a cautious step towards her, but she shook her head at me, too. “Don’t,” she said.

Okay. “Haily, I’m...”

“Don’t talk to me, either,” she cut me off.

Don’t touch, don’t move, don’t talk. Sure. I could live with that. Only, not really.

She lifted her hand to her face, rubbed at her forehead as if it were suddenly hurting her. I moved myself towards the stairs less cautiously, and this time she didn’t seem to have the energy to object. “I’m sorry, Haily,” I said quietly, because despite my nerves over whether or not my little confession would ultimately make things okay again, I also had the profound urge to say my piece and hope she reserved judgment until after she heard it. “I do love you, but I don’t know how to love you like that. I didn’t want to tell you because I was afraid it would change everything. I’m sorry if that hurt you. I’m sorry if this hurts you.”

She didn’t speak to me. Didn’t look at me. Just sat there for what felt like a very long time, rubbing at her temples until finally... finally she stood, pulled her coat on and left quietly. I didn’t try to stop her this time. I understood her enough to know when she needed space. Maybe I needed space, too. So I let her go, and she did, leaving me with nothing but uncertainties.

Shit.

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The Trust residence reminded me of an ice castle, the way the drift on the slight hill covered the driveway, clung to the gate. Icicles were scattered across the ledge of the roof and the windows were fogged, leaving it with a tall, ghostly appearance. More intimidating than usual. More when the front door opened and Milo walked towards my Buick.

I couldn’t see the softness of his hair today, just a few brunet locks that peeked from beneath a black knitted cap that matched his black coat and gloves. The gray scarf around his neck made his complexion seem less pale, the pink hue cast over his nose and the high arc of his cheeks more pronounced, and I could see the green of his eyes beneath his heavy dark lashes before

re he was even looking at me. I heard myself sigh, my eyes on him through the foggy passenger window as I reached over to open the door before he could get to it. I watched as he slid into the seat, the way his fingers, covered in his heavy gloves, fumbled with the seatbelt. My gaze dropped to his mouth, lips an attractive shade of red from the cold. They turned down at me. Less of a frown, more like confusion.

“Took you a while,” he commented, but unlike me didn’t seem to put out by things like that.

It had taken me exactly one hour and fifteen minutes. I smiled at him, wondering if I’d be able to do that as often as I wanted to, or ever, given the events of the day, turned to face the windshield and rested my hands on the cold steering wheel. “I was mad at you,” I admitted. Not that he didn’t already know. “Assf--Jame, is a prick. I don’t like him. I don’t like that when he’s anywhere near you, I’m not even allowed to talk to you. I don’t like that you went to see him last night, because I wanted you to tell him to fuck off.” I cut my eyes in Milo’s direction, the look on his face interested, maybe a little perturbed, but not altogether defensive. “But... I get it. I get you care about him. I don’t know why,” I added quickly, “but I get that you do... because it took me so long to get here because Haily stopped by.” I felt myself coloring, my eyes drifting somewhat shyly away from his. “She’s had... this thing for me. Last night, I went to Brandon’s party when you blew me off. I think Haily thought something was going to happen between us. It didn’t. Obviously. But it hurt her feelings. I hurt her feelings. So today when she stopped by, I told her.”

I braved a glance at Milo, easily noting the rigidity in his shoulders, the slant of his brows as they drew together and the stressful creases in his forehead that I wanted to smooth away but knew better. “Told her what?” he asked slowly.

I sent him a pointed look, and he averted his eyes from me. “The thing is, I think I was ready to,” I said. “Because she’s my friend. I care about her the way you care about Jame. So I guess what I’m trying to say is I’m sorry I was angry. I get it now... Sorry it wasn’t sooner. I get things in my head sometimes. Anyway... do you want to get out of the car before I drive away? I get it if you do.”

A glance in his direction showed him fidgeting with the seat buckle, fingers tapping indecisively, but not making any prominent action to escape from it. “You told her?”

“I told her... I don’t think she’s going to say anything. I don’t know for sure, I didn’t ask. I guess she could.”

Milo swallowed, his eyes moving in my direction. “If she does... you okay with that?”

I shook my head. “No. But I’m not okay with her not knowing anymore, either.”

er.”

Milo was silent for several long moments. I didn't want him to, but I was waiting for him to get out of the car, maybe never give me even a passing glance again. It was strange how the possibility of being outed by him not so long ago had completely freaked me out. Now with Haily, I was still freaked out... but maybe less afraid. Maybe I felt like, even if she did tell, even if she forced me to face this... I thought that maybe I was going to be okay with it. She wasn't someone I didn't even know. I'd known her my whole life. I think in part, I didn't even care if she betrayed me. Just as long as she'd forgive me. It seemed important to be honest with Milo about that. Even when the thought of losing him hurt almost as much as wondering whether or not Haily would, in fact, betray me.

“Did you tell her about me?” Milo finally asked.

I looked up, surprised by the question. “No. I wouldn't.”

He gave a short nod, accepting that. I watched him curiously as he gazed out the window towards his house, and then back in my direction. “My dad will be home soon,” he said. “You should drive.”

“Really?”

He turned his head in my direction but avoided my eyes. “You keep saying it. There's nothing wrong with anyone... everyone thinking we're friends. Right? Just... drive.”

Chapter 13: What If

by DomLuka

Because it was tradition, and because we just plain enjoyed it, four days before Thanksgiving Chad and I went hunting for a turkey together. In a grocery store. My parents, who detested being anywhere near a store during any holiday rush had been sending us out with a list every year since Chad had learned to drive.

Back when my brother lived with us he spent most Thanksgivings complaining that everything took too long to cook, especially the turkey, and he was most likely found in the kitchen sneaking his hands past my parents despite their best efforts to teach him patience, sampling anything and everything that would eventually reach the table. So naturally, he'd make a point to pick out the smallest turkey we could find because he figured, less wait time. Now that he was living with Greg Hugh, Chad was a firm believer in leftovers. Despite the fact that he ate at home with us for the most part, he'd told me on more than one occasion Leanna spent the night more often when his refrigerator had more than beer and jello in it. This year the goal was for a big turkey, and for added sport my brother suggested we find one that looked like Jesus.

The two of us circled the cooler full of wrapped main courses, every so often stepping out of the way when another shopper reached past us.

“Hey,” I said, sounding impressed as I reached down, lifting out a wrapped bird. “Eighteen pounds... might have a beard or something after we open it up.”

Chad shook his head, whipping a strand of his pink bangs out of his eyes as he guided my arms back towards the cooler, where I took the hint and let the turkey fall. I leaned in his direction when he picked up his own pick. “Twenty three pounds. Definitely has a halo.”

“I thought we were looking for Jesus, not an angel.”

Chad frowned at me. “I thought Jesus was an angel.”

I shook my head as if I were disappointed with him. “He’s, like, the angels’ boss.”

Chad shrugged. “Twenty-three pounds. I’d say this guy is the boss.”

I decided that was fair enough and turned in search of a cart, which we’d left abandoned half an aisle back. All seemed well when I reached it, as no one had bothered to snatch the potatoes out of it. I held the cart still while Chad dropped the turkey in, and we continued along at a leisurely pace.

“Are you bringing anyone to Thanksgiving this year?” Chad asked as he paused and reached for a bag of marshmallows, even though when I glanced down at the small strip of notebook paper between my fingers, marshmallows weren’t on the list.

“No,” I replied. “Probably not.”

That wasn’t exactly unusual. During the holidays my friends were usually busy with their own families while I usually had dinner with mine. Grannie Tenny would be there, and then Uncle Ray and his family--just his family, on the years he had to work--and then Leanna. It was a small gathering accompanied by football and card games, a lot of eating and then complaining about being too full. Sometimes if we finished early enough I would sneak over and crash Haily and Joe’s Thanksgiving with their family. Caleb was usually out of town and we’d catch him later. But this year was going to be entirely different.

For starters, Caleb had left on Tuesday to start his vacation with his family early and I probably wouldn’t even hear from him until the day before we were due back in school. That left Haily, Joe and I on our own... which pretty much meant that we were all spending mass quantities of time away from each other since Haily still wasn’t talking to me, neither one of us would tell Joe why and he’d decided he was going to ignore both of us until it was over.

“Things still aren’t better with Haily?” Chad asked, sounding careful about bringing it up. I’d told my family about the most recent step I’d made in my endeavor to become Heywell’s queer poster child. They hadn’t been amused when I’d worded it just like that, but they were proud of me for being honest with Haily. However, since she still wasn’t speaking to me I wasn’t

t sure if there was a reason why I should be as happy as my family seemed to think I should be. My dad told me he thought that Haily could handle my secret, that it would all be just fine. My mom suggested giving her space. Chad had pointed out the most important thing to remember, and that was that Haily hadn't told anyone my secret.

"She gave me a dirty look after school on Friday. So I figure maybe that means she's not ignoring me anymore."

Chad's mouth turned up, and then he took over pushing the cart as we ran into traffic and he didn't think I was being aggressive enough about getting through it. "If you want I can get Leanna to talk to her. She likes Haily...

Haily likes Leanna. It could work. Maybe she can figure out what Haily's thinking."

I flashed my brother a wan smile. "Tell Leanna thanks, but I already know what Haily's thinking. She thinks I'm an asshole."

"You could try apologizing again," Chad suggested, rather than disagree with me, I noticed.

"Yeah," I replied, but I wasn't exactly optimistic about that suggestion.

The few times I had tried approaching Haily she narrowed her eyes on me and shook her head, obviously wanting me much further away. That's when I'd decided to take my mom's suggestion to heart and give Haily space. When she was ready to talk to me, I knew better than to think she'd be shy about it.

My brother picked up on the fact that this subject was going nowhere good for me as we reached the long, overcrowded checkout line and as he picked up the nearest tabloid to flip through it while I nosily looked over his shoulder he turned to a subject that was more likely to cheer me up. "What about Milo? You inviting him over?"

I smiled at the notion. "Nah. He's got his own thing going on. I'm meeting him later, so if you're over for dinner tonight I'm probably skipping it. Tell Mom for me?"

Chad laughed. "Um, no. That's what? Three nights in a row? She's gonna start weighing you in, Nels, if you miss any more."

I scowled. "It's the only time Milo isn't busy."

"So have him over tonight."

I would have liked that. But I knew better than to bring it up to Milo. The fact that Emily Hill had stopped by another two times in the last week wasn't helping, either. Milo believed in avoidance when it came to that woman. I didn't necessarily like it, but I suppose I was just happy that he wasn't avoiding me. In fact, he was the one who'd asked if I wanted to do something tonight. Lately he'd been less on edge while in my company, and I wanted to keep it that way, especially since the Monday after the whole Haily debacle he'd tracked me down three times during school just to tell me he ha

dn't heard anything about my gayness, so maybe there was nothing to worry about. I didn't bother to tell him that I hadn't worried since the moment Caleb met me in front of the school, none the wiser. Haily was much more likely to tell Caleb before she told Joe or anyone for that matter. If she hadn't told him, I really didn't think she was going to. But something told me to let Milo come to this conclusion on his own. By Wednesday when I had no one to have lunch with and didn't feel like leaving Hellschool for my break, he'd sat with me and when Jame complained about it he told him to either eat his food or find another table. With much difficulty, I refrained from gloating. "Maybe some other time," I told Chad. "Now do something to make this line move so we can get this stuff home and I can sneak out before Mom tells me I have to stay home."

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I pulled at my blond bangs, wondering if my hair was getting too long. Usually Haily was around to tell me. I didn't see myself asking her anytime soon, and the thought made me feel down for the fleeting moment before Milo glanced over his shoulder to where I'd made myself comfortable on his half-made bed and his mouth turned up at one corner, his green eyes unusually playful. I narrowed mine mockingly on him. "What?"

He stepped aside, away from the thin piece of paper he'd been working on, which was now covered in paint just like the tips of his fingers, which he'd used as his brush. I found myself fascinated by the colors smeared over his hands as he wiped them off with a wet towel, not seeming bothered by new stains on the rug beneath his feet. Juanita, he'd said, was the one who'd hung Christmas lights up through his room, and at the moment the colorful lights replaced the white glow of the bedroom light and the blues and reds reflecting off his bare chest made him look like the most colorful thing in his room, especially since the majority of the walls were still bare. But his collection was growing again--I noticed more paintings every time I came over. I had a theory that Milo was secretly grateful for his dad clearing out his room. It gave him a chance to use the space he had from scratch. Though, I doubted he was nearly as happy that his dad had hidden his brushes after their last argument, which is why he was using his fingers.

"Pay attention," he said softly when he noticed my mind was wandering away from what he was trying to show me and directly to parts of his body that were covered in paint and otherwise.

I grinned at him and sat up. I had stayed back when I got to his house and found him working instead of ready for wherever he wanted to go tonight, wanting to avoid getting paint on a new white sweater, but at the moment I was thinking that the sweater needed a little color. But I did like he wanted, my eyes moving to still-wet paper and I laughed out loud as I stood, shaking my head at him. "I liked the body you gave me last time," I teased.

Milo looked thoughtful as he regarded his work. Even with his fingers he'd managed to make my mom's goat somewhat realistic, except that he'd replaced the goat's head with my face, but let it keep the horns. He cut his eyes back to me, decidedly not amused. "The goat's more realistic."

My eyes widened indignantly but when I took a teasing step in his direction he grabbed the nearest bottle of paint and aimed it at me, white teeth flashing as he laughed. I took a step back and rolled my eyes, deciding to let him win as I let myself fall back lazily on his bed. Milo relented with the paint and headed to his closet for something clean to wear while I turned my attention back to his painting, soon deciding that I liked this mood he was in. Just like I liked the way he'd wedged his body behind his closet door and his elbow and other body parts were making enough noise to shake the house as he struggled to dress in the small space. Couldn't blame him, though. He'd said he wanted to get out of his house before his dad was home and taking off his clothes in front of me would probably be unproductive.

He emerged in clean black jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that was loose fitting but not sloppy. His dark hair was tussled around his face and he looked sheepish as his eyes met mine and then avoided them completely when he realized I was already two feet away from him, not so bothered by the paint sticking to the bottom of my shoes when I crossed through it as I reached to touch his shoulder and turned him towards me while my hands drifted over his collarbone and the tips of my fingers found the smooth skin of his neck.

His mouth felt warm as my lips found it and my eyes drifted closed. I flicked at his bottom lip with my tongue before it met his and Milo lifted his hand, nails still stained with paint, to touch my side, his thumb brushing my ribs and causing a pleasant tremor to crawl up my spine. It made me pull him closer, the scent of paint still mild on his skin when I slid my mouth to his cheek and then his ear. It was when my hand wandered down his back to the firm curve of his ass that he pulled back, hands on my shoulders to keep me at a reasonable distance while he bit at his bottom lip, which looked pink and kissed. "We have to leave," he reminded me.

I felt my mouth turn into a smirk, fully ready to start a debate on the matter but doors closing downstairs had the playfulness fleeing Milo's face as he stepped back from me, and I released a breath. "Where are we going?" I asked as I followed Milo out of his bedroom.

He seemed distracted, his head tilted mildly as he strained to hear what was going on in his house, but he still took the time to meet my eyes, his expression softer when it was aimed at me. "Are you okay with anything?" he asked.

I grinned, liking the sound of that.

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"When you said anything..." I stared up at the tall Stratfort residence not

far from the private school and shook my head, disappointed. It's not that I'd expected to be alone with Milo. We were rarely ever truly alone. And, my disappointment wasn't that he'd taken us to Jerry's house. I happened to like Jerry and was more than happy to be included if Milo wanted to share his friendship with the guy with me. It was that other thing I would have preferred Milo keep to himself. You know, his other friend. The one with the ass on his face. Damn it.

We were still sitting in Milo's car. When we'd reached Jerry's I couldn't tell why Milo suddenly looked so nervous until he'd broken the news that Jerry wasn't the only one we'd be running into when we went inside.

"We don't have to," Milo said after a moment, and I looked at him sidelong, trying to figure out what was currently going through that handsome head of his. He was looking out the window where his headlights still shone over the iced-over road as if he were bored. At the moment his expression gave nothing away, only the light tapping of his index finger over the steering wheel hinted that he was feeling impatient, waiting on me.

I found myself amused by him, mostly because I'm pretty sure this was the first time he'd ambushed me with something. I suppose I probably deserved it, given our past, and I'd forgiven for this even as the words had left his mouth because I had a sickness when it came to thinking everything Milo did was cute. I didn't tell him to leave, and I didn't indicate that I was ready to go inside, either. "Milo. Why would you think this is a good idea?"

He looked at me as if the question didn't make sense, his dark eyebrow arching up. "I think it's a horrible idea. Jerry asked me if I wanted to come over tonight, I told him I was hanging out with you and he said to bring you."

"And Ass--I mean, Jame?"

Milo flashed me the same disapproving glare he always did when I slipped Jame's nickname into a sentence. "Jerry invited him, too. He didn't know the two of you can't get into the same room together without turning into cavemen."

"Hey," I said defensively. "I'm trying, and if everything that came out of his mouth wasn't so..."

"I know," Milo cut me off, obviously not wanting to hear it. "Look, he doesn't like you. I mean, he doesn't like you a lot. I'm blaming you both for that. Maybe you can't see it... but he's not that way with me, Nelson. He's a person." Milo shrugged helplessly. "I mean, I gave you a chance when everything about you annoyed the hell out of me. Why can't you give the same chance to someone else?"

"Because when it comes to Jame Graham, I don't want to see him naked," I said honestly. "And what do you mean everything? I thought you thought I was cute," I finished indignantly, which caused Milo to crack a smile.

"I like that you got annoying. I wouldn't have paid as much attention to you

if you weren't."

Wondering if that should appease me or not, I let out a breath. "Alright. I'll go in there. I'll behave. He won't, but I will. Unless he says anything about my family. Or Caleb... what do you think the chances are that he's lost his voice and just won't say anything at all?"

"What are the chances that you'll just ignore him if he does?"

I considered that. "I don't think I want to promise anything. But I will," I added quickly, the moment that Milo's green eyes started to narrow on my words. "Just, don't skip out on me, okay?"

His jaw clenched momentarily, and my guess was that he wanted to point out that lately he'd made every effort he could when it came to regulating Jame. He'd been finding faults in his friend, and he'd made a point to tell the guy that I was his friend and I wasn't going anywhere. He hadn't ditched me since the last time I threw a tantrum over it, and I was willing to admit all of this. But... well, I needed some reassurance too every once in a while. Considering I was about to walk into Jame's territory and I was planning to behave myself, I figured I needed all the reassurance I could get. When Milo finally met my eyes his were inquisitive. "If you don't want to be here, we'll go do something else."

Okay. That was reassurance enough. I reached for my door and was rewarded with one of his more elusive smiles. I was more than happy to deal with Jame for one of those. Besides, Milo and I could go somewhere else easily enough, but he'd likely be opposed to go to my place, and... so was I because my parents would want us to hang out with them, and since Milo's dad was home and Emily was going to be there later, his place was out, too. Everywhere else was just as public as Jerry's house, so it wasn't like I'd be able to take advantage of any privacy, anyway. At least here I'd still be able to spend time with him, and that counted for a lot. It counted for more that despite the way that Milo wasn't one to show it, I was making him happy. I could relate and imagined he felt the same way I did when he'd made the effort back in October to invite my friends to Jerry's party.

And walking into Jerry's house again, it wasn't so bad. His little sister let us in and Milo took it upon himself to enter familiar territory and lead us down to the basement, probably in the same manner my friends did when they came over. It wasn't another party we were walking into, just a small gathering of friends. Well, maybe not all of them were my friends, but still. On the way down the stairs Milo explained that Jonathan would probably be around, too, and while I hadn't really taken the time to get to know him before, Milo seemed to like him. The way I saw it, the more distractions from Assface the better. Normal people, I figured I'd have no problem getting along with.

So I put on my happy face, and before we were in danger of anyone seeing us

, took advantage of the dim hallway when I pushed Milo against the wall and kissed him, which, I'm pretty sure freaked him out, but it left a nice blush on his face when we did reach his friends, his green eyes adamantly ignoring mine.

I looked across the room which was still in the order it was when I'd visited Jerry's the last time, only less crowded and a lot cleaner, and everyone there seemed to have gathered around the entertainment center where a video game was on the television screen and music was playing just above the sound of it.

There seemed to be some sort of two-player match going on. Lots of ninja moves and grunting. Growing up my parents hadn't allowed game systems in the house unless it was one on a computer, but every so often I'd play with Chad over at his place, a new pastime of his that Leanna had introduced him to. I sucked, and the two people across the room playing seemed to know what they were doing more than I would. One was Jame, his cheeks bloated around his smile as he slid a mocking glance across the sofa at his opponent. "You hit like a girl," he remarked.

And my happy face disappeared abruptly because it was Haily who replied, "And you fight like my grandma. Now please stop breathing in my direction before I embarrass you in front of your friends."

Jerry, who'd shaved off his sideburns, I noticed, which made him look much younger, was sitting between them, seeming amused, while Jonathan with his flat red hair sat in an armchair just away from them, more concerned with a small handheld system than with what was going on around him.

I looked at Milo, frowning at him and the situation. It didn't help that he looked just as surprised as I was, and it didn't help even more that even being surprised, he didn't give me the impression that he found Haily's presence altogether unexpected. He mouthed words in my direction, asking if I wanted to go.

Turning my eyes in Haily's direction, I regarded her curiously. From the looks she was cutting him, I guessed that she was just as annoyed by Jame as ever, but she wasn't letting him make her feel uncomfortable as she won the match the two of them were playing and high-fived Jerry. It occurred to me then just how much I'd missed seeing a smile on her face over the last week. That smile faded when she looked twice before her eyes settled on me, and after a brief moment of consideration she seemed to turn back around, place her back against the sofa and made an obvious effort of not looking in my direction at all. Jerry noticed us, too, but seemed a lot more friendly, his grin spreading over his face.

"Hey!" he waved. "Get on in here!" He slid closer to Haily, I noticed, instead of Jame when he attempted to make room on the sofa. I would have made the same choice.

Milo regarded me warily, but I shot him a reassuring glance and led the way into the room. But I didn't head to the end of the sofa where Assface was sitting like Milo did. Even when he sat between Jame and Jerry, leaving me room between Jerry and himself, I propped myself on the arm of the sofa next to Haily, going as far as reaching over her to greet Jerry while she pretended that she couldn't see me. I found myself glancing down at the top of her head, where her braid started today, before Jonathan said something to me and I turned around to say hi to him, too. He'd put down his game, seeming pleased about new company and we easily conversed about Hangman Cove and the snow that everyone was getting tired of. As promised, I ignored Assface. The one glance I did spare him told me he was more interested in talking to Milo than sending me dirty looks, so it was a welcome change, anyway. Haily played one more match against Jerry, who beat her easily, and passed the game controller to Jonathan, which left her unoccupied when I finally leaned down towards her, lowering my voice.

"So is this you, jumping ship?" I remarked.

She looked up, dark eyes narrowing. "I happen to like these people," she informed me, crossing her arms defensively but I'd like to point out... talking to me. "Most of them, anyway," she added, throwing a more loathsome glance in Jame's direction than she had for me. At least that was something.

"I like them, too," I replied, deciding to leave Jame out of it entirely.

Haily's eyes touched my face again and then moved back to the television screen as if she were trying to figure out whether or not I should be ignored. I sighed, glanced over my surroundings to see that everyone else was occupied, and then lowered my voice again. "Thanks for not telling anyone, Hails."

I'd tried apologizing. Maybe thanking her for being trustworthy was what she needed. Or maybe not. In fact, that seemed to make her even angrier as she turned back in my direction. "Like I would! You thought I would?" she hissed, clearly offended.

I frowned at her. "I wondered," I admitted, not feeling like I should apologize for it. "You know, telling you anything wasn't exactly easy for me..." I took a breath, forcing myself to calm down so I had better control of my voice, which I didn't really want to be overheard so close to everyone else. "I didn't want to tell anyone, Haily. The only reason my family has any idea is because they figured it out on their own."

"I'm your friend," Haily stated. "And you let me make a fool of myself. So, thanks a lot."

"I'm sorry. But that doesn't make telling you the truth any easier. You know, every time I've ever thought about telling you... or Caleb, or even Joe the only thing I worried about was whether or not any of you would ever speak to me again. You're not speaking to me, Haily. Not exactly a confidence

booster here.”

“But I’m not--not speaking to you because of that. I’m not speaking to you because you’re an asshole... and because I threw myself at you and feel like the biggest idiot for it. And I’m blaming it on you.”

I’m not sure if Jerry picked up Haily’s tone, or the words she was saying and was trying to make sense of them, but he raised an eyebrow in our direction and I wisely decided it was time to shut up. Especially since Milo was looking at me too, his complexion seeming a little pale, and I guessed he was probably still worried about Haily in general. Or me. It’s not like he’d figured out how to muzzle me yet or anything. I let my mouth turn up lazily for him in a smile I wasn’t really feeling, not wanting him to start feeling paranoid. I think he figured that if Haily started jumping up and down and chanting Nelson’s gay! Nelson’s gay! Everyone would look at him and know his secret, too. Actually, when I’d told him about Haily I’d already expected him to walk away from me. The fact that he hadn’t had been a surprise, and maybe a lesson for me when I realized that it was as important for me to trust Milo as it was for him to trust me. Now I wished he’d trust that no matter what, I’d never, ever let the fact that my secret had been revealed pull the curtains off of his.

“Is it okay if I go get a drink?” Haily suddenly asked Jerry.

I watched, interested as he looked away from his game to smile at her. “Cooler’s just in the garage...” he leaned towards her, whispered something in her ear that made her smile. I figured she was just looking for an excuse to get away from me for a second when she stood up and her smile faded when her eyes were aimed in my direction. I thought about snatching her seat as soon as she was gone, but when she gave me a pointed look before she walked off, I realized that avoiding me wasn’t exactly what she had in mind. I found myself standing, and when the other guys looked at me almost expectantly, I gave a helpless shrug that made Assface roll his eyes. “I think she could use some help,” I said quickly before following after Haily.

It occurred to me that she seemed familiar with Jerry’s place when she went to a door in the basement that I would have overlooked, opened it and then closed it in my face when I caught up to her.

I glanced over my shoulder, hoping no one had seen that as I tugged at the stud in my ear and reached for the door, deciding not to be too annoyed with her. She blamed me. I don’t know. I guess it seemed fair enough. But I’d had enough of our fight, and if she was at least talking to me then maybe I figured it was time to stop giving her all that space. Hell, if I could get her to forgive me, maybe everything would be back to normal by the time school started up again.

“Haily?” I called as I closed myself into the dim garage where three covered cars were parked and stacks of empty boxes lined the wall nearest me, all I

abeled for Christmas decorations.

It wasn't much of a surprise that she didn't answer me, even though I knew she heard me as I spotted her standing on top of a freezer that would have come up to my waist had I been standing in front of it. On the closed white top there were six cans of soda at her feet, and with her back to me she reached up, her hand disappearing behind some dusty old baskets while her dark braided hair swung behind her. Without looking back she retrieved an almost full bottle of tequila and held it down as if she expected me to take it. "Jerry wants this," she informed me, and I decided to be helpful as I moved to retrieve it from her hand. As soon as I did she reached up again, this time coming up with two shot glasses at a time, passing each in my direction and leaving me to stack them by the sodas.

"Jerry's a nice guy," I mused.

She glanced down at me in a way that suggested she didn't want me knowing she was doing it. "Do you think he's cute?" she asked, and I found myself blanching at it, regarding her suspiciously before I decided that she wasn't trying to be mean. It's not like I was used to my friends asking me what guys I like.

But, I decided to go with it. "I wouldn't use the word cute. But, I guess so." The eyes she cut in my direction became a little braver, lasted a little longer as she turned to hand me the last of the glasses. "What about Caleb or Joe?"

I shrugged at that, beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. "I look at Caleb kind of like I do my brother," I admitted. "So no, I wouldn't say I'm attracted to him."

Haily raised an eyebrow. "And my cousin?"

I felt heat rising in my face despite the cold temperature in the garage. "Joe's definitely hot," I replied, and then felt myself growing defensive, despite the way she didn't appear to be judging me. "But you would think so too if you weren't related to him. Trust me."

Haily looked disturbed by that, but shrugged as she held out her hand. I couldn't help smiling when I took it to help her down. She was still having a hard time looking at me, but instead of gathering the items she'd come for and walking away she lifted herself into a sitting position on the cooler. "I wouldn't say anything to Joe," she advised. "I don't think he'd take it as a compliment."

I nodded slowly at that, finding myself interested in the fact that I suddenly had a different perspective on things. That what if, perspective. What if everyone knew? I had Haily's perspective. "What about Caleb?" I asked. Haily rolled her eyes. "He'd probably be offended that you think Joe looks better than he does," she guessed, but then turned serious. "But I don't really know. I don't really know what either of them would think."

I nodded slowly. "I don't think I'm going to tell them, Haily," I said honestly. "I was kind of hoping to get through high school without really having to deal with it. There aren't very many people who know anything... I guess I'm kind of wondering, how you feel about it. I mean, are you okay?" Haily narrowed her eyes. "No. Because it would have been nice to know sooner, since it would have saved me a lot of embarrassment."

I smiled at her. "If it helps, you're probably the only girl I'd go for if things were different."

She shook her head. "Nope. Doesn't really help, especially since I know all about you and Teresa Milldrum, which is gross, Nelson.... Look, I don't have a problem with... you know. But it's kind of hard to look at you the same way. I think it might be for a while. But I don't hate you... I told my mom you'd probably be stopping by on Thanksgiving."

I smiled at that. "Really?"

Haily gave a reluctant nod. "She's still going to hide that plate of pie for you... maybe afterwards you, me and Joe could do something."

"Definitely," I agreed, deciding that maybe this year the holidays wouldn't be so different after all. Maybe they'd even be better. "So... are we okay, Hails? I don't expect you to forgive me right now," I added quickly. "But are we okay?"

Haily let out a breath, as if she were being burdened and regarded me, some of the humor I knew she had reaching her features. "I guess, if it makes you feel better."

"It does," I said seriously. "I hate when you don't talk to me."

She shrugged. "Yeah. I know. Served you right, though."

I didn't bother arguing with that and together we started to gather glasses and beverages when she looked at me again.

"So you like Milo Trust, don't you?"

"Huh?" I caught one of the shot glasses--just barely--when it decided to jump out of my hand, and looked at her, feeling guarded. "What do you mean?"

Haily shrugged, smirked at me teasingly. "I've got you figured out, Nels. You've got the biggest crush on Milo Trust... you should be careful about that. You never know how someone might react."

.....

Milo was not amused. Not at all, when I told him what Haily had said.

"What?" I teased him. "I think you should be flattered that I had the biggest crush on you."

"That doesn't mean I want everyone else to know about it," he said indignantly right before he lost his balance, slid on the ice covering the trail and reached for me to catch himself.

I caught him around the waist, smiling before he found his footing and his

groin pressed closely against my thigh. I found myself sliding my hand down the bulkiness of his coat, down the firm curve of his ass in a not-so-subtle way. His emerald eyes glimmered threateningly at me in the darkness as he tried to push me away prematurely and almost slid again. Pulling him closer I laughed against his cheek as I used my weight to help him find his balance. "It's not everyone else," I promised. "It's Haily... she won't say anything. She doesn't even know anything when it comes to you. Swear it." I met his eyes reassuringly, hoping he'd believe me as I enjoyed the way the cold had him suddenly pressing closer to me instead of pushing away. We'd left Jerry's an hour ago. We'd given Haily a ride home when she'd asked me for one and Milo explained that he was driving, but didn't have a problem with taking her. The plan from there was to take me back to my car, parked not so far from his house, but instead we'd braved the roads near Hangman Cove. We both at least had clothes for the weather when we decided to go for a walk. It probably wasn't one of the smartest things to do. The only light was from the moon reflecting off snow and temperatures had dropped dangerously low. But it was also the most convenient time. We were guaranteed to be the only ones there, which meant that Milo, who couldn't seem to keep his balance even with his boots on, didn't object when I laced my gloved fingers through his and continued to lead the way towards the lake. "What if she ended up finding out about me?" Milo finally asked, still worried.

I glanced back at him and resisted the urge to pull his knitted cap further over his head, since in my opinion they weren't covering enough of his ears, which I imagined would be as red as his nose if I could see them better. "I don't think she'd say anything about you, either," I said honestly. "But she doesn't know." I gave his hand a tug. "C'mon, stop worrying about it. Please."

Milo fell silent, his gaze drifting towards the sky as we moved further away from the brush and our feet hit sand where scattered leaves were cold and slick as we made our way over them. The beach appeared silver between the ice and the snow, and against the moon our shadows stretched out in front of us while the scarecrow hung silently in his tree, bits of snow frozen against old straw. I'm sure it was all perfect. Beautiful. But I was more concerned with what Milo was thinking, if he'd find inspiration here and if the next time I walked into his room, I'd see the results. As it was the lines of his face seemed somewhat serene, and his shoulders beneath the weight of his coat were relaxed as his thumb slid over mine, whether or not he was aware of it. I heard him take in a chilly breath of air, letting it out in the form of white fog in front of his face.

"There was a rumor at my old school," he suddenly said. "It's the reason why I left Stratfort."

I looked at him, finding his words unexpected. "What kind of rumor?" "You know what kind," he said pointedly, his eyes meeting mine. "No one believed it, Nelson. But I knew it was true, and all I wanted to do was get away from it. I don't even know how it started, or who started it. I don't even think anyone mentions it anymore. But I wasn't ready for it. I'm still not.. not like you."

Wanting to know more, but also wanting to make him feel better, I smiled. "Then it's a good thing I'm cool with going at your pace."

Milo narrowed his eyes. "Haily knows. Who's next? Sometimes I even think ..."

"What?" I asked, tightening my hand on his when he continued to walk, not wanting him to get too far away from me.

"Sometimes I think Jame knows I'm gay."

That pulled me up short, giving me a good dose of Milo's worry and he just had to deal with the fact that his hand was currently connected to mine, I'd stopped moving, and felt fully content to pull him back in my direction. "Why would you think that?" I asked, trying not to sound as sharp as I felt. But Jame? Caveman or not, I didn't trust that guy, not with my secrets or Milo's. Maybe Milo would disagree with me, but the way I saw it, I didn't have many enemies. The fact that Jame had become one said a lot when it came to my gut instincts, and I didn't want to trust him for shit. I really didn't want Milo to, either, but refrained from saying so since I was the one asking him to trust Haily. I hated being fair.

Milo shook his head, seeming troubled as his forehead creased. "I don't know. You probably think I'm crazy for it, but it's just this feeling I get... I like, when you told me what Haily said... what if it's just a matter of time? Sometimes Jame gives me this weird look, and I just think... he knows. Or he knows something."

"Or maybe he's just weird," I said, wanting to make Milo feel better. Because I couldn't say, you're scared. That would have offended, but it would have been true. Milo was terrified, and I understood the feeling. I remember when he'd been the one to put it into me, but then I really didn't want to remind either one of us of that.

Milo rolled his eyes at my comment. "I mean it, Nelson. I'm not ready. I don't want him to know, or anyone else. Shit, why do you think I got so mad at you when..." He cut himself off, the firm set of his jaw telling me that he wanted to be taken seriously without having to explain himself further. But I was taking him seriously. I tugged at his hand, wanting to pull his body closer since it felt like the rest of him was trying to pull away. I took it as a good sign when he didn't resist and my arms slid easily around him while I turned my head to rest my cheek against his cold one. "Tell me what would be so bad about it," I said quietly. Maybe I could assume what would be

e bad about it for me, but Milo obviously wanted to vent, and with everything going on with Haily lately, and now Jame, too, it seemed, the last thing I wanted was for him to feel unsafe with me, and if he was, I guess I wanted to know why. I wanted to solve it for him, even if the logical side of me understood that was impossible. I couldn't make this kind of decision for Milo anymore than he could make it for me. "Is it because of your dad?"

He snorted, and when he spoke I could feel his lips moving against my neck between my coat and my beanie that caused me to shiver and lean closer against him. "My dad didn't want me switching schools. I let my grades drown before I convinced him it was a good idea... and he can't know. He can never know, because all he cares about is his stupid reputation. Like I could affect that. Most of the time people don't even know Thompson Trust has a son.

Emily didn't. Trust me, it was a disaster the first time he brought her home. She almost called the police when I walked into my kitchen and found her there. Juanita straightened her out. But I'm not part of the deal where she's concerned. My dad didn't even tell the woman he wants to marry about me. She had to find out like that. I had to find out like that."

I pulled Milo closer and closed my eyes as I breathed in the small amount of warmth coming off his body. Hearing him, it was hard not to be grateful for everything I had. I had a family that was determined to love me despite my flaws or personal preferences. I had at least one friend who was mad as hell at me, probably with good reason, who still wasn't going to give up on me, secrets or no secrets. Milo had a mom who'd cut out on him and sent him constant reminders with pictures he didn't want as much as he wanted her acknowledgment. He had a father who had no interest in getting to know him apart from his need to have a picture-perfect family, and a stepmother who hadn't wanted him to begin with. And he had Assface, but that was a different story altogether. As for the rest of them, I couldn't understand and why anyone wouldn't want Milo.

Yeah, that's because I was completely hard for him. All the time. Literally and figuratively, I guess. But it was also because of the way he painted. No one who didn't feel could do what he did to a canvas. And maybe he looked angry over fifty percent of the time but if anyone cared to look a little closer they'd figure out that he wasn't just angry, he was guarding himself because everyone he was supposed to care about had royally screwed him over in one way or another. And he was paranoid, but if I was surrounded by the same people he seemed to be surrounded by, I'd be pretty damn insecure, too. Milo Trust wasn't really close to anyone... except maybe Jame, so I guess it made sense that he made such a point to guard that friendship. And I'd like to think that he could trust me. So without teasing him, without doing my best to lighten the mood, I decided on telling him the most honest thing that came to mind. "If it were between you and me, I'd out myself first

t, Milo. And if I have to lie to my friends, I'll lie to my friends. No one has to know anything about you that you don't want them to know. If... if someone found out, I swear it wouldn't be because of me. I won't do that to you." I pulled back, smiled at the way his expression pondered whether or not he believed me. "And know what? It has nothing to do with you being the only guy in Heywell that will kiss me back."

And I got to kiss Milo Trust, my boyfriend, at Hangman, just the way everyone else took advantage of such a right.

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I didn't wake up until noon on Thanksgiving Day, and that was only because Leanna was in my room, on a cell phone, presumably speaking to someone in her family, who we didn't know much about. When Chad had met her she hadn't been close to them, and he'd met them once as far as I knew. I also knew that for some reason they didn't approve of my brother, which was strange because despite his tattoos and piercings... and pink hair... everyone approved of Chad. So I figured that when it came to Leanna's family, they were a bunch of idiots, especially for letting her go. Hell, I'd keep her.

As she paced back and forth across my bedroom floor, she noticed my eyes open and quickly indicated she was sorry for the intrusion, I waved her off and smiled like I would if anyone in my family had chosen to wake me up at a reasonable hour. I figured noon was reasonable, as I'd meant to get up much sooner. But I'd been up late the night before because Haily had come over. I'd invited her, wanting to make things better between us. And it was... really nice, actually. I think over the last months I'd become so uncomfortable around her because I knew what she wanted from me and couldn't give it to her. Now that the secrets were out of the way she suddenly felt like my friend again. When she reached to touch me I didn't feel the need to go in to complete defensive mode. When she made a comment about my ass in a particular pair of jeans I didn't jump to the conclusion that she was trying to flirt with me and I shouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. And best of all, she didn't look hurt every time she looked at me. So we'd stayed up and hung out way later than we'd expected to before I drove her home. This was after I'd suggested she just crash in the guest room but she insisted that if she wasn't home Thanksgiving morning her mom would consider it a federal offense.

I still felt sleepy after all of that and yawned widely as I checked to make sure I'd worn boxers to bed before I threw back my covers and passed Leanna's small figure to grab a pair of pants on the way to my closet. I pulled on a worn but clean pair of jeans and studied two sweaters my mom had presented me with and then hung up just yesterday. One red, one a powder blue. I didn't have to ask her about them to know that she wanted me to be wearing at least one of them in our family pictures that afternoon. I picked up b

oth, turned to Leanna and held them up.

She didn't pause in telling someone that she was sure she couldn't make one event or another as her eyes squinted through her glasses when she made a face at the blue one and pointed to the red. The blue ended up on the floor, the red on my back. I found myself stretching in it since it was a little snuggler than I was used to, but the material was soft against my skin as I struggled to pull the tags off the sleeve. Because I was about to rip it, Leanna moved in my direction and did it for me. A moment later she was hanging up with her family and reaching up to smooth over the blond hair that was sticking up on my head. "Do something about your hair before you come up stairs," she warned. "Your mom's armed with a camera." She made a face. "Sorry I woke you up, this was the closest place to get away from the zoo up there."

"That's okay," I insisted. "Is Uncle Ray here?"

"Since first thing this morning. Your cousin is adorable, by the way. Chad's freaking out because everyone's playing with the baby and no cooking is getting done."

I smiled, because she'd said that with affection. "Mom's not mad I'm not up yet?"

Leanna rolled her eyes. "I did mention there's a baby up there, didn't I? But she did say something about your chores. What have you got? I'll help."

I smiled, deciding to take her up on that.

"Do you want to feed the rat, the bird or the goat?"

After a quick trip to the bathroom to make myself presentable, I ended up feeding the goat and the rat, and then I headed into the kitchen where my family had congregated. My uncle Ray looked less stern with me than the last time I'd seen him, probably because I wasn't working on an early police record anymore. Grannie Tenny looked a little brighter than normal, smiled at me twice when I refilled her coffee for her, and I struck a pose for several pictures for more than one camera. Eventually I settled down in the living room with Chad, Leanna and my aunt Patty for a card game while our house slowly developed the odor of hot food and sweet-smelling pies. I was surprised when Caleb called to say happy Thanksgiving and that he was bored to death, but I was happy to hear from him, even looked forward to school starting because I found myself missing him.

A few hours later and I'd helped my mom expand and set our dinner table before we all sat in front of more food than everyone combined could possibly eat. My uncle Ray said a few words that made us laugh and then my dad followed with a little speech that was downright cheesy as he talked about togetherness. But it was nice nonetheless.

And then the doorbell rang.

The look on my face probably mirrored everyone else's as we fell silent an

d looked over the table, doing a head count to make sure everyone was accounted for. Finally, my mom gave Chad a nod to go see who was at the door. My brother snatched a roll off the table before he went, and we didn't wait for him as we started passing food. But Chad was back soon enough, and when I caught my brother's eye, his expression somewhat curious, he gave me a nod to follow him.

Frowning and trying to figure out what was going on, I silently excused myself from the only neighbor I had looking at me, Grandma Tenny. Chad waited, his hand moving to my back as he led me towards the front door. "It's for you," he said quietly, but didn't have to elaborate as I looked over the living room, my eyes pausing on Milo Trust.

It was obvious my brother had invited him in because he wasn't standing outside, but he was currently crowding our front door as if he were expecting to bolt out of it at any given moment. His ironed pants made him look taller and his white dress shirt was untucked and rumpled. His dark hair was askew in a way that was only ever a result of him pulling at it so much and as his green eyes met mine they seemed sullen and nervous as I smiled at my brother and indicated that he should go back to the table. The moment Chad was gone that same smile faltered and I crossed the room to Milo, taking it upon myself to lean on the front door just in case he decided he wanted to run.

"Are you okay?" I asked, not bothering with pleasantries. It was always pleasant to see Milo, but the fact that he'd shown up on Thanksgiving told me there was cause for concern.

He shook his head, but his words contradicted the action. "I'm... fine. Look, I'm sorry, this was stupid. I don't even know why I'm here."

He reached for the doorknob, but I covered it with my hand first, forcing his attention back in my direction. "What happened?" I asked.

Milo frowned, his gaze drifting towards the noise currently in our kitchen and then back at me. "I'll tell you later."

"Your dad?" I asked.

The dark look that crossed his features was answer enough as he shrugged one shoulder heavily. "We were supposed to be sitting down for dinner. He brought up my grades."

I made a face at that. "What's wrong with your grades?" I knew for a fact that they were better than mine, and my parents were pleased enough with me. I didn't get it.

Milo rolled his eyes. "Nothing. Everything, because nothing is ever good enough. The point is, I'm sitting with him and his girlfriend for a holiday..."

"And he brought up your grades," I said nodding. "Then what happened?"

Milo pulled at his hair in a way that made me want to reach up and protect it.

"There was a lot of yelling... and I'm... really sorry to bother you."

“You’re not bothering me,” I insisted, moving my hand to his shoulder, urging him away from the front door. “Come on, we’re just sitting down.”

Milo shook his head. “I think I should just go.”

I sighed. “Then let’s go to my room for a while. We can talk.”

“No one’s going to anyone’s room.”

I looked up to find my mother coming at us, the look on her face rather stern, for my mom, anyway. She was wearing a green dress today, her long hair still pulled back from her cooking. Her eyes landed on Milo, and while she smiled, he looked so horrified and cute that I had to suppress a smile over it, especially when my mom hooked her arm through his and pulled him towards the kitchen. “We’re sitting down to eat,” she informed us, looking over her shoulder at me. Milo was doing that, too, but I pretended not to notice because I knew he wanted to be rescued. “You look nice today,” she told Milo. “Come on, we put a chair for you next to Nelson.”

“Um...” Milo started awkwardly. He glared at me.

This time I did smile. “Might as well not argue with her,” I informed him. “She’s a hardass.”

“Nelson,” my mom warned, her tone much sharper when it came to my language. She went back to smiling at Milo. “I don’t know how the Trusts do it, but I’ve been told I make a pretty good turkey.”

“We have fish,” Milo said, as if his brain were only half there and that was the first thing that came to his mind.

My mom glanced back at me as if he’d told her he didn’t get cake on his birthday and then patted his shoulder soothingly. “I hope you’re hungry, Milo. If not you can try a little of everything. Nelson helped stir the beans and he buttered the rolls. I’m sure they’re both good.”

Milo opened his mouth, another objection on his tongue when another disruption behind us caused us to look. Sighing, I turned to see who was knocking on the door now, but my mom pushed past me, her hands on my shoulders as she gave me a shove in Milo’s direction. “I’ll get it,” she said impatiently. “Nelson, why don’t you get Milo set up.”

Milo glared at me as I took over for my mom, steering him towards the kitchen. “I’m not staying, Nelson!” he hissed.

“You can let my mom know,” I challenged, and then smiled at him even while the red that meant he was angry crept up his neck to his face. “Look... stay,” I said, my tone softening. “You’re not interrupting anything and if you hadn’t said you had plans I would have invited you, anyway. Besides, I’ll even promise that the only one you have to worry about biting you is me.”

His brow flew up in amusement before he quickly glanced back to make sure my mom hadn’t heard that. And then his shoulders went rigid as color drained from his face.

Frowning, I followed his gaze to where my mom was standing in front of the

the open front door, the sound of a sobbing woman coming from just beyond it.

“What on earth?” my mom demanded, alarmed.

“I’m so sorry to bother you, Pamela...I didn’t really know where else to go.

Thom’s just had the worst fight with Milo, and everyone just took off, and I asked Juanita if she could bring me here, and my family is so far away...”

I recognized her voice well enough by now, even when it was interrupted by sniffing and sobs. I looked at Milo, frowning as I wondered how I was going to get him out of here, past Emily Hill. Because I didn’t think he’d forgive me anytime soon if I didn’t.

Chapter 14: Waiting

by DomLuka

Worried for Milo, I grabbed his arm long enough to get him to follow me, because if he wanted to avoid Emily Hill then just standing there was a bad idea for three reasons. First was that my mom liked Emily Hill. Really, she did. While I’d done my best to be honest with Milo about every time the woman showed up at my house, I may have neglected to mention that she wasn’t just stopping by to talk about her wedding anymore. She was stopping by to visit my mom. Which brought me to the second reason, which was that my mom was going to invite Emily Hill in. Probably right after she finished hugging her. Reason number three was that you just couldn’t show up at the Larmon residence without a smile on your face, especially during the holidays, without being expected to stay until you’re acceptably cheered up. Acceptably would be at my family’s discretion. I’m pretty sure that Milo was beginning to catch on to that last thing and was regretting his decision to show up in the first place, but he didn’t exactly argue as we bypassed my family in the kitchen and headed straight to my room.

I let him in before me, closed my door after us and momentarily contemplated sneaking him out the window. It didn’t take me long to dismiss the idea as I looked to where Milo was staring blankly at the pictures on my wall, hands in his pockets as he rocked restlessly back and forth on his feet.

“You alright?” I asked cautiously, approaching him from behind.

“Do you think she’ll forget and leave Juanita in the car?” he asked, his voice sounding void to my ears.

“I don’t think Juanita would let that happen,” I mused, moving around him, wanting to better search out his eyes for what was going through his mind. “What exactly happened, Milo?”

He shrugged, avoiding my interested gaze. “Told you. My dad...”

“What about Emily?” I found myself asking since I couldn’t exactly be with Milo and upstairs eavesdropping at the same time to find out for myself.

Oddly, Milo looked defensive. “She wasn’t like that when I left. The only thing I’ve said to her all day is when I asked her to pass the butter. I said plea

se and it didn't make her cry."

"But you didn't get into it with her?" I asked, the look on his face answering the question for me. "Well... that's probably good since I'm pretty sure my mom's inviting her to sit down with us."

Milo groaned, eyes narrowing as his face contorted into one of his more brooding expressions when he moved past me, his body aimed for the door only to stop in front of it to turn and face me. "I have to get out of here." He looked so sincere that I wanted to help him to do just that.

Instead, I moved towards him despite his edginess, and didn't take it too personally when he tensed the moment I dropped my hands over his narrow hips and drew him a step closer, my gaze drifting habitually to his pink lower lip when his tongue moved over it. "I'm glad you came here," I said quietly. Because he hadn't gone to Jame. Ha! No, never mind that last part. Probably not the time to gloat. "And this isn't as bad as it seems."

Milo cut his eyes at me, hostility behind them that I found adorable, but refrained from smiling at it because he hated that.

"It's not," I insisted, sliding my hands closer to his ribs when his fingers wrapped around my wrists. "I know... Emily. But look, if you walked out before she was all upset, maybe she had a fight with your dad, too. Maybe the two of you have something in common."

Milo didn't look amused. "Or she blames me for every problem they have, just like he does."

I dropped my eyes, not really sure how to talk to him about this even though I was obviously the one he'd come to. When it came to his dad, or even Emily, Milo had always seemed pretty set in his opinion. Honestly, I could understand that given what he'd been through with each one of them. In my opinion, Milo's dad needed to open his eyes while Emily... well, as far as he'd ever told me her only crime was that she'd been shocked to learn a man she cared about had a seventeen-year-old son; and then there was his complaint about her only being interested because of his family's last name. That last thing seemed more like an excuse to me--more and more, in fact. I'd met plenty of people who became interested the second Trust came up. I wasn't so sure that Emily Hill was one of them.

"She told my mom she wants to get to know you. My mom believes her, and she's pretty good at judging stuff like that."

To my surprise, he seemed to consider that as his grip loosened on my wrists. Reluctantly, his eyes met mine. "I don't want her to get to know me," he whispered, a slight hitch to his voice that hinted more at stress than downright emotion.

I cocked my head at him, wanting to understand, but at that moment my bedroom door swung open and Milo jumped away from me so fast his back rocked my dresser against the wall, sending my lamp on its side and a few sketc

hbooks to the floor. After looking up to see that it was Chad, I moved to retrieve the items while my brother raised an eyebrow at Milo. "Decaf, maybe?" Chad suggested, and then turned his attention to me. "You coming up?"

"We need a minute," I told him, and his pointed look suggested that my mom wasn't willing to spare too much time. My brother left us anyway, as I finished straightening my dresser.

"Don't you have a lock?" Milo asked, still looking three shades paler than usual and seeming alarmed.

Without bothering to answer that question, I moved to the door, locked it, and turned back to him, this time grabbing his hand and tugging him towards my bed where I sat, leaning back on my pillow. He glared at me for a long moment before the weight of his knee dipped the mattress and I pulled him back until I could draw my arm around him, his head resting below my chin. My fingers went to his hair, gliding easily through the soft waves as I closed my eyes and breathed in the mild scent of his shampoo. "We don't have to go up until you're ready," I told him. "They won't make us."

I opened my eyes when Milo turned his head enough that my still hand came into contact with his smooth cheek. His eyes, green and heavy, were on me. "I'm ruining your Thanksgiving." He said it more accusingly than apologetically, and I couldn't help the short laugh I released at his tone.

"Worth it," I promised him. "I like when I get to see you."

His features softened the way they did when I couldn't tell if he were in the middle of a deep thought, or worrying about something. "I don't want you to stay down here with me," he finally said. "Your family's waiting on you."

"They're waiting on you, too," I pointed out, and then regarded him seriously. "You don't have anything to worry about when you're here... you know?"

His mouth turned down, and I found myself running a finger over it, wishing I could fix it. "You've talked to them about me," he said, and not for the first time. He'd made the same comment the first time he ever set foot in my house, but this time I had a feeling that it was going to go a step further.

"How much have you talked to them?"

I let out a breath, more nervous than I was willing to let on. "I tell my family everything, Milo... almost, everything. My mom. My dad. Chad. Whatever I've told them about you, they'll never say anything, to anyone. I swear.

I told you, I wouldn't do something to hurt you like that. Neither would anyone in my family."

For a moment I couldn't tell if Milo was staying there so close to me on his own accord, or if I wasn't giving him much of a choice, the way my fingers were suddenly curled over his shoulder. But then he let out a breath, giving

me more of his weight. "What's it like?" he asked. "To be able to talk to them?"

I swallowed against a suddenly dry throat, not liking the way he sounded so alone. I found myself tightening my arm around him. "You could talk to them, too, Milo."

I watched as his hands moved over mine, lifting my fingers as if to inspect them before he suddenly sat up, turned to face me. "I shouldn't have bothered you today," he said stubbornly, but before I could object to that his tone softened. "But I'm glad I did... and I'm not going to ruin your Thanksgiving."

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I don't think I'd been properly introduced to awkward until the day I'd sat down to an early dinner with Milo Trust and Emily Hill at the same table. Coincidentally, it was also the same table my entire family was also sitting at. And Juanita, who was looking around like we were all too noisy and maybe a little bit crazy, too, after she'd shooed Chad out of his seat so she could sit next to Milo. She made a point to move her seat within three inches of his and when my mom had poured her a glass of wine she'd regarded the glass suspiciously before taking a cautious sip. She seemed to like Leanna, though. I guess Chad's girlfriend spoke enough Spanish to get by, and made enough mistakes to make Juanita laugh.

Emily Hill was opposite the table to me, tucked between my mom and my uncle Ray. She seemed decidedly better than she had when she'd arrived. She'd straightened her black hair, and she managed a smile as she engaged in conversation with the people around her, but her eyes were still red, mildly swollen, and every so often she stole a cautious glance in Milo's direction. It might have made him nervous, but I doubted he was noticing it.

I guess as far as awkward went, my family seemed pretty good about handling it. They didn't allow for many silences, and more often than not ended up talking over each other. I found myself wanting to smile at each and every one of them for acting as if a distraught family showed up every year for Thanksgiving. But that didn't make me feel the situation any less, seated next to Milo. He was the only one who didn't seem interested in speaking at all, except when he thanked my parents for the food and told them that he liked it. I didn't bother pointing out that he was hardly making an effort to move food around his plate with a fork, only smiled at him whenever I managed to catch his eyes.

It wasn't that he was being rude. I don't think anyone thought that. More like, he seemed uncomfortable in his own skin, afraid of what would happen if he dared to look up. It occurred to me that I didn't like him in that position, and half wished he would have taken me up on my offer to get him out of there, anywhere he wanted to go, just so he didn't have to feel like he was

feeling now. But he'd chosen to stay, and I knew that was for me. I think it might have scared him to know how much I wanted to jump him over that. In a lot of different ways, and that said a lot because I tended to have a pretty active imagination. Only, nothing I'd concocted involved my family or his around the dinner table.

And then Emily Hill started talking about her family. My parents, my uncle and his wife, they'd managed to make her feel at home in a way that I seemed to have failed to do with Milo. She talked happily about her at-home traditions, the closeness between her and her siblings, her niece, her nephew. I don't think anyone didn't realize that she sincerely missed them. And that's when Milo started sneaking glances in her direction, listening. It was as if he hadn't even been aware she had a family. Maybe not surprised about it, but almost disappointed. I wonder if that's because he hadn't known. Or maybe it was because she seemed so close to them that he no longer understood her, why she was sitting at our table, with him.

"...and we put up the tree Thanksgiving afternoon at my mom's house," she said, sighing. "My dad makes the best eggnog." She smiled at my mom. "Thank you so much for having me here, it makes me think of them. I didn't want to miss it this year but it had seemed..." she paused, as if suddenly insecure about where she was going, her dark eyes touching Milo and then fleeing as fast as his did every time they landed on her. "I thought it would be a good idea to spend it with my new family."

The table grew uncomfortably silent just then, Milo's eyes downcast on his plate, and he finally took a bite of his turkey, as if to avoid having to come up with a response.

It was my mom who saved the moment, breathing life back into things when she finally said, "Well, we're happy to have you here, Emily... and Juanita ... and Milo," she added gently, causing my boyfriend's cheeks to color. I smiled at my mom, happy to have Milo there, too, even if he didn't realize how much.

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Voices still echoed through my house, happy chatter and laughter just beneath the sound of running water where I stood at the sink, scrubbing off dishes and passing them to Chad to be rinsed before he passed them to Milo, who had a towel ready. After we ate, instead of fleeing Milo had volunteered to help me and my brother with our annual chore, seeming amused as we bantered back and forth, arguing over which one of us had more accurate versions of childhood memories.

"You ever think about doing something like this?" Chad suddenly asked Milo, who'd been caught eyeing a tattoo on my brother's bare foot. Some sort of bird flying out of the sun--the ink was colorful, standing out against his skin, which was almost just as pale as mine.

“Getting a tattoo?” Milo replied. “My dad would freak.” I laughed when he eyed me, the look on his face suggesting that wasn’t something he was against.

Chad rolled his eyes. “Not getting one. Designing something. You’re good with art. Nels talks about it all the time.”

Milo’s expression turned sheepish, and then nearly accusing on me before he replied to my brother. “I paint. I don’t think it’s the same thing.”

Chad shrugged. “Well if you ever change your mind about that have Nelson bring you by the shop. The guy I work for, Dane, he’s always looking for new ideas, or someone else who can get an idea someone has down on paper.” My brother suddenly lifted his shirt, just over his right hip to reveal another tattoo of my family--my parents, me, and himself--all looking rather cartoonish. I had super-big muscles, my mom had a halo, my dad horns, and my brother was a full inch taller than all of us. “Nels did this one.”

Milo leaned forward, taking an interest, and then raised an eyebrow at me. “If I’d known he was going to put it on his body I would have made myself look way better, then there’d be no question about which one I was,” I remarked.

Chad grabbed the towel Milo was holding and snapped it at me before smiling at Milo. “And if you change your mind, he’ll pay you for it.”

Milo gave him a nod, seeming more interested than before. I tucked away a mental note to bring it up again with him, thinking he might end up enjoying something like that. Besides, Chad said he’d take me in for one the day I turned eighteen, and I knew the work of one artist in particular I wouldn’t mind having stamped onto my body. It seemed that no matter how I was feeling about Milo Trust at any given time I could become absorbed in his work with nothing more than a glance. He was scary-good, and I’m sure my brother would think so if he could see more than one painting. I think anybody would. Except Milo’s dad, it seemed, and that tended to piss me off to no end.

He’d mentioned an argument during Thanksgiving dinner, no less, over grades. My parents didn’t accept me failing classes by any means, but they also didn’t discourage me, especially from the things I loved the most. And Milo wasn’t failing. That I knew. And he loved painting. The more I heard about his father’s opinion about the matter, the more I felt sad for Milo.

“Meelo?” Juanita’s accented voice interrupted, and I watched as Milo turned to face her, allowing her to hug him before they made a silent exchange and he nodded before glancing back at me.

“Everything okay?” I asked him.

“Juanita’s kind enough to drive me home,” Emily Hill said as she suddenly appeared behind Juanita and Milo. She glanced between Chad and me. “Thank you. For having me. Dinner was perfect.”

“No problem,” Chad said politely.

I found myself forcing a smile in her direction, more concerned for Milo who was beginning to look more uncomfortable than he had at the table. Maybe that’s because Emily was looking right at him now, not exactly leaving like she said she was going to do. I recognized that look. A woman with something on her mind. From knowing my own mother, and Haily, I’m not sure there was anything I was intimidated by more.

“Um... I’m going to go check on Leanna,” Chad said, once again polite by excusing himself. The firm pat he gave to my back suggested I should do the same thing. But still, I watched my brother and Juanita leave the kitchen before I caved in to propriety and attempted the same thing myself. It was Milo moving between me and the exit that prevented me from doing so. He didn’t have to look at me for me to pick up on that don’t-leave-me vibe. So I paused, looked sheepishly between Milo and Emily as I ran my fingers through my hair, opened my mouth, realized I had nothing to say and abruptly turned around to keep up on the dishes.

That awkward thing again. Didn’t help that I’ve always been too nosy for my own good and found myself peering over my shoulder. Of course, the first thing I ran into was Emily Hill’s eyes warily on me, and snapped my attention back to the sink. What was I supposed to be doing again? Right. Dishes. Clean them. I turned up the water, picked up the sponge and the closest plate to my fingertips.

“Tommy... I mean, Milo,” Emily said, her voice so soft I felt as if I were straining important ear muscles just to hear her as my hand paused against the plate, hot water scalding my fingers while I tried not to notice. “I just wanted you to know, I had no idea you’d be here. I’m so sorry if by showing up I upset you, it’s really the last thing I’d ever...”

She stopped suddenly, as if they’d been interrupted, and too cautious to turn I waited until no one else seemed present, deciding that Milo had obviously indicated that she should stop.

“You’re allowed to be wherever you want to be,” he finally said, seeming anxious to me. I think he was trying to be nice, but he sounded borderline defensive.

“I feel terrible, you know,” Emily said. “I’m sorry about what happened with your dad. I didn’t mean to upset either one of you. I wish I’d just kept my mouth shut. I get the feeling I’ve just ruined everything, and I don’t even know how I did it.”

Milo was silent for a moment, and then, “It’s not your fault. Just... don’t worry about it, Emily.” He said her name like he was trying it out for the first time, and I found myself turning off the water, turning around. Milo had backed up a few feet, as if wanting to put more distance between the two of them, seeming uncomfortable with Emily Hill’s reluctant smile.

“Maybe if I talk to your dad...”

Milo shook his head, suddenly not so shy. “It won’t matter if you talk to him. Trust me, you don’t want to get in the middle of it. He’ll ground me, and everything will go back to normal.”

Emily sighed, not seeming to care for that idea, but she also didn’t look like she wanted to argue with Milo for fear of making things worse. “Maybe I’ll see you at the house later? I really would like to sit down for a dinner. Just the three of us.”

Milo shrugged. “Yeah. See you later.” But I already knew that his later was a lot more distant than the one Emily had in mind. Of course, if I was about to be grounded over something stupid, I probably wouldn’t be in a hurry, either.

Emily stepped forward, and then awkwardly gave Milo’s shoulder a pat since it seemed that a hug was out of the question. After a quick wave goodbye in my direction she was gone, and when Milo didn’t turn to face me, I went to him.

“What was that all about?” I asked. “I thought everything was over your grades.”

Milo let out a breath. “It was. She asked me how school was going and my dad made a big deal about how I’d be doing a lot better if I was back at Stratford. I guess I didn’t take it very well.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure how to comment on that. Milo back at Stratford? I guess it could be worse. It wasn’t like I saw him all that often at school, anyway. What seemed to matter was that for some reason--the rumor he’d spoken of, or whatever else--he didn’t want to go to school there, and if it was going to make him unhappy I was completely against it. I might have told him that if I didn’t get the impression he’d rather not talk about any of it as he headed back to the sink. After the day he’d just had, I wasn’t about to push it, liking the fact that I seemed to be one of the only people he could stand right now. “So are you hanging out with me today?” I asked, my smile an attempt at lightening his mood. “I’m probably heading to Haily’s family thing this afternoon. You should come with me.”

Milo frowned. “Nelson...”

“No one will mind,” I promised him. “Trust me. She has a ton of relatives. No one will even know we’re there. Besides, you’re rebelling, right? It’ll beat going home.”

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I think it was a good thing, Milo seeing Haily, knowing she knew the truth about me. I knew he’d been worried about her making more assumptions than just my having a crush on him. But I think he started relaxing when Haily made an active attempt to hide my secret from Milo too, mentioning she saw me checking out one of her cousins--female cousins--or suggesting s

he set me up on a blind date with one of them. I'm not sure who was more amused by it, Milo or me.

Haily had me wishing that all of my friends could be more like her, especially when we tried to get Joe to come hang out with us. He'd more or less turned up his nose at Milo Trust and disappeared for the rest of the time we were there. I might have been more annoyed about it if Milo had been, but the longer he hung around me and Haily, the more his mood seemed to improve.

Until he asked me to drive him back to his car because he had to go home and deal with what he'd left there. An hour after I'd said goodbye to him he called to say I wouldn't be hearing from him until school started back up.

I guess that answered whether or not he was grounded.

The rest of break seemed to drag on, and I spent most of my time with my family and the occasional visit with Joe and Haily. I watched too many movies and ate too much food, and the day the temperatures finally crawled above forty I was stuck inside because once again, Hellschool was in session.

But, it wasn't all bad. First thing that morning I was standing in front of Milo's locker before Milo ever got there, and I didn't even let it bother me that Assface was with him when I spotted him coming in my direction. Light sweater and faded jeans. I liked those particular jeans, especially when he turned around. His black scarf was dangling over his shoulders, as if he'd tossed it on as an afterthought and his dark hair was newly trimmed. Not too much. Just made him look a little cleaner, and despite the fact that it was all sitting on his head perfectly he nervously moved his fingers to brush his bangs out of his green eyes when he found me watching him. Assface spotted me moments after, rolled his eyes, and after a few short words to Milo, took off in another direction. Even better.

I stepped aside so he could get into his locker, my head tilting in his direction as I hoped to catch the scent of sandalwood and paint. His eyes cut in my direction as he worked on his combination, and then rolled at me as if he knew exactly what I was doing. I grinned at him, my attention turning to the blue slip of paper between his fingers. I brushed the tips of mine against them as I reached for it, and then compared the list to my own.

We'd received our new class schedules through the mail over break. This time my friends and I were split down the middle for lunch. Joe and Haily for first, Caleb and I for second. Joe wanted Caleb and me to try to switch because the way he put it, we had better luck with school officials. I had pointed out that the only reason he didn't was because he liked to talk to people like they were stupid, but that hadn't been received well. Still, Caleb was willing to switch. I hadn't been sure, but now I was.

"We have lunch together," I told Milo, happy despite the fact that we no longer had any of the same classes.

Interested, Milo took both schedules, and after a quick overview, pressed his lips to muffle his laughter.

Milo raised an eyebrow. "You have three classes with Jame."

My smile dropped at that as I snatched back my schedule and regarded it suspiciously. Then I held it out to him. "We should trade."

Milo unloaded books into his locker, regarded me pointedly and decided to change the subject. "I'm grounded forever. It's probably good we have lunch together."

I sighed, not liking that at all. "And what are the chances of Jame letting me sneak you away if that's the only time I get to see you?"

Milo's gaze turned to his locker again, his fingers fumbling over the books inside. "Jame doesn't have lunch with us."

I found my smile again. "Caleb does, but he'll probably switch. I told my dad I'd stop by Hollander's today. Wanna come with me?"

Milo closed his locker, giving me a short nod. "Do you want me to drive? My car's closer to the school."

I shrugged, not bothered either way. "Sure." I glanced at the schedule in his hands again, knowing that his first class was as far away from mine as possible, but I was determined to, at the very least, walk him halfway. "So... what happened with Emily? Is she still fighting with your dad?"

"Not really... he's been bringing home a lot of flowers lately. Juanita says jewelry, too."

"Milo... I know you have the whole issue with her, but on Thanksgiving..."

"I don't think she's just after his name anymore, Nels," Milo cut me off, his gaze peeking from under his lashes in a way that effectively shut me up.

He dropped his voice, despite the noise in the halls. "My dad made some new rules. Says he doesn't like my attitude. "He doesn't think I'm focused and told me I'm not supposed to pick up a paint brush until summer, and he'll let me know when he's in the mood to discuss how long I'm grounded for."

"What?" I asked indignantly. "But..."

"Obviously, I told him to fuck off," Milo added. "I think that got me locked up indefinitely. But the other night, when I thought he was busy with Emily, I went to look for where he stashed all my stuff because Juanita wouldn't tell me... and Emily was looking at my paintings."

For an awkward moment, my mind took in that image, not very happy with it before Milo shook his head.

"Not that painting." He grinned at me. "That one no one will find."

I laughed. "Just checking... so Emily knew where everything was?"

Milo shrugged. "I guess so... she said I was really good," he said, as if he couldn't quite wrap his mind around the concept.

My smile softened. "You are good." Because maybe he didn't know that. I found myself studying him for a moment, trying to remember if I'd ever gotten

n a thank you for all the times I'd told him so. What I could remember seemed to consist of him changing a lot of subjects or pretending he hadn't heard me. Maybe it was hard for him to hear it, take a compliment. The one person who should have been behind him no matter what, was the one telling him he couldn't. I was so not a fan of Thompson Trust. But maybe someone had finally gotten to him. Someone he didn't think was even supposed to like him. "You didn't get mad at her?" I asked carefully. "For looking?"

A sheepish blush crept into Milo's face, probably because he couldn't exactly get offended by that. Sometimes it seemed like he looked for reasons to dislike someone. Like Emily. Hell, he'd done it with me for a while, too--I mean with me, maybe he'd had a reason at first, but still... the more I got to know him, the more I didn't want to hold it against him. No one I knew had a wall thicker than the one Milo Trust had built. Obviously, he saw a reason to have it there. Inconvenient for him, since the more I noticed that wall, the more I wanted to tear it down.

Some days it felt like he was letting me.

"At first," Milo admitted. "But then I figured out, she had no idea they were mine." He shrugged at the doubtful look I flashed him. "My dad doesn't talk about me to her, Nelson. I think he's afraid that if he did I'd ruin everything... but maybe she doesn't see it that way. I know what I've said about her--and, I'm not exactly ready to be her new best friend or anything--but out of all the women he's brought home... she's the only one that I wish would get the hell out before it's too late."

I raised an eyebrow. "But..."

"She's the one who's too good for him," Milo said, startling me. He came to a stop in the hall to face me, so I did the same. "You know why my dad can't stand me? He was married to my mom for almost ten years before he figured out that he couldn't change her. He didn't figure that out until she was gone... I remind him of her. He doesn't want me to be like her. But I already am, because as soon as I get the chance, I'm going to leave him, too. So will Emily, because she's not a bad person. She cares about people and he doesn't know how to appreciate that. She just doesn't know it, yet."

I opened my mouth, wanting to comment on so much of that, wanting to know more, especially when it came to his dad. Milo said it all the time: they didn't get along. This was the first time he'd spoken more than a few words about it. I wanted to know everything he had to say because it let me in on more of him. I wondered what he'd say if he knew how much that meant to me. Sometimes I wondered about the fact that we were the only two guys either one of us really knew. Wondered if it would make a difference if there was more to the population. I wondered if he wondered about that. I guess I just wanted him to know that it was him I wanted to get to know. He was worth knowing, even if his dad couldn't figure that out. I wanted to te

ll him that, because I thought he should know, but as the first bell rang his mouth turned up at one corner and he took a step back from me so students could walk between us.

“I’ll see you at lunch,” Milo said, and I gave up on wanting to walk him all the way to class as he turned and walked away from me. Whatever. It’s not like he would have let me carry his books, anyway.

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I navigated my way past other students heading to the cafeteria, followed others out the door towards the student parking lot. One hour. Milo. No Jame. No anyone. I had a lot of time to think about that when I probably should have been paying attention, or learning something. The more I thought about it, the more I liked it. One hour a day, five days a week, roughly twenty hours a month. That was, like, more time than I got to see him even when he wasn’t grounded. I loved my new schedule.

“Where are we going?”

I had to look twice when Caleb fell into step beside me. His blond waves were packed down and trapped beneath a dark-brown beanie that made his eyes look darker as he rubbed his glove-free hands together, warding off the cold air trapped beneath the overcast sky.

“What are you doing here?” That sounded snappish. Oops. At least my friend didn’t seem to notice, his breath fogging in front of his face, over his hands.

“It’s too fucking cold. We’re taking my car. Your heater sucks.”

“Um, actually, Milo has this lunch and he was going to drive...”

“Whatever,” he cut me off, picking up the pace. “Where’s he parked?”

Despite being annoyed over this unplanned interruption, I didn’t go without noticing that instead of arguing about having to spend his time with Jame Graham’s best friend, he was more concerned with getting out of the weather. Sometimes less of a reaction was a better reaction.

“I thought you were switching your lunch,” I said as I caught up to him.

Caleb shook his head. “Joe said you didn’t.”

“Oh.” Well, that was to be expected then.

Caleb let out a breath. “And... Ronnie has first lunch.”

“Why would that be a problem?” I asked as we reached neatly and not-so-neatly parked rows of car and I looked for Milo’s.

“Because I think she dumped me,” Caleb replied, saying the words as if they weren’t his first language.

“What do you mean? How could she dump you?”

Caleb shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. But I’m pretty sure it’s some kind of record because I haven’t even bought her dinner yet.”

“Well... do you think it’s because of... you know, Assface?”

Caleb snorted, waving that off. “No, she dumped him right after the dance.

She told me she wanted space. What the hell is that supposed to mean anyway? It never works when I say it. I think she could have put a little more thought into the blow-off. If she cared... she would've come up with a better one. And I told her I'd give her space, and then she asked me not to see anyone else and I told her... "Sure. Why not?" What the fuck is my problem, Nels? You know what this feels like? It feels a lot like that dream I had when I looked like a doormat."

"Why would you look like a doormat?"

Caleb and I turned towards the voice, and I smiled at Milo. He was subtle, his eyes meeting mine as he obviously wondered why Caleb was with us, but he seemed to figure out quickly enough and waved for us to follow him."

"Caleb has dreams," I explained to Milo. "Weird ones. He thinks they mean stuff."

Caleb elbowed me, and when I smirked at him he gave me a dirty look, silently objecting to me sharing that kind of information with a stranger. But I figured I'd get a head start on filling Milo in when it came to Caleb's quirks, since I planned on having my twenty Milo hours Caleb, or no Caleb.

"It's your dream," Milo replied. "Why not just be the boots, then you're the one doing all the stepping."

"Because I don't wear size six with little butterflies on the shoe laces," Caleb said reasonably.

I made a mental note to look for that particular description on Ronnie's feet later. For now I gave Milo a sheepish shrug when he raised an eyebrow, questioning Caleb's sanity. Caleb got that same shrug when he pointed a thumb at Milo, shaking his head like my boyfriend was some kind of walking blond joke. "So..." I said. "Maybe we'll make it to Hollander's in time to have lunch with my dad."

My parents had been saving me a lot lately. I'd have to remember to thank them for it. Especially my dad, who was the perfect distraction when it came to making sure that Milo and Caleb weren't so aware of the fact that they were having lunch together. He entertained us with stories about his customers which kept the mood light. Maybe Milo hadn't been so comfortable with the entire situation at first, but by the time we had to go back to school he was visibly less tense over our company, and he even managed to smile at a few of my dad's jokes. And it was good, him hanging out with my father like this. Maybe, it would be easier to get him to come home with me more often if he knew my family better.

Milo had plenty of time to get used to my dad over the next days. At lunch all three of us would meet at Milo's car and head to the bakery. Caleb and Milo seemed to coexist across the table together, but it took a little more time before they seemed comfortable enough around each other to smile at the same time. But it wasn't long before we started going other places, with

out needing my dad as a buffer so much.

I didn't delude myself into thinking that Caleb and Milo actually liked each other, but I didn't mind being able to see my best friend and my boyfriend at the same time, in the same room. Hell, at the same table. Even though I would have much rather seen Milo alone for quite a bit of that time. But by Christmas he was ungrounded enough to call me, and I was learning fast to wait by the phone ten minutes to nine, every night. And I noticed when we talked the conversations got longer. And now I knew that when he was six he wanted to be a robot for Halloween but his dad dressed him up as a doctor. His parents had apparently fought about it, before his mom left. When he started sounding sad, I asked him if he would dress up like a doctor for me. Or a robot. I could work with either.

When I asked Milo what he wanted for Christmas, he told me to make him something. A bout of inspiration and a box of colored pencils later, I was done with a little comic book that started with paintings scattered on the street and Milo Trust ready to knock me out. It ended with Santa dropping me off at his window. He'd laughed out loud at my sketches, smiled at me in a way that had warmth seeping into my cheeks, and he'd gently tucked it into a locked box at the top of the closet in his room, a room I wasn't supposed to be in. That's what Milo had translated anyway, when Juanita started reminding him that his father would be home soon.

But Milo hadn't let me go without the painting of our field, which he explained, he'd finally gotten around to finishing. It was perfect. And it was Milo. I spent most of Christmas morning trying to figure out where I wanted to hang it, but after a quick snowball fight with my dad, Chad, and Leanna, I came in to find that instead of where I'd left it on my bed, my mom had hung it in the living room. I guess I wasn't the only one who loved it.

The first weekend after classes were back in session, Milo called to tell me his dad had finally let him out. When he walked into my house thirty minutes later his painting was the first thing he saw, and I found myself smiling at how a soft blush crept into his cheeks over it. He'd seemed surprised to find it in our living room and stepped forward to admire it, but not the same way I did, or anyone else who recognized that he had talent would. Milo seemed humble about his work, this one in particular, hanging in my home where it could be seen. He turned emerald eyes on me, his head cocking curiously. "You put it up."

"My mom did," I admitted. "Everyone loves it..." I made a face at him after glancing towards the painting again. "Maybe I should have given you something that you don't have to hide."

Milo shook his head, a smile curling his mouth. "I like my gift."

I grinned at that, unable to express the satisfaction that gave me in any other way. "My parents are out back with hot chocolate... so I thought we should

go hang out in my room.” Because I didn’t want to share the time I had with Milo with anyone. This time I felt like I had a choice about it. Finally. Between Milo being grounded and finding it nearly impossible to have more than a few minutes alone with him here or there during school, I figured I was allowed to be a little bit selfish this time around. Talking on the phone wasn’t the same thing, and as he followed me to my room I couldn’t help the way I kept glancing in his direction. Staring, probably. I definitely had a staring problem. Milo noticed, smirked his amusement at me.

“How did you get out, anyway?” I asked, lowering my voice because even halfway down the stairs to my basement bedroom, I was afraid someone would overhear us, interrupt. “You’re really not grounded anymore?”

Milo made a face. “I don’t know. My dad’s been distracted with Emily, I think. I told him I wanted out of the house and he said I could have a few hours at Jerry’s.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Jerry?”

Milo shrugged as we reached my room and I turned to face him in the doorway. “Jerry will cover for me without me having to ask him to if my dad calls... which he won’t. My dad likes Jerry.”

I thought about being offended by that, but quickly decided not to bother.

The last time I met Mr. Trust I’d kicked his own front door in his face. I could get the dislike thing. I didn’t like him much, either, and found myself frowning when I noticed Milo’s eyes drift to the second of his paintings occupying my house, the scarecrow I still had in my room. He’d known it was there, but never really looked so confused about it before. I found myself sighing as I closed my bedroom door. I was willing to bet that Mr. Trust didn’t have anything Milo had painted hanging where someone could see it.

“How long do you have?” I asked.

“A couple hours. You should lock your door.”

I raised an eyebrow at that, but he wasn’t paying attention to me as he shed his jacket, letting it drop on my bed. He seemed lost for a moment, his eyes moving over my room like he was supposed to find something particular in it, but had just then remembered to look.

“Milo, are you okay?” I asked.

His attention drifted back to me, his head cocked as if he didn’t understand the question. “I’m not stuck at home.”

No. He was with me.

I smiled at him, crossed the room and hooked an arm around his waist. I pulled, toppling his weight against me as I purposely fell to my bed and shoved his jacket aside as he, after minimal protest, settled against me, his back half against my chest, his head just above my shoulder. I slid my fingers against his ribs, drawing a small shudder from him. My mouth found his ear and I let my bottom lip trace his lobe before I moved my mouth to his cheek, my

kiss lingering there as he closed his eyes and let his weight fall more firmly against me.

“I like it here,” he said so softly I hardly heard him.

I smiled against his cheek. “Does that mean you’re not going to tell me you have to be somewhere else in twenty minutes?”

Milo’s pink tongue slipped out, touched his top lip. The curve of his smile was more patient than annoyed as he opened his eyes and turned them in my direction. “I have plans with Jame tomorrow, if that’s your way of asking.”

I feigned horror. “He gets a whole day?”

“Shut up,” Milo responded, and then let his mouth fall on mine. He paused, seeming surprised by himself. I was used to him being shy. Thanks to him being grounded, I’d gone an entire week more than once before the opportunity arose to even sneak a kiss. When I was able, sometimes it felt like we were starting all over from the beginning. Nervous. Careful. Perfect. And I liked the way I could make him blush, the moment he went from uncertain to excited. But this was nice, too, and before he could decide to pull away from me I moved my tongue between his lips to search for his as I rolled him beneath me. I let my weight fall over him, my thigh pressing between his. His hands moved to my hair, fingers catching enough to remind me that I really did need a haircut soon, but Milo seemed to like the leverage it gave him, pulling my mouth back to his when it ventured lower, over his neck.

My eyes fell closed, my tongue moving against his. I nipped at his lips, nuzzled at his nose with mine and heard him sigh as I slid my hand around his waist, urging his hips to lift against mine.

“Door locked?” Milo murmured, his voice strained as I pulled away from him, lifting the hem of his shirt over his chest.

I didn’t respond as my eyes followed my fingers over inch after inch of smooth skin until my thumb moved lightly over his dark nipple, then followed it with my mouth, causing a small bead to form beneath my tongue as his hands moved over my shoulders, his hips lifting from the bed, pressing the rising bulge beneath his pants against my thigh. Milo gasped, door forgotten when I cupped him through his jeans, my palm sliding over the length of him until my fingers found the button holding his pants together and I unhooked it. He arched, searching for more attention there, but my hands moved higher, gripping his shirt and guiding it over his head while he sat up, and then caught my mouth with his. I moved an arm over his bare back, hauling his chest against mine. He slid his fingers over my torso, gripping at me as my hands came to the hem of his jeans and lowered them over his hips, his boxers caught in the descent until his thighs, still parted around mine, stopped them.

Milo’s fingers fumbled with my belt, but didn’t manage to pull the leather o

ut of the first loop before I allowed my gaze to drift down his bare chest to the thin trail of hair beneath his belly button that led down to his exposed cock, thick and ready where it stood, angled upwards. I moved my palm over the head of it, squeezed gently, causing his back to arch, his member pressing firmly against my hand.

I moved my mouth back to his, tongue entering and swirling pointedly against his as I moved my fingers over his shaft, around him, down his length to cup his balls before I made my exploration upwards again, my grip growing firm around velvet as I found a pace that had his fingers digging into my ribs and his hips bucking towards mine.

My hand on his back moved lower, fingers spreading to cup the smoothness of his rounded ass, pressing him closer before they slid hesitantly into his cleft, tracing him to his balls while I caught his soft moan against my tongue. I could feel myself shaking, my jeans hurting my dick where it was restrained as I pressed the spot that made him jump, soft, sensitive skin behind his balls, before my fingers moved upwards to rest curiously against puckered skin. He squirmed against me, his cock eager for the friction of my hand while he pressed shyly away from where my fingers explored his ass. He pulled his mouth from mine, his hot breath touching my ear in heavy, even pants. I could feel his mouth open against my neck, his voice uttering nothing more than a moan when I slid my finger over his hole, and then a safer distance away to cup his left cheek, pulling his hips towards me and setting him off balance until his back fell against my mattress, his jeans tangled around his knees.

He looked up at me through heavy lashes, his lips puffy from my attention. His hands once again reached for my belt, and I moved to help him with it, only long enough to release my jeans, removing the pressure from my cock. My fingers moved quickly back to his pants, pulling them down his knees, but too impatient to pull his shoes from his feet I left them around his ankles and dropped my mouth over the firmness of his stomach, dipping my tongue mildly into his small, round belly button. He arched his hips, said my name, his voice husky in a way that made my cock twitch. I let my mouth slide lower, over the thin trail that guided me until my nose touched the head of his erection. I breathed him in, eyes closing as I licked him there, down his smooth shaft slowly, and kissed my way back up while my hands moved to his hips, sliding beneath. I grabbed the cheeks of his ass as I closed my mouth over his cock, knowing better than to go too far but testing his reaction as I moved my tongue against the head.

Milo's hands moved back to my hair, his grip tight in a way that encouraged me to continue as I moved my mouth to taste the crease between his thighs, the sensitive place just below his stomach and back to where he was hard. He released another sound when I squeezed his ass, my fingers wanting to

to explore again as I massaged his cheeks, moving deeper into his cleft until I touched his hole, careful, gently. I circled the tight ring, pressed gently as I took the head of his cock back into my mouth. He said my name. I loved it when he did that. My scalp burned where he gripped at my hair, holding without pushing, and I tasted him against my tongue as his back arched and he shook beneath me. I'm not sure he was finished before he was pulling me upwards, my cock, tenting my boxers just outside my jeans sliding up his body, resting firmly against his hip as my lips touched his chin, then his lips as they searched for mine. I kissed him back when his tongue found my mouth, held him to me, feeling his small trembles and enjoying each small moan when I pressed my thigh against his softening cock. He turned his head, his breath warming my head as his fingers moved, hooking my jeans, pushing them over my hips.

"See," I said, unable to help myself. "You won't have this much fun with James."

I felt Milo's laughter, where his mouth had roamed down my neck, where the collar of my shirt ended.

He softly reminded, "Shut up, Nelson."

I laughed as he slid his hand between my cock and my boxers, willing to do just about anything he wanted me to.

Chapter 15: Time out

by DomLuka

I didn't want to say goodbye to him. Against Milo's better judgment, I talked him into letting me say goodbye to him. In his car. In our gravel driveway. He should have left five minutes ago.

His tongue touched my bottom lip, slipped back into my mouth to find my tongue, and it was with extreme reluctance that I forced myself to pull away from him, frustrated because I was already hard again and didn't own a looser pair of jeans.

"You have to go home," I insisted. "I don't like it when you're grounded."

"Then get out of my car."

I considered, and responded by leaning towards him again, sighing when his lips touched mine. I slid my fingers over his cheek, cupped his face. "I don't want you to go," I whispered, felt him smile against my lips in response.

Milo pushed me away, the gleam in his green eyes contradicting the stern look on his face. "Get out of my car."

I laughed. "Call me. Promise."

"Tomorrow," he said.

I kissed him one more time, opened the passenger door and got out as fast as I could, not wanting to let out what little heat he had in his vehicle. I stood in my driveway, watching him leave until brake lights disappeared. Wish

ing he'd turn around. Wishing he'd come back. And I still had a smile on my face when I finally went inside.

My parents were snuggled on the sofa, absorbed in a movie. They'd seen me walk Milo out. Probably over twenty minutes ago. My dad raised an eyebrow at me. "A little late, isn't it?" he commented.

"Only because I'm home for you to notice," I remarked.

My mom rolled her eyes, lifted a piece of popcorn from the bowl in her lap and threw it at me. I laughed as I dodged it. "Bed," she ordered.

It was only ten o'clock, but I didn't have a problem with that. I was pretty sure my bed still smelled like Milo.

.....

Joe Douglas had strict parents. Not exactly Trust strict, but maybe strict enough. He didn't have a curfew on weekends, but when he was in trouble, he was usually in trouble for an inappropriate amount of time, at least by our teenage standards. For example, he was still doing double the chores normally required from him over our summer mishap that involved Milo Trust's abused paintings and Joe losing his driver's license. That said, he'd made it apparent enough to begin with that he wasn't very fond of Milo Trust being in his house, just like he wasn't entirely fond of the reason Milo Trust was in his house; Caleb had talked him into throwing a party because his parents were out of town to see his grandparents, and since it was a school night, Joe had talked them into leaving him behind.

But I couldn't blame Caleb as much as Joe did. His place just happened to be perfect for parties, strict parents or not. He lived in a spacious one-level because his father was a retired cop in a wheelchair. Joe hated talking about that, mostly because he couldn't do it without shaking, but we all knew the story. His father, after six years of failed attempts, had finally made detective. The family had been out celebrating and not paying attention, Joe had stepped right in front of a motorcycle with no headlight. His dad was the one the bike swerved into. He never walked again. The family moved to Heywell shortly after because they had family here. Joe, thanks to Haily, had fallen into our group easily enough. I considered him amongst my best friends, even when he was being the prick of all pricks. Like when I was seated on an oversized recliner with Haily and Theresa Milldrum and he leaned over the back of it, commenting, "Who the hell told that shithead to show up?"

I'd glanced over the wide room. It wasn't exactly the most crowded party. Joe had at least drawn the line after Caleb called to invite the first seven people. I'd mentioned it to one, not knowing whether or not he'd show up and now that he had it seemed I had Joe to explain it to.

Or, maybe not.

Haily leaned back on the recliner, narrowing her eyes on her cousin. "Be nice, jackass," she insisted. "Milo's okay."

Joe raised an eyebrow at her before his expression grew more suspicious, as if he'd just figured something out. "Seriously? Milo Trust? Since when do you have a thing for Milo Trust?"

Joe glanced at me, rolled his eyes as if I should understand his opinion on the matter entirely. I simply looked at Haily, just as expectantly as Joe did. She narrowed her eyes at me, then shook her head. "Whatever. Just don't be a dick, Joe."

Joe laughed at her. "Milo Trust," he said again, still boggled by it before he walked away.

I regarded Haily sheepishly. "You didn't have to let him think that."

Haily shrugged, leaning against me because Theresa Milldrum was suddenly taking up too much room, her attention on the guy who'd come by to talk to her. "He's going to think whatever he wants anyway. But you remember what I said about being careful, right?" she regarded me doubtfully, as if she really didn't expect any such thing from me. I might have responded to that, if Caleb hadn't come along to interrupt us.

"Nelson," he said, seating himself on the arm of the chair in a way that shoved me into Haily, which in turn shoved her into Theresa. Both girls glared at us.

I opted to grin at Caleb. "What's up?" I asked, but my eyes were already drifting across the room, past the pool table, lowered just like every piece of furniture or appliance, to accommodate Joe's dad, towards the front door where Milo Trust had already stopped to talk to Peter Forest, who he'd mentioned had become his lab partner.

"Come here for a sec," Caleb insisted. "I want you to check out someone for me."

Tearing my eyes from Milo, despite noticing that he'd clearly spotted me, I exchanged a curious look with Haily, who suddenly shoved me off the chair so that I was on my feet in front of Caleb, who wasted no time dropping a hand on my shoulder and marching me across the room to check out... well, a girl, I hoped. Haily hoped it, too, if the look she flashed me when I looked over my shoulder at her was any indication. The two of us definitely hoped that Caleb had found... a girl. Who wasn't Ronnie.

No matter what change brought our way, one thing had always remained consistent when it came to my best friend. That just happened to be his inability to maintain an interest in one girl for any amount of time. A lot of people would have called Caleb an asshole for this. In some cases, manwhore might have been more appropriate. But then, I'm not sure he was aware of it. Any of it.

Caleb Spangler tended to live in the moment. He liked what he liked, he felt what he felt, he acted on things that he wanted just for the sake of wanting them. I was the last person who'd hold it against him. Caleb being C

aleb was exactly the way we'd become friends. And knowing what I knew about him, what Haily and Joe knew about him, we'd become rather concerned over his obsession with Ronnie.

I think we'd all hoped it would have been good for him. He was one of those people who didn't always take the feelings of others into consideration, but at the same time, when he did realize he'd caused pain to someone he liked, he was the first to shoulder the burden. Ronnie was different. Caleb liked her. He had a strange way of showing it sometimes, but he definitely liked her. He wasn't willing to stick to his no-seeing-other-people idea on her behalf when he realized she wasn't going to date him and decided to go back to being friends. But friends didn't obsess over each other. Especially while on a date with someone else. According to Theresa Milldrum, Caleb had taken her out a few days ago, and she wasn't at all happy that he'd spent their time together speculating about Ronnie. Ronnie, who was so-not-worth-it, Theresa had said.

We ended up in the den, the small space where Joe claimed to do most of his father-son bonding. According to Joe, he'd sit on the black leather love seat and his dad's chair would squeak as he wheeled it back and forth in front of the pellet stove, barking out lectures about how it was time for Joe to grow up and be a man.

On the far side of the room there was a sliding glass door that led to a deck. The Douglas's had more deck than yard, and a hot tub that had once fit seventeen people before water started splashing over the sides. Tonight it held six teenagers stripped down to boxers and girls in t-shirts--some cases less than that--as a tall bottle was passed around along with a good amount of splashing. I quickly noticed Ronnie sitting against the corner of the hot tub, her shoulders under the water to keep warm. She was wearing her glasses, which had fogged up and made it difficult to tell where she was looking, but she was smiling as she chatted with the others around her. I frowned at Caleb and resisted the urge to roll my eyes. But his attention was out the window, his fingers raised to touch the glass.

"What do you think about that guy?" Caleb asked, and I did a double-take at him over it before I looked out the window, deciding he meant the tall, pale redhead with a healthy dose of freckles over his chest, sitting next to Ronnie.

"What about him?" I asked.

Caleb frowned at me. "Who the hell is he?" he asked, as if his line of thought should be clear to me.

I shrugged. "Don't know. Looks like he came with Ronnie."

"Yeah, I see that," Caleb snapped, quickly becoming frustrated. "Do we even know that guy? How does she even know that guy?"

“His name is Steve Kenyon,” Milo said from behind us, drawing our attention in his direction. “I used to go to school with him. I think he plays basketball.”

“He’s Stratfort?” Caleb demanded, becoming more perturbed as he looked back at Ronnie and Steve.

“Guess so,” Milo replied, shrugging. He didn’t seem to see anything wrong with Stratfort the way Caleb did at the moment. “I think he hangs out with Brandon Sholer sometimes.”

Milo slid his eyes in my direction, wondering if that would make a difference. But I didn’t care one way or another about Steve or Ronnie or Brandon as my gaze drifted to Milo’s hands, the paint staining his fingers. I smiled at it. Maybe things were getting better at home for him. This was the second time in three days I’d seen him outside of school, and I liked the feeling. I liked that he smiled back at me, his skin seeming to have a healthy glow beneath the dark hair that fell across his forehead, and his shoulders were straight and relaxed under a black sweater.

“I didn’t know you’d show up,” I said to him.

“I didn’t feel like sitting through a movie with Jame,” Milo replied, but the way his eyes fell over my face made me feel like a better reason he had was just plain wanting to see me. I grinned at him as if he’d just told me a secret and he raised an eyebrow over it, but his mouth curved with amusement. “Jame’s not here, right?” Caleb suddenly asked Milo, obviously affronted by the mere thought.

Milo looked only mildly irritated when he remarked, “Would he even have made it past the front door?”

I sighed, not caring to comment. Caleb had the good grace not to, either. But, in all fairness, this was Joe’s house, and it’s not like any of us would have been welcome anywhere near Jame’s place. And just because Milo and... well, most of my friends, at least, had learned to play nice, it wasn’t as if

I hadn’t tried with Jame. Ignoring him didn’t work, and pretending he didn’t secretly want to spit in my face every time he saw me didn’t work. I think it was all still a sore point for Milo, though, and it was a sore point for me, knowing that Milo was bothered by all of it, so we’d both made a point to avoid the topic whenever possible. I was all for avoidance now as I gave Milo a nod.

“Come on,” I said. “Haily will kill me if I leave her alone with Theresa for too long.”

Milo fell into step beside me easily and I raised an expectant eyebrow at Caleb, who shook his head at me and pushed open the glass door, letting in the cold, the stench of pool chemicals and the noise from outside. “I’ll be out here,” he told me.

I rolled my eyes when the door was closed and looked at Milo, allowing my s

mile to return. "I'm glad you showed up," I said. "It's actually been kind of boring around here."

"Actually... I was sort of just stopping by," he said carefully. I had some time ...

I found myself rolling my eyes at Milo, too, as I tugged the sleeve of his sweater to get him to follow me. "Well, while you're just stopping by, come hang out for a while."

He shrugged uncomfortably, but didn't comment on having to leave again. If he did I'd guess that he was uncomfortable. Probably because Joe made him feel that way, in which case I'd be leaving with him. It was nice that things didn't turn out that way.

It seemed Milo Trust was the least of Joe's concerns when someone cracked a lamp his mom had just bought, and no one wanted to 'fess up to it. Joe quickly became Hurricane Joe, not at all shy about telling everyone it was time to get the fuck out. Direct quote. It was only after everyone was gone that Haily pointed out to him that the crack was supposed to be there as part of the design, and the rest of the three-piece set looked just like it. But no one seemed like dwelling on the fact that the house had gone quiet as Haily, Caleb and I stayed to help him clean up, and after a few moments of silently pleading to Milo, he picked up a garbage bag and followed me around with it. Joe seemed more relaxed once all the evidence of a hastily planned party was safely tossed away in the neighbor's dumpster and he threw on a movie none of us paid attention to as we sat in a circle on the rug in the living room, passing around Caleb's knit hat. I was seated between Milo and Joe, and when Joe passed me the hat I drew out a folded piece of notebook paper and read the small print in blue ink.

"Has lucky underwear."

"Haily," Joe, Caleb and myself chanted, while Milo said, "Caleb?"

Haily laughed out loud as she passed Milo a bottle of orange vodka and the opened two-liter of Sprite that had become our chaser. "That would be wears no underwear," she informed my boyfriend.

Milo made a face as he looked at the vodka, and then finally lifted the bottle to his lips, took his drink and then guzzled Sprite. By the time he was finished his face was flushed, probably because he was way ahead of the rest of us as he took the hat and pulled out another slip of paper, his eyes drooping. Milo didn't drink very often, and obviously this game wasn't to his advantage. Caleb, Haily, Joe and I had known each other long enough to know most of the answers, while Milo was playing at a guessing game. Not that he didn't seem to be having a good time. In fact, he seemed more relaxed than he'd been before, but that could have been because of the alcohol. He was drinking far more than the rest of us, and the second his speech became even somewhat impaired Caleb had laughed at something out of Milo's mouth

that sounded a lot like funbag shoes and mentioned that someone wasn't driving home tonight. Milo had dropped his car keys in my lap shortly after without protest as he took yet another drink.

He got a few of the answers right, looking pleased with himself when everyone else had to drink because I'd slipped a few facts into the mix just for him. Like the way I currently had a fake tattoo of a naked woman on my right ankle because Leanna had played a joke when I'd fallen asleep in Chad's apartment after church last Sunday, and sometimes after I ate beef I worried that cows, with their beady little eyes and big heads might come after me for revenge. And then there was a scar on my inner thigh, a wound that had me freaked out for days two summers ago after I sat on a blade in my garage and almost sliced right through my nuts. Caleb and Joe had been horrified to hear the story, Haily couldn't stop giggling, which got Milo giggling because he was that far gone, and I crossed my legs and let my gaze drift towards Milo as I thought about the way he'd discovered that scar a few nights ago, tickled it with his finger in a way that drove me crazy before he placed a kiss on the red, puckered skin, traced it with his tongue and then found much more interesting places for his mouth to be.

He knew a lot about me, some that my closest friends knew, some that they didn't. It had me grinning stupidly at him each time, feeling rather important about myself all because Milo Trust paid attention. To me. It made me want to touch him, frustrated that I couldn't. And when he looked at me, hazy-eyed and full of giggles and secret blushes all I wanted to do was tell my friends to piss off and just do it anyway. I liked the Milo that let his inhibitions go. Let himself laugh. Forget that being anywhere near my friends made him uncomfortable and let himself have a good time. Guard down. Pants down...well, that one was currently in my own private mind, but whatever. Still sounded good to me.

It wasn't too late before Milo, despite his current inebriation announced he had to get home. I might have been pleased with Haily and Caleb's--not so much Joe's--objection to that, if it weren't for the fact that he'd mentioned his dad had taken Emily out for dinner earlier on and I didn't think it was a bad idea for him to get home before they caught him in his current state. Otherwise, I probably would have objected, too.

I was surprised by how fast Caleb offered to follow me to Milo's house so I could get him and his car home and still have a ride back home.

We were halfway to Stratfort as I adjusted Milo's rearview against the strong glare of Caleb's headlights, as he was following way too close and up our asses when Milo looked in my direction.

"Nelson?"

"Yeah?"

"I think I'm drunk."

I laughed, allowing myself a glance away from the road and in his direction as I reached across his seat, my hand falling over his thigh. The fabric of his faded jeans tickled my palm as I slid it over them, spreading my fingers around his when they covered mine.

“Are you going to need me to walk you in?” I asked, more concerned than my tone suggested. I really didn’t want him getting in trouble. And that tore at me, because I would have liked taking advantage of such a situation.

“I’m okay,” Milo said softly. And then his fingers tightened over mine, guiding me up his thigh until my hand came against an obvious bulge in his pants.

Startled, my eyes widened as my foot fell over the brake. I’m not sure if it was Caleb’s jeep or Milo’s car that had screeching brakes, but it was Caleb who laid on the horn behind us as Milo laughed and I regained control of his car. One-handed.

“Shit,” I muttered, face flaming as I inwardly admitted he’d just gotten the better of me. I squeezed him through his jeans in retaliation. “You’re definitely drunk,” I agreed.

Milo held my hand where it was and I heard the hitch in his breath that made it a challenge not to close my eyes, forget where I was. Better yet, to forget where I was, stop the car.

“I ditched Jame,” Milo whispered, drawing my attention back to what reality was supposed to be.

Driving him home. No touching. Not that I stopped.

“Ditched him?” I repeated dumbly.

“I wanted to see you. I hate it when you think I don’t want to see you.” He ground his hips against my palm, held my fingers more tightly and guided them upwards, over the outline of his shaft. I shifted my weight in my seat, hand shaky against the steering wheel. “Do you think I’m cold, Nels?” he asked. “Someone said that once. I’m cold. I don’t try to be.”

I blinked, widening my eyes in an attempt to better focus on the road as we turned into his neighborhood. But it was hard to pay attention to anything but him. “Who said that?” I asked, swallowing against a voice that was an octave higher than what seemed normal.

Milo’s laughter, soft and light, reached my ears. “A girl.”

I smiled at that, gave him another squeeze despite the way it made my cock twitch even as we pulled in front of his house. “Maybe that was your problem,”

I teased, and then found myself regarding him rather seriously as his fingers slid against mine. “I don’t think you’re cold,” I said, wanting to be reassuring. “You’re not cold, Milo.”

His mouth curved, his smile suddenly sincere in a way that he couldn’t hide from me. It was the kind I couldn’t forget, even if he insisted on it the moment sobriety hit him. And I still didn’t think he was cold. And I hoped that

t for the time being, he was enjoying the giddiness that seemed to absorb him as he lifted my hand from his body and laced his fingers affectionately through mine because neither one of us could risk a kiss, as Caleb's horn reminded us as my friend grew impatient with the delay.

"I should get the gate," Milo said, suddenly sounding more lucid than he had before. "Can't leave the car here. It'll block my dad out."

My gaze slid from where the streetlights hit his face to the not-so-subtle bulge against his pants and found myself smiling sheepishly.

"I'll get the gate," I replied, deciding that a little cold air might do me some good.

I opened the gate just as Milo always did, pulled his car into the driveway and said goodbye quietly, already looking forward to seeing him in school tomorrow. I watched him disappear into his house before I closed the gate and slid into the passenger seat of Caleb's jeep, huffing hot breath on my cold hands as Caleb gave a nod towards Milo's front door.

"He good?" Caleb asked.

"He'll sleep it off," I said, smiling secretly because I thought he might just do that after he thought about me, the way I was thinking about him.

Caleb smiled, his thoughts turning as he started driving. "So," he said, "I've gotta ask. How'd you get back on Haily's good side?"

I sighed. "I... told her the truth." And I glanced at Caleb, wondering what would happen if I told him the truth, too. If things were different... I wondered if we'd still be back in front of Milo Trust's house, my best friend encouraging me to stupidly sneak through a bedroom window, just like he would if we had just dropped off a girl I couldn't stop thinking about... or if we'd still be driving away, but without the relaxed smile touching his face.

.....

It occurred to me that I didn't put nearly enough time into looking at Milo's butt. I guess as far as backsides went, I'd always had a bias towards Brandon Sholer's, the way each cheek moved and flexed every time he took a step, his swagger always teasing.

When it came to Milo, that wasn't always the first place I wanted to look. With him it was eyes and hair and perfect skin; a lean body that tempted my fingers. But his ass was nice, too. Firm. Rounded. Tight. I'd felt that, the high lift of his cheeks, smoothness of skin. The way his cleft dipped inside to sensitive spots that sent him trembling.

I'd sort of put a great deal of thought into it.

I guess looking back, it shouldn't have been that much of a surprise. Porn had been my outlet for so long that looking at it, at some point, had become as natural to me as my hand around my own dick. So I guess it was fair to say I'd already developed an idea of what I liked about the male anatomy. Everything was pretty self-explanatory. But what always had to be stripped down

n and under the private, hot spray of the shower was the perfectly rounded, grab-able ass. And maybe the backs of leanly muscled thighs. Those things were connected, anyway. Made sense. I thought about those particular parts of Milo Trust. I could be alone on a desert island alone with my imagination, Milo's ass my first thought, rounded, up, lights on, thighs slightly parted and the shadow of his balls slightly visible between them.

Leanna had given me a piece of advice when I'd pestered her enough for it.

You can't do anything the wrong way, Nelson, as long as whoever you're with likes what you're doing. I thought about what Milo Trust might like. Christ.

Sorry. Scratch that.

I looked over my surroundings, regretfully not on a desert island, alone with the lowliest thoughts I'd had in weeks.

When it came to my imagination, it didn't always discriminate. Damn inconvenient when it came to church, me surrounded by friends and family.

But this was not my fault. I refused to be responsible for something I couldn't control. I'd hold my mom responsible instead. Maybe Emily Hill, too.

My mom because she'd shouted into my room much too early on a Sunday morning in the middle of a dream I would have liked to see the end of. It was

a three-day weekend because of a teacher work-day, and I'd skipped over the fact that I was supposed to be at church with my family halfway into it. And I won't neglect to mention that my mom had decided to invite Emily Hill to a Sunday service. And that's where Emily earned my grudge, because she'd shown up and brought Thompson Trust, and Milo with her.

They were about three pews ahead, off to the right. Milo's hair was combed, fell perfectly over his head in a way that still made it seem like he'd put no effort into it whatsoever. His gray shirt complimented the rest of him, his skin bright, eyes lazy, the green of them absorbing to look at. The thin material of his dark pants cupped him perfectly, and I'd found myself wanting to get much closer the moment everyone, including Milo, stood to sing the chosen hymns.

I didn't sing. Throat too dry. I stared instead, wondering what the hell was wrong with me.

"Honey?" my mom leaned over to whisper. "Are you okay? You're looking a little red."

Definitely not okay. I shifted from foot to foot, turning the lower half of my body in an attempt to keep the attention away from the bulge growing in my pants. I'm so going to hell. "I'm fine," I bit out, unable to prevent the way my gaze shifted in Milo's direction again.

Every so often he'd turn his head over his shoulder, his mouth moving with the lyrics of the song I'd tuned out, and he'd seek me out with his eyes, just as he did now. His family had stopped to greet mine before service star

ted. He'd regarded me silently then, too, a slight smile touching his eyes just for me despite the fact that we hadn't greeted each other. I'd wanted to disappear with him somewhere right then and there. Maybe because I'd hardly seen him outside of school for the last few days, causing me to experience symptoms of withdrawal. Or maybe it was because I resented the fact that I couldn't smile at him the way I wanted to as much as I resented the way Mr. Trust looked at me.

That was one man who didn't like me. Not at all. I guess he was polite enough to my parents. Even Chad and Leanna. But when Emily introduced me his gaze had slithered coolly in my direction in a way that clearly suggested that I wasn't worth the paper he used to wipe his ass. I don't know if it was because of my involvement in the trouble Milo had found himself in during the summer, the way I'd introduced myself the first time I'd been in his home, or even the fact that I happened to be part of the student body he wanted Milo to have no part of. Maybe he was a fortune teller in another life and had already predicted the inappropriate thoughts I'd start developing about his son during morning hymns. Oh, God.

Hell. Yep. I could see me going there. "I'll be back," I hissed, deciding my mom had heard me, and so had Chad and Leanna, because they both were suddenly stepping aside as I threw myself past them, away from where we were seated and into the aisle that I followed towards the back of the church, the music bouncing off the walls following me.

I made it to the bathroom, a row of clean stalls on one wall and marble counter tops and porcelain sinks at the one opposite. I moved straight into the last stall, quickly slammed and locked the door behind me as I took in deep breaths and stared down angrily at the rise in my pants. "Asshole," I told it. "Go away."

"Fuck off," a familiar voice responded, just as I heard the sound of the men's-room door swinging closed.

I froze, my mind reaching only moments before I placed the voice. Instant turn off. Thank God.

And, why God, too, I supposed as I peered through the crack between the door and the stall, frowning as I watched Assface move towards a sink, turn the hot water on and slide his hand under it, staring at the way the water ran through his fingers as if he couldn't have cared less about wasting it.

I gave myself a moment, took a few deep breaths. When I unlocked the door and stepped out of the stall I tried to appear calm as I went to the sink next to Jame, turned on the water and washed my hands while I stared in the mirror, making sure to seem more interested in my own reflection than his. But I could still see him, his eyes cutting threateningly in my direction, no question about the way he'd rather not be breathing the same air as me. Be nice. Be nice.

I so didn't want to be nice. Couldn't think of a single way that I might be inspired to do it, either. So I decided that ignoring this particular individual would be in my best interest. His, too.

I turned for a paper towel so I could dry my hands and tossed it into the waste basket on the way to the door.

"Have you ever even tried to care about anyone besides yourself?" Jame suddenly said, his tone containing the same amount of rage he normally reserved for Caleb when the two of them had their less flattering moments.

I paused, hand on the door, ready to get back to my family. But I couldn't seem to let that go and turned around to face him. "Just because I don't care about you doesn't mean I don't care about anyone." I wasn't going to let him play victim. I knew why he didn't like me. I didn't care about him. Neither I nor my friends had been interested in getting to know him. We'd spent years talking shit about Jame Graham in ways I might have been ashamed of if the whole situation wasn't two-sided. But it was. He'd never made any effort to coexist with us, either, and I knew better than to think he would despite my best efforts to try it. By all means, at this point there was no reason for either one of us to think of something to say to each other in a church bathroom, of all places. But then the inspiration to do so, on his part and mine, all came down to one thing: Milo Trust.

I shook my head at Jame, not liking the way he was glaring at me. "I don't have to care about you," I continued. "And I'm not playing this game with you, either. I won't let him hate me over something as stupid as you."

Jame snorted at me. "Oh, he'll hate you," he said, getting to me even though I tried not to let him. "You'll fuck up everything for him, because you don't give a damn. Then he'll hate you, and he'll remember I warned him to stay away."

I felt my eyes narrowing, my guard flying up as I considered everything I knew about Jame Graham, everything Milo had told me about their friendship. "What is that supposed to mean?" I asked carefully. Because I couldn't respond to the rest of that. I couldn't bring myself to tell Jame Graham that he had no idea how much I actually cared about his best friend. But I suddenly found myself wondering if he already knew, and if he knew I wondered why he thought I'd ever do anything to hurt Milo. Just the thought of him hating me as Jame predicted was hurtful on levels I didn't care to think about. Jame shook his head at me, coming in my direction. "It means when you do fuck shit up for him, I'm gonna get you, Nelson," he smiled snidely, his cheeks swelling as he lowered his voice. "If I were you I'd stay the hell away from him now, or sooner or later, I'll end up laughing in your face."

He pushed past me, out the door. I stood there for a moment, smirking in a way I didn't quite feel as my mind worked over the last few minutes leaving me with one conclusion. It was time to learn more about Jame Graham.

.....

The gate in front of Milo's house was open, cars parked neatly up the driveway. I pulled up along the street thirty minutes after church let out and stared up at the house cautiously.

I hadn't called first. I knew better than to show up without warning, especially when I was pretty sure that both Mr. Trust and Emily would be home. I stepped over the melting puddles of ice against the curb and headed up to the front door anyway, only hesitating for a moment before I reached out and rang the bell.

The door opened sooner than expected, taking me off guard. So did the man behind it.

Somehow, Mr. Trust didn't look quite right in worn jeans and a t-shirt. The way he held himself, street clothes stretched over his body, hair less than tidy, it was easier to see Milo in him. But that didn't make him any less intimidating, especially when he lowered his eyes to my level and regarded me in an expectant way that gave me the feeling I was bothering him already.

I tried to force a smile, a task that seemed easier when Emily Hill suddenly peeked around his shoulder and grinned at me. "Hi! Are you here to see Milo? Tommy," she amended when Mr. Trust threw her a cold glance before stalking off.

"We're in a hurry, Emily," he called over his shoulder.

Emily rolled her eyes as she opened the door wider for me. I couldn't help returning her small smile. Something about it made me feel at ease. I obviously wasn't the only one who thought that some lightening up might do Mr. Trust some good.

"Milo's in his room," Emily said. "You can go on up."

"Thanks," I replied, and because I was convinced that Mr. Trust still had his ear tuned in my direction, added, "I'm not staying long."

I was headed upstairs not needing any more of an invitation. I really didn't plan to stay for long. I would have been more interested in getting Milo to take off with me somewhere for a while. But then for once, I wasn't exactly there for a social visit.

Milo's door was closed when I reached it, so I tapped with my knuckles before I let myself in, taking him off guard.

Half seated on his bed, the shirt he'd been wearing at church was untucked, buttons undone and sleeves rolled up over his forearms. There was a pencil stuck behind his ear, one in his hand and books and sheets of homework he'd obviously been putting off spread out in front of him. He pointed at his door, indicating for me to close it as he stood up, dropping the pencil he was holding into the center of a book. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be home so I can call you."

I couldn't help smiling at his perturbed glare as I moved closer, but resisted

the urge to touch him. "I guess I'm saving you the trouble... and I'm not staying."

"Good," he said, and then rolled his eyes at the offended look I flashed him as he turned back to his books. "You need to leave so you can come back later." He looked at me as he reclaimed his seat on the bed. "Tonight, after six. You're not busy, are you?"

I shook my head, intrigued. "Why after six?"

Milo smiled, a pink hue touching his features as he avoided my eyes. "My dad's taking off with Emily, and Juanita's going on a date."

"A date?" I repeated, pretending to be more interested in Juanita than the prospect of spending a night alone with Milo as I sank to my knees in front of his bed, rested my elbows on the mattress and stretched my arms until the tips of my fingers brushed against his knee.

Milo shrugged. "That's all I could get out of her."

"I'll be back at six," I said, and Milo's satisfaction about that touched the corner of his mouth as he looked down at his books. But then I cocked my head, regarding him more seriously. "I need to talk to you about something."

Milo's green eyes turned in my direction with a fair amount of suspicion, his dark eyebrow arching above the right one. "What's up?"

I let out a breath, deciding that I wasn't in the mood to beat around the bush with things. "Why would you think Jame knows you're gay?"

Milo frowned at me. "I don't know that, Nelson. I told you... it's just a feeling I get sometimes. It's probably stupid, anyway."

I nodded slowly. "And would it be stupid to think that he knows I'm interested in you... more than a friend should be?"

Milo stood, nearly knocking me over before I pulled myself onto his bed and watched him pace across the room, just to give his closed door a shove, testing it. When he faced me again, his voice was lowered, frustrated.

"Why would you even say something like that?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "Because I thought we'd be past you freaking out over something that's probably just stupid, anyway. That's what you said, right?"

Milo frowned. "I'm not freaking out," he insisted, but it sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than me. "Why..."

"I'm just asking, Milo. I guess I need to know if Jame... if he's ever said anything about me that..."

"What happened?" Milo cut me off, obviously deciding that we wouldn't be talking about this if something hadn't provoked it.

I frowned, debating for a moment over what I wanted to tell him. Finally, I settled on saying what was bothering me the most. "He thinks I'm going to fuck things up for you. What would he mean by that?"

To my surprise, Milo rolled his eyes, his shoulders relaxing. "If it was up to Jame you and your friends would be locked up somewhere away from poli

te society. Don't worry about him, Nelson. He doesn't like that I'm hanging around you so much, is all."

"You think that's it?"

Milo sighed. "My new nickname is traitor because I talk to Caleb without telling him where to shove it."

I smiled at that, or tried to, anyway. "Things aren't going to get better with Jame, are they?" I needed to say it. The look of acceptance that crossed Milo's features as he stepped towards the bed and seated himself a foot away from me suggested that maybe he needed to hear it.

I watched him as he lifted his hand, inspecting his short fingernails as he bit at his bottom lip. "Why can't I have both of you?" he asked quietly. "Maybe I haven't known Jame as long as you've known your friends, but he's not a bad person, Nelson. Not to me. He used to be one of the only people I could go to when I couldn't stand it around here anymore."

"I want to be that person," I said without thinking.

Instead of becoming annoyed, Milo's eyes softened in my direction. "You have been... but where does that leave Jame? He doesn't understand why I want anything to do with you, and I don't know how to explain it to him."

"So explain it to me."

Milo shoved his hair away from his forehead, cocked his head at me. "Explain it to you?"

I nodded slowly. "Maybe I want to hear it. That Jame's wrong. That I can't fuck anything up for you."

Milo's troubled brow creased and he reached for me before he stopped himself, eyeing his door with caution. He stood up, and I followed him. He seemed to study me with mixed thoughts for several moments before he finally said, "Come back tonight... please don't worry about Jame."

.....

The sun set well before six o'clock, making Milo's house appear nothing more than a shadow against the star-filled, night sky. There was one light coming from within, an upstairs window that didn't look right to be Milo's room, casting shadows on the walkway leading to the front door.

When Milo opened the door he was barefoot, jeans a bit too long, wrapping beneath his heels. His wet hair was carelessly pushed away from his face, dripping down his neck and wetting the collar of his white t-shirt as he wiped distractedly at the leftover paint on his arm with a washcloth.

"Hmm... if that won't come off, you can get back in the shower and I'll help," I offered.

He paused in what he was doing to glare at me and my sexual harassment. I used the opportunity to pluck the washcloth out of his hand, not liking the way his harsh scrubbing was leaving his skin all red.

"So do I get to come in?" I asked teasingly, and then turned serious. "Or do

o you want to go somewhere else? I'm okay if you don't want us to be here alone together."

Instead of answering, his gaze turned down to the backpack I was holding.

"Overnight bag?" he remarked.

"Nah," I said as I hung the washcloth over my shoulder instead of handing it back so I could unzip the backpack. "That's in the car. Didn't want to look too eager. I swiped this from Caleb," I explained as I pulled out a bottle of cinnamon-flavored liqueur. "You kind of turn into a sexy drunk."

Milo finally cracked a smile, stepped aside. "I'm not drinking that."

I hadn't actually thought he would, but I shrugged, not willing to be blamed for trying.

"Fine," I said, feigning disappointment as I stepped inside, passing him the bottle so he could decide what to do with it as he took it upon himself to remove the washcloth from my shoulder. "But do we at least get to make out? I mean, more than once? I brought gum, too."

As I walked further into the dark house, the door closed behind me, all light suddenly disappearing and taking me off guard, but not nearly as much as Milo did when his hand touched my hip, his arms sliding around me and his lips landing carefully over the corner of my mouth.

I dropped the backpack, grabbed him. But I didn't turn into his unexpected display of affection, didn't try to escalate it. Something about it was perfect just the way it was, just like the way he tilted his head, kissed the arc of my cheek.

"You have it very dark in here," I whispered.

"I know." His face was so close to mine I could feel his mouth forming words against it, his breath tickling my eyelash. "I think better in the dark... Don't think I'm stupid, okay?"

I slid my hands up his sides and held onto him tighter. I didn't know what this was, but I sensed it wasn't something that could be pushed, so I waited, I listened.

"I don't care what Jame thinks about you," Milo said. "There are things he doesn't know... but he doesn't get to tell me what to do about you. No one does." He found my mouth with his, and I let my lips part beneath the pressure of his tongue, closed my eyes when it swept carefully against my own.

"The first time I looked at a guy," he continued, his voice suddenly strained, uncertain, "and realized the way that I was looking at him wasn't... normal, I freaked out. My dad already can't stand me, Nelson. What if he hates me when he figures out how different I really am?"

I frowned, cradled the back of his damp neck, water droplets from his hair touching the backs of my fingers. I wanted to draw him closer.

"Parents are supposed to love their kids, no matter what," I said, reciting my own parents' words, the ones they'd instilled in me since the day of my fir

st coming out. The fact that Milo had never had that, felt the doubt he did, vexed me because I'd never felt that alone before. I didn't want him to. But Milo shushed me, short and simple. Maybe, in the dark he thought I was offended over it, because his arms were suddenly a little tighter. "You're everything I'm not supposed to be ready for. But I'm glad you're such a persistent asshole because if you weren't I wouldn't know that I want to be with you. You push me, and I hate that about you. But it makes me more honest than I'd be able to be if you didn't. With you, I get to be me. That's what I'd explain to Jame." He let out a breath, and I waited, silent, wanting to respond but not sure if he was ready for me to. Finally, he said, frustration edging his tone, "Now will you please say something annoying so I can turn on the lights and look at you again?"

I opened my mouth. I think a sound came out. He wanted me to break the awkwardness he was feeling. I wanted to stay trapped in it, make him understand that in his own way, he'd just given me the only thing I'd ever really wanted from him. It had nothing to do with Jame, really. It had nothing to do with anyone except Milo.

And maybe I didn't want to be annoying, even though I was sure this was probably the first and last time he'd ever openly approve of it, a thought that had me biting back my amusement. He said he wanted to be with me. Pushy or not.

I kissed him instead. I parted his lips with my own, touched his tongue and lifted my fingers to his chin, tilting his head to reach deeper. His chest moved to rest comfortably against mine, his mouth only pulling away when I couldn't help myself and slid my hand down his back, over the rise of his ass and groped a cheek. I couldn't tell if the subtle tremor that moved through him was his way of being annoyed. If it was, then I liked it.

"I rented a movie," he said.

"Okay." We could do whatever he wanted to do tonight. Wherever he wanted to do it.

His hand slid into mine so he could lead me through the dark house, down the stairs this time instead of up, and he laughed because my other hand was particularly stubborn about leaving his butt.

Milo liked the privacy of closed doors. It didn't surprise me that he'd chosen a room with a lock to set up the movie in. It wasn't a big room. A desk in the corner was empty, suggesting that it could have been an office at some point. Or perhaps it was just storage, a stack of sealed boxes marked fragile against one wall. Milo had taken one of the boxes, set a small flat screen on top across from a forest-green love seat that had probably ended up here because it had more color than anything else in the house apart from his bedroom.

There were two folded quilts on the small sofa, worn and faded in places, a

against a pattern that looked like cutouts of various birds. I could see the need for them down in the basement. It was cold, even still wearing my jacket, and more so for Milo with his wet hair and thin t-shirt. His lips were turning a mild shade of blue, and I wanted to kiss them until they were warm and pink again. But I didn't interrupt him as he checked the door three times to make sure it was locked, or as he moved to draw the thick curtains over the already closed blinds of two smaller windows that looked out into underground window wells. He needed to make himself comfortable. Safe. And being barricaded in with him the way I was didn't seem like something to complain about as I shed my jacket and shook out the quilts, spreading them on the love seat one over the other. I tucked myself beneath them, and when Milo was ready I held them up for him, reaching to draw him against me when he sat but seemed shy over what to do next.

Milo picked up a tiny remote, started the movie, but I have no idea which one. I was more interested kicking off my shoes, wrapping my sock-covered feet around Milo's bare ones, not feeling entirely content until we were stretched out, his body half on the sofa, half draped over me. His arm across my chest, his chin propped on it, I traced his earlobe with the tips of my fingers, kept his damp hair out of his face.

I took my time kissing him between whispered conversations, our voices low despite the impossibility of anyone hearing us.

"When my mom was here," he said, "she used to let me paint on the walls. My dad hated it. Sometimes when I'm here alone I want to make everything red, orange... blue, yellow, just to spite him. If Emily likes it, it'll spite him more."

I ran my fingers over the bridge of his nose, traced the high arc of his cheek, the curve of his soft eyebrow, causing his lashes to drift lower over his eyes. "How are things with Emily?"

Milo didn't open his eyes, but the troubled lines between them spoke on their own. "Okay, I guess... any idea what the assembly is supposed to be about on Wednesday?"

I smiled even though he couldn't see me, knowing he didn't care about an assembly. Instead I allowed my fingers to keep tracing his face, his ears. Kept touching him. My eyes drifted towards the glow of the television when the room suddenly became darker, saw the credits rolling. My hand paused on his cheek as my eyes drifted back. His still weren't open. The rise and fall of his chest against mine was becoming even, deep.

"Milo," I whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Is Juanita coming home tonight?"

He let out a breath that tickled my neck, prompting me to snuggle him closer as his eyes slowly opened.

“Probably. We shouldn’t stay down here.”

“Okay.”

But I missed him as soon as he rolled out from underneath the covers, crouched gracefully on the floor and turned off the movie. That made me move, get up to go turn on the light feeling groggy as I did, but not wanting to be trapped in the dark when we lost the glow of the television. By the time I turned back for my jacket and shoes, they were all bundled in Milo’s arm and he was heading straight for the door, which I obligingly unlocked and opened for him.

“Are you hungry?” he asked over his shoulder. “I don’t think I’ve eaten since breakfast.”

“Sure. Do you want to go somewhere?”

“We have stuff here,” Milo replied, and when he glanced back at me again I accepted that with a nod, but couldn’t help feeling disappointed. I would have liked to take him out to dinner, maybe draw out the evening.

But when we reached the kitchen and he dropped my shoes and jacket away from me, I felt less rushed to put them back on as I sat on a barstool near the counter, feeling amused that there were specific items already out and waiting for him, like a baking tray, grater, knives. I had a feeling it might have taken him a good hour to find them if they hadn’t been. But he seemed perfectly comfortable using them as he concocted us mini pizzas using French bread, a bottle of spaghetti sauce and various cheeses he swore would taste better than they smelled. He wouldn’t let me help as he explained that back when Juanita had first come into their lives, she, Milo, and his mother would spend afternoons in the kitchen while Juanita attempted to teach them simple recipes and her language.

We sat there, laughing as Milo tried to teach me to roll my r’s after I mispronounced gracias. It involved the tongue, so naturally my mouth kept drifting towards his. I noticed him growing more relaxed, looking at entrances it was possible for someone to walk through less and less each time my lips touched his, and he took a quiet interest in my relationship with Caleb after he’d commented, “Sometimes when I listen to what comes out of his mouth I don’t even understand how the two of you became friends.”

“He bullied me into it,” I’d admitted, smiling. “But once you get to know him--if he’ll let you--you can’t help but love him. He always has my back.”

I found myself telling Milo about Caleb’s softer side, stories that didn’t involve random girls or fighting. By the time I was done telling him about what Caleb was like with his niece our plates were empty and Milo was regarding me seriously, green eyes focused beneath his dark head of hair, which had dried and stuck up in places from when he’d laid on me, the way I ran my fingers through it.

“So if you had to tell him what you told Haily...” Milo started and then sto

pped, not seeming to know where he wanted to go with that.

My knees already facing him, I shifted in my chair until ours touched, eyes lowering as I considered how I wanted to respond. Considered how I felt about it. I could practically feel Milo's anxious interest in my answer. I guess it was a question he had the right to ask. Only, all the times I'd asked it myself, I'd never actually come up with any particular answer.

"I guess... I don't know. With Haily, not knowing was hurting her. With Caleb..." I shrugged helplessly and met Milo's eyes. "It's not hurting him, but if he knew, I hope he'd stay just like he is now. But it's not like we're in a big town, Milo. Even after meeting you I still feel like the fucking minority. I'm not ashamed of it, but I wouldn't want to have to defend it. I guess if I were going to tell him it would be... when I'm ready, and when he's ready. When you're ready."

Milo's eyes widened. "Nelson..."

"You don't have to ever be ready," I assured him, wanting to wipe the look of horror off his face. I smiled gently. "But you count, too."

He flushed, suddenly busying himself with clearing our empty plates. I watched him quietly and then got up to help with dishes, not bothering to offer first. I let the water run, filling the silence between us as he got over more of his awkwardness. I'd meant what I said. I hoped he knew that, and I guess I hoped that maybe, I wanted him to feel as safe with me as he had when I'd first walked into a house with no lights on.

I finished the dishes before he finished putting away food, and decided I'd given him enough space as he moved to slide what was left into the refrigerator. I moved my arms around him from behind, loose enough that he could pull away if he wanted to. Instead he turned to face me, leaning back against the refrigerator door, allowing me to crowd him there.

"Should I get going soon?" I asked, my mouth turning up. "You could come with me."

Milo's eyes, so intent on my sweater somewhere beneath my neck had me following his gaze, wondering if I'd spilled something. Nope. Clean. Just a little damp from where his hair had dried on it.

"My dad's not going to be home until tomorrow afternoon," he finally said.

"You should probably go before then."

I smiled at the unexpected invitation. I'd be a damn liar if I claimed that I hadn't been hoping for one, or that I wouldn't have tried to drag him back home with me if I hadn't gotten one. "You sure?" I asked, still feeling cautious.

The last time I'd spent the night I'd been passed out, wasted. This felt different.

Milo met my eyes. "You should get that bag out of your car now, that way we won't run into Juanita."

.....

It never failed to interest me that Milo Trust usually seemed more shy when I wasn't touching him than when I was. I was still figuring him out, and liking it.

He'd turned off his bedroom light. I didn't mind that so much. He'd left the hallway light on, it drifted in beneath the door and the blinds over his window were cracked, letting in the blue glow of the night sky.

I hadn't actually brought an overnight bag. I reserved those for vacations. When it came to Milo, I figured the less clothes the better. He'd fallen into one of his more interesting shy moods. The moment he'd turned the lights off and caught me fascinated by the way he slid his jeans down his hips he'd decided his shirt and boxers were staying and he was quick to get under his covers. I opted to take my time. We'd brought up my backpack and the bottle I'd brought along, not wanting anyone to run into it and I'd placed both close to the bed, keeping my shirt, my socks, my pants close to it as I shed them, my attention drifting over the shadows in his room, the scent of paint still strong enough to be noticeable in the air. I let my gaze drift back towards the bed, the outline of him beneath the comforter. I dropped my underwear. The covers shifted. I smiled, crawled into his bed, wrestling sheets out of the way until I felt his arm, slid in next to him and tangled my legs with his, arm sliding around his waist, my fingers wandering up his shirt, wanting to feel skin.

He turned into me, his hand held against my side and hesitantly slid lower, halfway down my hip when there weren't clothes in the way to stop him while I decided I wanted to share his pillow, moved closer to his ear.

"Sleepy?" I asked. I sounded drowsy, but that was probably because I felt more relaxed than I ever had with him before. Not that I was going to fall asleep anytime soon, the way his fingers lazily moved over my thigh.

"No. Not tired." I heard the smile in his voice, felt him suck in a breath when I moved my hand over his boxers, gripped at the thin material.

"Take these off." It was more of a passing thought than a request.

I was already tugging at fabric while Milo lifted his hips, his long body shifting as I moved under the covers, working underwear off his legs, the tips of my fingers following them over lean muscle. Milo jolted, squirmed, back coming off the mattress before I could come back up. I wanted his shirt, too. I wanted it gone. During all that moving he'd gotten rid of it himself. Sounded funny to think it but I felt relieved when I noticed, laughed at myself over it. I liked to laugh. I liked to feel happy. Couldn't ever recall being prone to sudden bouts of giddiness, though. Not unless I was getting high with Joe. Sober. Milo. I liked it.

His arms moved around me as he settled back down and I stretched over him, sighing as he buried his face against my neck, inch after inch of skin me

eting between us. My toes touched his, light dusting of hair on his legs rubbing against mine when his knees suddenly parted and I fell between them, his erection hard and apparent, trapped beneath my stomach. Milo made a little sound, hips thrusting against the weight of my body pressing down on him and I was done.

I lifted my hips, smiling against his mouth when I found it at the way his ass lifted from the mattress because he wanted to keep contact, the head of his cock brushing against my thigh while my own body hardened. I slipped my tongue against his, surprised when he lifted his head, slanted his mouth over mine and took it further, deeper. His eagerness left our mouths moving clumsily, lips, tongue, teeth. His hands came over my back, sending a warm chill down my spine as they drifted low, pulled me back down to him and made me gasp when my shaft slid smoothly against his. The slow movement of his hips beneath me led us as we found a slow comfortable rhythm despite the rushed kisses.

This was, like, the most fun I'd ever had.

Maybe it was because we'd never taken our time before. Not really, anyway. I wasn't exactly known for being patient when it came to any opportunity to touch him. And everything always felt so eager. Rushed. Like taking advantage of what little time we had alone, as fast as we could before it was over. The realization that we had all night hit me and I deepened our kiss, slowing his tongue against mine. His knees lifted to cradle my thighs when I pressed my cock more deliberately against his and a small moan escaped his throat, but then his hands were on my shoulders, pushing at me pointedly. I moved off of him, no time to wonder what was happening as he shoved aside blankets. I opened my mouth, questions ready, but then his head lowered, and I was caught on my knees when his face disappeared in my lap and my spine straightened as his warm mouth closed over the head of my erection.

I let out a shaky breath as my hand fell gently over his bobbing head. He'd still never taken all of me but he sucked and licked and touched me in ways that had me shuddering happily. I think I dumbly told him how good he was at this, clumsily uttering words of praise and admiration that caused him to chuckle around me, the feel of it causing me to groan and grab his shoulders because in no way did I want to interrupt what his head was doing. He teased me until my knees were shaking beneath my weight and I could hardly control the urge to thrust into the wetness of his mouth, inspiring his hands to move to my hips, holding me still.

I watched him, annoyed only because I didn't think he had even the faintest idea of how hot I thought he was. I wanted to explain it to him in detail as I followed his back with the tips of my fingers, causing it to arch beneath my touch. I caught the softer skin of his lifted ass, thumbs tracing his cleft.

He wriggled against my hands as I felt the familiar tightening in my belly, his mouth constantly increasing it.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I uttered, not wanting it to be over.

Milo lifted his head, confused until I pulled him to me, kissed him. I wrapped my fingers around his hard length and he pressed it towards me. I stroked him there as I eased him back onto the mattress, felt him relax as his head hit the pillow.

“What are you doing?” he asked, either because I’d stopped and pulled away from him. Or maybe because I was reaching over the edge of the bed, into my backpack. Maybe both.

I came back with what I wanted, tucked into the palm of my hand. Milo, not missing a thing, and naturally turning suspicious because it was second nature to him, was quick to take it from me.

He was sitting upright, staring at the bottle of lube I’d purchased on a whim a month ago when the store was out of the only brand of lotion that didn’t make me itch. Even in the dark I could see his eyes go big, turn on me with several accusations I’m glad he didn’t say out loud because I’m not sure I would have been able to hide my amusement over them. I would never laugh at him, and I didn’t want him to misunderstand and think it. But my amusement over the looks he was giving me faded quickly, because terror was not sexy. But still, I waited on his response.

“What’s this for?” he finally got out, an odd note hitching his voice.

I closed my hand over his where he held the bottle, leaned forward and pressed a kiss against his face. “Nothing we’re not ready for,” I promised, knowing that as much as I wanted and thought about what was crossing his mind, it scared the hell out of me as much as it seemed to scare him. I’d read stories about people getting hurt. I didn’t want to hurt Milo and wasn’t confident enough just yet to think I couldn’t. “If you don’t like something, we’ll stop,” I finally said, trying to make it clear that meant now if it’s what he wanted.

He eyed me for a moment, his concern slowly turning to curiosity as he released the bottle into my hand, watched me as I smiled at him, opened it and let a generous amount of the oily substance fall over my palm. I reached for him, wrapped my hand around his cock, stroking, making him slippery as he let himself fall back, gripping my wrist encouragingly.

He reached up, his long fingers curling around the back of my neck, pulling me back down to him, opening his thighs around me so that our bodies slid together while I stroked him.

I wanted to go back to our earlier grinding as much as he seemed to want to, but I also wanted my hand on him as I studied the slick shape of him with my palm, gently cupped his balls and then reached lower, touching and circling puckered skin, the spot I hadn’t stopped thinking about since his first

t encouraging reaction when I'd touched it.

Milo groaned against my mouth and kissed me harder, even as he pressed his backside into the mattress, as if he wasn't sure he wanted me so blatantly there just yet. I moved away, back again as I tested him, his breaths becoming shorter, impatient, and I got my answer and so did he when the tip of my finger slid past his tight ring, massaging him open in a way that had his hips lifting higher, his hand reaching for his own cock.

I lifted my mouth from his, suddenly more interested in the way his eyes had drifted closed, lips slightly parted as he slowly fondled his hard length, hips shifting against my small invasion. I pressed in deeper, feeling softness, moving in small gentle thrusts until I was buried and his back was arched and his own hand worked his cock the way he liked it. The way his body tightened around my probing made me think I knew he was going to come before he did, and the throbbing excitement that shot through me had me working him harder, my free hand wrapping around my own erection so I could join him.

And when I collapsed next to him we were all hard breathing, shaky legs and soft touches. I shared his pillow. His hand tugged at mine until my arm wrapped around him. His mouth touched my nose as my eyes drifted in the dark, closing peacefully against the scent of paint and Milo's soft breath across my face.

.....

I groggily stared at Milo's ceiling, my hands in his messy morning hair where his head rested against my chest. It was earlier enough but the sun had been up for a while, casting warm shadows across the room. I'd slept soundly until he'd nudged me awake and we silently listened while Juanita moved around downstairs.

"What are you doing today?" I finally asked him.

He tilted his head to meet my eyes. "Hanging out with you."

He made me grin, probably blush, too, the way his half-sleepy eyes caught mine. "Here? Or somewhere else?"

"Somewhere else," he decided quickly, suddenly sitting up. "Have to use the bathroom."

I sat up, rubbing lazily at my face as my eyes drifted over his exposed backside before he grabbed the nearest pair of pants and covered it. My jeans. I smiled, deciding to point that out after he got back since he was already out the door, carefully closing it behind him.

I stretched, got up and pulled on my boxers, then shirt before I went about tidying up. I found the bottle of lube tangled in the sheets when I shook them out, dropped it on top of my backpack where the liquor bottle was sticking out before attempting to make his bed.

I paused when I heard Juanita's voice calling up the stairs. "Milo! Yame!" The door opened behind me as I straightened the comforter, my tone light as I asked Milo, "What's Yame?" smirking because my wishful thinking already had him telling me it meant get back in bed and have more sex with your boyfriend.

But let's face it. I'm not that lucky.

"It's how she says my name, Nelt-son."

I whirled around, eyes wide.

Yame. Chapter 16: Fire

by DomLuka

For a moment there was nothing but white light and begging my heart to stop rattling in my chest against the silence, the sickly twisting in my gut. But then there was Milo again, standing in front of his door, staring as if he didn't know what to do about the sudden harsh knocking from the other side. "Tommy, downstairs!" his dad shouted through it. "Get him out of my house--and you downstairs!"

I swallowed hard, not sure I'd ever been made to feel colder. I shoved that feeling down, though. Thompson Trust didn't have to like me. I was pretty sure if it came down to it my mom could totally kick his ass. But then, him not liking me definitely wasn't the problem. Not the bigger part of it, anyway.

"Milo?" I asked softly. "What do you want me to do?"

But he was still staring at the door, obviously somewhere else. I reached out and touched his shoulder and he spun on me as if I'd bitten him.

Blinking a few times, he stared at me, his eyes suddenly sweeping over me in a way that wasn't exactly flattering. "You need pants," he said, and I frowned at the lack of emotion in his tone.

"You're wearing mine."

Milo didn't even bother to look, just turned from me, went to his dresser and tossed me jeans. He went to get a shirt for himself. I didn't argue with him, put them on and went to step into my shoes, gather my things without being asked. I kept my eye on him as I did so, the way he kept going to his closed door, pulling roughly at his hair, his shoulders rising and falling over harsh breaths and then slowing and stilling again.

"Milo."

He jumped at the sound of my voice this time, and I didn't care for that reaction, either. "You have to go," he said, refusing to look at me.

Frowning, trying not to feel how shaken I was, too, I approached him, slid my fingers around his wrist so he couldn't pull away when his body whipped back in my direction. Nostrils flaring, eyes going red against the paleness in his face, he looked at me helplessly and defensively all at the same time.

“You don’t have to go down there alone,” I told him. “I’ll do this with you.” Because I was feeling responsible. Horribly guilty. When I had moments without panic rolling through me all I could think about how stupid all of this had been. If I’d just left last night, snuck out without Juanita knowing, or just brought him home with me. If I’d locked the fucking door after Milo had stepped through it...

Milo cocked his head at me and for a moment I couldn’t understand why he’d look at me like that, like he didn’t believe me, expected nothing from me right now. I wanted to scream at him for it, demand where the boyfriend I spent last night with went.

But when he spoke his tone was mild. “You have to go.” His eyes drifted to where I was holding his wrist--not pulling away, but obviously not wanting it there, either.

I stubbornly didn’t let go. Instead I moved closer, wishing he’d see me, or hear me, or something... “Get shoes on, come with me. We’ll handle this, I promise.” I couldn’t leave him here. Not like this. I felt like leaving him there would make a liar out of me. I’d promised him. I’d promised him a lot of things. I felt like all of them were broken.

He made me feel like there was nothing I could do about it, his blank gaze reaching mine, his wrist gently pulling away. “Please. Leave, Nelson.” He sounded so desperate that I was running out of ways to tell him no. Anything to make him stop looking like that.

So I did the last thing that came to mind. I reached out, pulled him against me and wrapped him possessively in my arms. I think I was shocked when he didn’t pull away. Instead he sank against me, fingers curling around my jacket. I let out a breath, relief finding me as if I’d just managed to find him. “Please don’t make me leave you here,” I whispered, worried by how my own voice shook.

“You have to.” He was pulling away from me again, still not willing to meet my eyes as he finally opened the bedroom door, waited there until I was standing next to him.

He looked at me expectantly, like I was supposed to know I just needed to walk away. It’s what he wanted. No. It’s what he said he wanted.

There had to be a difference.

And his way was wrong. I found myself shaking my head at him, but he turned away from me, walked away from me. He was walking me out. I wanted to be stubborn about it, move back into his room and lock the door. Because suddenly it dawned on me that if I walked out of here, if I walked away from him, even if he was asking me to, I didn’t know what would happen next. What Milo was facing--it was a huge deal. And I had no idea where it was going to leave him. Or me. So that’s the last thing I asked him, once standing outside his door, him on the other side of it. “What happens now?”

But the tall and angry shadow that moved behind Milo came closer, unfriendly eyes glaring their disgust at me and sent a cold lump down my throat that choked me. So I looked at Milo instead, wanting to escape it, not liking the nothingness in his green eyes, the last thing I saw before Mr. Trust slammed the door in my face.

.....

I was pretty sure that I wanted to kill Jame Graham. With a spoon, or something dull like that. Something that would take a little effort on my part, so I could really get in there and enjoy it.

Yeah.

I felt a hysterical sort of laughter bubble, rise out of me the same way vomit would during the stomach flu. Unpleasant and bitter.

"Nelson," Greg Hugh's voice reached my ears, his tone suggesting that maybe I was throwing up all over his floor, not just making weird sounds. I found myself looking down to check. No. Hadn't gotten sick yet.

I looked up, frowning at the way his handsome face was contorted into something strange. He was looking at me like I was strange. Okay. What?

He was trying to pass me a glass of water. I didn't remember asking for it but I took it anyway. Maybe I said thank you. Maybe not. My eyes felt all blurry when I started drinking it. "Is Chad home yet?" I asked after several long swallows.

Instead of answering me, Greg gave my shoulder a friendly squeeze and stood up. "Hang in there, okay? I'm gonna get you something with sugar in it."

Because I didn't understand, I shook my head as he crossed the apartment he shared with my brother in search of food. Because I didn't really care what he was doing, I leaned back on the sofa and didn't ask him why he was doing it. I closed my eyes.

Can't think. Oatmeal for brains. Kind of what it felt like. And kind of numb, too.

"Nelson."

Greg's voice was sharp, causing my eyes to flutter in his direction. Later I'd feel bad about how it wasn't in a very friendly way. But he was still looking at me... he was looking at me like I was broken. He sat on the sofa. It dipped beside me and he held out a candy bar.

"Eat that," he insisted.

I looked at it, still sitting in his hand. I didn't want to eat that. Didn't remember asking for it, either. I ran my fingers through my hair, the fact that I hadn't combed it yet today becoming apparent and my efforts went to smoothing it. "Chad back yet?" I frowned at the look Greg gave me over that question. I cocked my head at him. "He's at Leanna's, right?"

"Work. He's at work." And Greg was looking at me as if he'd already answered.

red that question. More than once. Okay. Yeah, he had. When he let me in, that's when.

I shook my head tiredly. "Sorry," I mumbled, and then stared blankly at my hand when he suddenly opened it, placed the candy against my palm. "Do you want to talk about this?" he asked awkwardly. I almost smiled at him, but couldn't quite put in the effort. Nope. Didn't want to talk. Not recommended at all. If I started talking to Greg Hugh I'd tell him that last night I felt the beginning of something between me and Milo Trust. Something good. And then this morning it had all gone to hell, and I ran a stoplight and got honked at by an old lady, so I'd decided to wait to drive all the way home. I'd come looking for Chad instead. And somewhere in there I'm sure it would lead me to telling him that by the way, I'm into guys and you were my first crush. Seems like something I'd say while not thinking straight. And I wasn't, was I?

Feeling ill again, I let my weight fall back against the couch, hoping he wouldn't bother me again, especially since I still didn't feel like eating the candy bar, which he was staring at because he wanted me to, or maybe...I held it out to him. "You want it?"

There was a knock on the front door. I don't think Greg would have been more relieved for the interruption if I'd had my hand halfway down his pants as I confessed my undying love. He was up and at the door in seconds. I only half stopped paying attention. Didn't bother looking to see who it was there, but I could hear Greg as he said a few silent words. "He got here like this. ..he said he didn't take anything, but..."

"You take drugs, Nels?" My dad's voice reached my ears and I turned my head, eyeing him where he stood in the doorway, adjusting his glasses with gloved hands.

"Not today," I said, because I didn't lie to my parents.

My dad exchanged an amused glance with Greg. "I've got him."

"Thanks, Mr. Lambert. Um... I was sort of late..."

"We'll lock up," my dad promised. "Thanks for calling."

Greg grinned, already reaching for his car keys. I heard the door close a moment later, and then my dad was on the couch next to me, eyeing my candy bar. He wanted it. I held it out with a weird smile that felt just plain stupid on my face, found myself watching as he tore the wrapper, pulled a piece of chocolate and shoved it into his mouth. Something about his actions felt comforting. Rubbed at the numbness. Or maybe that was just because he was there.

"So what's going on, Nels?" he asked, his eyes concerned through his glasses, but his tone neutral. I'm sure he expected me to tell him something horrible. I felt the need to put him out of his misery.

"Uncle Ray isn't looking for me for anything," I promised. "And mostly I ju

st smoke pot with Joe. Not all the time.” I pointed across the room where I’d dropped my backpack. “And there’s alcohol in there, but I didn’t drink any of it.”

Curious, my dad crossed the room, opened the bag and reached directly for the bottle, which he studied for a moment before deciding to leave it next to the TV for Chad and Greg. When he turned to face me again he was serious, the kind of soft look that always made me want to tell him everything. Or cry.

I felt myself sitting up a little straighter, the bridge of my nose burning as I became determined to do the first thing and not the second.

“Are you okay, son?”

I shook my head. Or maybe I was just shaking. Not helping the nausea. “Ass face.”

“Excuse me?”

I rubbed at my temple, my head beginning to ache. He was back on the couch again, his big hands massaging my shoulders soothingly. “Jame Graham,” I said, not liking the tremor in my voice. “He said I was going to fuck up everything for Milo, and I think I did.” I met my dad’s eyes, feeling helpless.

Then I tapped my thigh, the dark jeans covering it. “And these aren’t my pants,” I added, because at the moment, I figured that should explain everything.

.....
Sleep covered it up, my body rebelling against everything that had managed to kick it on its ass. Go take a nap. Go take a nap. I’d refused the suggestion from both of my parents and ended up passing out the second I went down to my room to change because I couldn’t stand looking at my legs wrapped in Milo’s jeans anymore. I liked these jeans. On him. But waking up hurt. Opening my eyes I felt like my stomach was bottoming out, and my eyes felt swollen, maybe because I’d refused to cry all day and I needed to. Whatever.

Crying could fuck off. I didn’t want to cry. I wanted to fix things.

I was groggy as I made my way to the bathroom to splash water on my face, and then followed muffled voices through the house. It smelled like pizza, faint. So maybe, cold pizza now. I hoped that no one would try to get me to eat some. My stomach was already lurching in protest.

Voices. Kitchen. My first thoughts were alarmed, because out the big glass windows the field was dark, the goat staring in one of them looking like a ghost outside. I looked around groggily. Cold pizza on the kitchen counter. Two slices and three hot wings, exactly what I usually ate. I decided to get mad at the food and without thinking pulled it all out of the box and dumped it in the trash can.

Returning to being worried over where everyone else was, I continued to the living room where I paused the moment I heard pieces of conversation.

“... be okay, I mean, if it were to happen, Haily would give the heads-up, ri

ght?" Leanna was asking. "Nels did tell her?"

"Yeah," my mom replied. "Maybe I should call her over... she doesn't know anything about Milo, though."

And she wasn't going to find out, I thought wildly, gritting my teeth. Because I needed, had to keep some of my promises.

"I don't think we should do anything just yet," my dad insisted. Thank God. Voice of reason. "Let's see how this plays out."

"I agree with you," my mom replied. "But obviously we need to be prepared. Maybe Nelson can go visit your cousins for a few weeks, and obviously he won't be in school tomorrow..."

I walked into the living room where my parents were gathered with Chad and Leanna, all of their demeanors looking just like they should for any family emergency.

I wasn't in the mood for being an emergency. I found myself forcing my features to soften when my mom spotted me first, smiled and got up to give me a hug. I was okay with that, closed my eyes against her comfortable shoulder before releasing her.

"Hi, honey," she said, looking me over the way she might if I'd just survived a bull fight. "How did you sleep? There's food in the kitchen."

I ignored the first question, waved off the second and promised, "I was already there. Took care of it." She smiled approvingly. Later when she looked in the trash can she'd be force-feeding me last night's chicken. "And I'm not leaving anywhere," I said. "And I'm going to school tomorrow."

My brother and my dad seemed to approve. Leanna just smiled at me, seeming suddenly uncomfortable, and my mom looked worried. I asked my next question before she could respond. "Did you talk to Emily?"

Eventually my dad had gotten me home. My car was still sitting at Chad's apartment, unless he and Leanna had brought it back. Probably better if they didn't, I decided, because I wanted to drive over to Milo's, knock on the door until someone heard me and get as mad as I should have that morning. Only, he didn't want me to. But I'd managed to tell my parents most of what had happened. The last time they'd talked to me the night before, I'd been with Caleb, and that's where they'd assumed I'd spent the night. They weren't going to ground me after everything else I'd told them had happened, but I had a feeling they'd be keeping closer eyes on me. Truthfully, I didn't mind. I think maybe I needed that.

And I didn't have to ask my mom to call Emily. And I hadn't objected when she said she was going to try. I needed something, anything, to tell me what had gone on in that house after I'd left it. I think that's why I'd been so stubborn about lying down for a few minutes like my parents wanted me to.

I was stalking my mom and the phone.

"There's still no answer over there," my mom replied.

I passed her, feeling dejected as I took a seat on the longer sofa near my brother. "How am I supposed to know if he's okay? His dad... I heard him this morning. The way he looked at me..."

"Maybe we should go over and check," Chad suddenly said, and the looks that crossed the room suggested that the topic had been brought up before. I would have smiled at my brother if he hadn't looked at me pointedly and added, "Not you."

"Why not me?" I demanded.

"Because you said yourself the way he looked at you... you're not going back over there."

My brother hadn't tried to protect me in a way that made it sound like he was giving orders since he lived at home and I instantly resented it, but my dad cut off any snappy response I might have had when he said, "Nelson, think hard. Has Milo given you any reason to think that his dad would do something we need to call Ray for?"

I wanted to say hell yes. Send the fucking cavalry just so someone could tell me Milo's okay. But my eyes told the truth, and the room fell silent again until my mom stood up. "I'll try Emily again," she said.

.....
Worst night of my life. I didn't sleep. I'd slept all day, so I didn't really need to. Let my family think I did, though. Instead I was bitter, knowing that it had been less than twenty-four hours. That Milo had woken up that morning wanting to spend his day with me. Things hadn't turned out that way. Now I was afraid to go to sleep. I spent most of the night writing, realized I hadn't done it in months. But it wasn't the writing I'd like to do. More like, everything I'd like to say to Mr. Trust. Then it turned to everything I would have said to Milo that morning if he'd given me half the chance. I started feeling sick again, gave it up. I think I slept for maybe an hour, finally, before I was eagerly getting ready for school. Chad and Leanna had managed to get my car home, and that I'd have to dearly thank them for later, because this was one day I couldn't miss.

I had to see him.

School would be safe. I could be careful there. Milo swore by Jame. His grudge against me wouldn't hurt Milo if that was true. And I prepared myself as I left my house before my parents woke because it wasn't really Jame I needed to worry about. I knew what to expect from him, but Milo...

He wouldn't want to see me. Not in public. Maybe not anywhere. Somehow I'd managed to resign myself to that fact even though everything in me rebelled against it. I couldn't see him. Look at him. Walk right past him every day. And pretend not to know him. But to keep my word I'd have to. Maybe I could watch him move on, move away from me. But not if I didn't know he was okay. I had to know that.

So I staked out his locker. I stood around a corner, in the crowd, hiding from it. I didn't have to approach him, especially if Jame was with him. But I did need to see him. Just one fucking look. And I didn't need to talk to him. He'd find the note I'd left him in his locker, just like a hundred times before. He'd find a way to tell me if he was okay. He'd do that because I meant something to him. He said it. I wasn't breaking my promise.

He didn't come.

I waited, I watched, I was ten minutes late to my first class. He didn't come.

Three classes with Jame. Six walks past Milo's locker. Eight trips to mine to see if he'd tried to reach me. Two trips to his car to see if I'd find him there after three useless trips trying to find where he'd parked it. Nowhere near where he usually did.

At lunch Caleb asked me if I was alright. I told him I was fine, and I was also pretty rude about it. He told me I was an idiot and I should stop looking like I was going to puke if I didn't want people asking me. He spent twenty minutes waiting in the parking lot and another ten in the cafeteria with me as I searched for Milo and then he finally demanded we sit down and eat. Then in the halls I made the mistake of asking Haily if she'd heard anything about me lately. Like, today. Things that might be weird, out-of-the-ordinary or what not. When she'd said no and asked why I'd told her it was nothing, leading her to accuse me of keeping more secrets from her. I didn't want to speculate on why she thought they could be any worse than the last one.

And Jame. I don't know why it bothered me that he acted like everything was normal. He hated me. I hated him. Nothing had changed. Nothing more he wanted to mention about the matter. He didn't talk to me, of course, and the only reason I hadn't tried to get information out of him was because I liked to think I wasn't that desperate. Not yet. Please, not yet.

No, desperation came after school when I sat on the hood of Milo's car, deciding that if he wasn't going to talk to me before the day was over then he could drive home with me as his new hood ornament. It became even harder when it wasn't Milo I seemed to be waiting for, but the Assface who happened to have his car keys.

I stood, face blank, barely containing the urge I had to do something stupid, when a smirk that was so smug it hurt erupted on Jame's face. And it was when he lifted a folded-up note with my handwriting on it and threw it at my feet that the obnoxious burning in the back of my eyes and the bridge of my nose came on again. My lashes felt heavy, wet. What the fuck is this, anyway? Don't cry. Just kill him. He deserves it and all that.

"Where's Milo?" Why the hell did I sound so polite? Talking to him. Beggar. That's what I was. Desperate. I couldn't take my eyes off that note, knowing Jame read it.

Jame snorted, shoved past me towards the driver's seat. I wanted to fling myself in front of him. "Jame, please..." I said, and he looked up at me, standing in front of the opened car door, looking startled but not impressed. "I know you read it. He thinks you care about him. I know I do... and you know I do. Just tell me if he's okay."

Jame scowled at me, as if he found everything I'd just said particularly offensive. But he still told me what I wanted to know. It just happened to be in a way that hurt me. "He's fine, away from you. He doesn't want to see you, Nelson. He's going back to Stratfort, asked me to clear out his locker so he wouldn't be seen around you... you don't care about him. I told you you'd fuck it up for him, too. You think his dad's gonna let up anytime soon? Congratulations. Asshole." And then Jame suddenly pointed at me. "You shouldn't get away with fucking any of it."

.....
My mom drove me to school on Wednesday. My parents had been relieved once I promised them nothing at school had changed. Except that Milo wasn't there anymore. Chad and Leanna had spent two nights at our house now because I was something to worry about. I told them all that putting me on suicide watch was insulting. They told me they loved me, and I felt bad. Because maybe I did need the company. My friends didn't understand why I hadn't returned any of their calls. I wondered why Milo didn't return mine. I had called. My mom called Emily with no success, and I became bold enough to call the house directly. Nothing. But then Wednesday morning when I woke up, my parents were in the kitchen with Uncle Ray, who was trying to figure out why Thompson Trust had filed a complaint about being harassed by our phone number. My mom had insisted on driving me to school then, begging me not to try again. "We'll hear something, Nelson," she'd said. "Please be patient." She seemed confident, but it made me wonder what she'd told my uncle Ray.

I'd always figured I'd come out to the rest of my family someday. It was my place to do so. But given everything that had happened I suddenly felt so tired that I didn't know how to care if the decision was out of my hands. If I discovered my parents had told Ray anything, I wouldn't hold it against them. Didn't want to. Besides, I figured it was way past time I cashed in on the perks of my being the sheriff's nephew. The way my mom talked I had no doubt that if Ray knew everything, he'd have better luck than any of us in getting some kind of update on Milo.

And yet I still couldn't keep my nose out of it, went to the nearest payphone once I reached school and dialed Milo's number. The disconnected notice I heard on the other line felt emptier than thinking they just weren't answering the phone.

I'd taken a deep breath and walked distractedly to my locker. The bells had

rung but today I wasn't the only one not paying attention to them. Our first class of the day had been canceled for some sort of special assembly other students were putting on. I didn't care about it. Milo hadn't cared about it. Milo wasn't there.

I opened my locker, stared into it blankly and mentally cursed myself when I allowed myself to feel even the slightest bit hopeful when I mistook a loose piece of notebook paper for what I wanted it to be. That's what led me to sticking my head dejectedly in my locker. Lockers don't smell good, and they echo. I could hear other students passing in a blur, my ears buzzing until the chatter faded away. Shit. Sighing, I closed my locker. Everyone was heading to the assembly, and I was supposed to meet Haily, Joe and Caleb. But thoughts of that faded when I closed the door to my locker, turned and came face to face with the blue eyes of Brandon Sholer. His blond bangs angled across his forehead, his muscled shoulder casually holding his weight against the lockers, he regarded me as welcoming as always, dimple flashing when I met his eyes.

I tried to smile at him. It's what I always did. Seemed harder to smile at any one over the last couple days, let alone meet their eyes.

"Hey," I said politely, already moving past him. "Heading to the assembly?"

"Yep," he replied, but instead of falling into step beside me to head in that direction, remarked, "So Milo Trust, huh? I guess I could see that. Only, you seemed smarter than to go after someone who doesn't return favors."

"What?" I'd spun back to face him, startled despite his relaxed demeanor as he pushed himself off the lockers, shrugged at me.

"Too bad he wasn't interested, right? He is hot," Brandon replied. He made a face. "But I mean, if you think about it, it was probably asking for trouble. Shit, Nelson, I don't get why you never just called me."

"What?" Stop saying that. I blinked at him a few times, shaking it off as I put his words together, understanding but not wanting to admit it. "I mean... did I just come out to you?" And how did that happen? Wait. I raised an eyebrow. "Did you just come out to me?"

Brandon smiled, his sudden chuckle the genuine kind that I'd always thought was cute. Not so much now. "No. I'm just making friendly conversation. And you... I thought you came out to just about everyone." He suddenly stepped closer, gave the place between my collarbone and my shoulder a friendly pat, but his blue eyes were suddenly serious. "I'll do what I can, but do yourself a favor and stay away from the guys on the team for a while... actually, keep your distance from most of the ones at school. Not everyone has a rich daddy that can get them into a fancy school because their balls aren't big enough to handle compliments from another guy, and I'm hearing no one's too pleased about the whole thing."

One fleeting little grin and Brandon was walking away from me. Didn't think it would be a good idea to watch his ass this time. Besides, I was too busy trying not to hyperventilate. I don't think I was aware that I even knew how to hyperventilate. Apparently it was easy. Or maybe this is what a panic attack was supposed to feel like. Forgetting how to breathe, hands going numb.

I shook them at my sides, my breath hitching as I tried to catch it. Forget everything about me being okay with the choice being taken away. Fuckity-fuck-fuck.

My reaction too slow, by the time I spun around to stare at Brandon Sholer walking away he was gone, and I was alone in an empty hallway. My mind was suddenly spinning so fast I didn't know which way was up, and then a terrifying clarity hit my chest.

You came out to just about everyone.

Nuh-uh. Not since the other day, anyway. And yesterday... Milo was gone, but nothing else was different. This morning... I don't know, I don't know, I don't fucking know. Not like I'd made an active effort to talk to anyone.

To even look past the ground at anyone. When had I seen my friends last? Not long. I'd know if...

I did know. Like, click. I knew because I knew Jame Graham.

It wasn't done spreading yet, mouth to ear like fire.

Suddenly my plan to plot Assface's death only came in second to one thing, and I was moving. It took me under five minutes to reach the auditorium. This time all too aware. There weren't many people in the halls, but suddenly I couldn't pass one of them without feeling watched. Scrutinized. Did that guy just step out of my way? Like I'm dirty.

Not right. This wasn't right.

"Haily!" I choked myself, realizing I'd just screamed her name as if someone's life depended on it. Well... maybe not that dramatic, but enough to draw her attention, among others.

I was late. I'd be stupid to think that she wasn't waiting for me. She was planning to show me where everyone was sitting. Haily always waited. But there were others around me, suddenly making me wary. Couldn't tell if they were looking at me because I'd just drawn their attention or because they were looking at me. Another deep breath. Another knot in the stomach. I felt cripplingly. Afraid to move, feet sluggish.

She jogged towards me. Her dark braid lifted up and down over her shoulder, her eyes wide as she reached me. "Oh my god, you have no idea what people are saying. I just heard..."

"I hit on Milo Trust and he had to switch schools so I'd leave him alone."

I was surprised how calm I sounded just then, was rather proud of it. That's why I felt put out when Haily rolled her eyes at me. "Yeah? So where is Milo? He can tell the three people I heard it from it's crap."

I took that in for a second. “Who told you?” I asked numbly.

Haily listed them, and none of them were Brandon Sholer. Spreading.

I reached out, grabbed Haily’s wrist and found myself dragging her towards the auditorium.

“Hey! Nelson did you hear me? Why would anyone figure...” her eyes widened on me suddenly and instead of trying to pull me to a halt she jogged to keep up with my long strides as I moved into the auditorium. Her voice drew into a whisper because there was already someone speaking. “You made a move on Milo?” she hissed. “I told you to be careful!”

I looked over heads, faces. The audience blurred together. We usually found a place towards the back. Easier to get out. That’s where I looked. “Where’s Joe and Caleb?” I asked Haily, who I’d let go of but stayed close enough because she’d taken it upon herself to grasp onto the sleeve of my sweater. Haily pointed in one general direction, but finding my other friends was hardly her focus. “Nelson...”

But the moment I spotted Caleb and Joe we were headed towards them, her words dying on her lips.

I think maybe it was the way that Caleb smiled and waved us over when he saw us, that got to me the most. I was beginning to notice the whispers in the crowd, conversations that stopped when I passed by. I found myself looking at Haily, wondering if she noticed, too. Wondering if it was real. For me it was everywhere, spreading. Close to the people I cared about. It hadn’t touched Caleb yet. My mind reeled, searching for ways to keep it away from him, knowing that I couldn’t.

“Maybe we could stop this,” Haily was saying, trying to be helpful. “If we figure out who started...”

“It was Jame,” I heard myself say.

“Okay. Not surprised, but what about...”

“Hey,” Caleb called as soon as we were in earshot. “Me and Joe are thinking about cutting out of here until this thing is over. Do you guys...”

“Let’s do that,” I blurted. Out. Get out.

“What?” Haily said next to me. “There are teachers at every door. They won’t let us out once we’re in.”

My eyes took a sweep over the students surrounding us. Too close. I heard my name whispered. Not my imagination.

I focused on my friends again. Behind Caleb, Joe was staring at me, lip turned up the way it did when he was trying to figure something out. He was in the fire.

“There’s that door that lets out to the teacher parking lot,” I said. “Only one of us needs to get out to open it.”

Caleb grinned in approval and turned his chestnut eyes on Haily. “Go get yourself a case of the cramps, Hails. We’ll meet you over there.”

Haily rolled her eyes, glanced at my pale face and decided not to argue. She left us to head through the same exit we'd just come through, her hand moving dramatically to her stomach as soon as someone tried to stop her while she gave her excuses as to why she had to leave.

Caleb's hand on my back, pushing me forward made me jump, but I snapped out of it and started walking. Made my way to the far wall where students who couldn't find a seat in the crowded auditorium stood. I walked past them with Caleb and Joe trailing behind. Since when did I lead the way?

Stay away from the guys on the team...

Brandon's words came back to haunt me when my eyes found them. Didn't mean to. Was kind of hard with them all lined up there, though. Against the wall. Not paying attention to the assembly speakers. Because they saw me.

I saw one elbow another, drawing attention, eyes shifting warily in my direction. These were people who liked me yesterday.

I walked faster. A foot stuck out into the aisle in my path and I stumbled over it. I hardly noticed the way Caleb caught me, kept me from falling. But I did notice when he glared at the guy who'd done it. He seemed, as usual, unconcerned that he couldn't take that guy on and the whole team, too.

"Hey, watch what you're doing!" Caleb snapped. I grabbed his big arm and pulled him along, not wanting to mention that they were watching what they were doing. That's why they were laughing. Except for Brandon Sholer, who suddenly appeared between us and the team, letting us pass. He gave me a nod, not seeming to give two shits about the dirty looks that sent in his direction. I felt sick, and stupid because I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye, not even with a silent thank you.

I just wanted out.

I swear people are rubbing me the wrong way today," Caleb remarked while Joe looked around him to frown at me.

"What were you guys going to do?" I asked, wanting to change the subject.

Caleb shrugged. "We'll find something."

Something.

"I need to talk to you," I said, not all that sure that I meant it.

"What's up?" Caleb asked.

I shook my head. "Outside."

Joe decided he wanted to speak up. "Is it about what everyone's saying?" he asked, his tone short, annoyance touching it.

Caleb's mouth turned down, the cleft in his chin growing deeper. "What's everyone saying?"

Joe made a sound, like he thought that was a stupid question.

I avoided the urge to clutch at my chest, tell my heart it was getting too loud. And I didn't want Joe to answer that question. "Can we just get outside?"

I asked, beginning to sound a little sharp myself.

I picked up the pace, slipped down the hallway that led past the stage. It was quieter there. Fewer people, but I felt no less relieved, especially when I realized that Joe was no longer with us. Caleb noticed first, touched my shoulder to stop me.

When I turned back, Caleb was looking at Joe, who'd stopped ten feet back, expectantly and said, "What are you doing? Let's go."

Joe didn't respond to Caleb. Instead his dark eyes were on me, cold staring drawing my gaze whether I liked it or not. "Is it true?" he demanded. "Because I just got a week of after-schools with Mr. Hoover because he heard me cussing out Adam Faber because he wouldn't shut up about you, so is it true?"

"What the fuck." Caleb was growing impatient, his eyes suddenly darting between me and Joe. Finally he settled on Joe. "Who's saying what?"

When I couldn't seem to respond to any of it because of the sudden knot choking me, Joe glanced at Caleb and explained, "Everyone's saying it. Something about Nelson here getting Milo Trust drunk so he could get in his pants."

The sound Caleb made was half disbelief, half something else. And then he met my eyes and his expression fell. I imagined he was thinking of the bottle he knew I had when I went to meet Milo the last time I'd seen him. Or maybe he was thinking that I should be denying the hell out of all of it. Finally he cocked his head and said, "What?"

I let out a breath. It wasn't true. Not the things people were saying. Not everything Joe thought, and not everything that Caleb didn't want to believe as he stared at me. But even for being half the truth... I couldn't correct the rest of it.

"It's true," I said quietly, and then as an afterthought looked at Joe and added, "I'm sorry you got detention."

Joe shook his head at me, his mouth moving for several long moments before he got words out, words that made me wince. "You're... that's fucking gross.. It's... that's just gross." And the look on his face said he meant it, and he was angry about it, and maybe more, but I lowered my eyes from his, preparing myself before I looked at Caleb again, who'd taken a full step back from me.

His turn.

But Caleb didn't say anything to me. He just stared at me like I was supposed to take it all back.

It was only minutes, but seemed like an eternity later as I stepped through the back door Haily was holding open, out into the overcast day, the sky spitting little bits of snow at me. Haily looked behind me curiously, waiting for Caleb and Joe. They weren't coming.

"They know," I told her.

She let the door fall closed, her features resigned, disappointed. "So much for being careful."

.....

I hardly looked up as Chad slid a can of soda across the small table in his apartment. Just caught it to keep it from plowing through the never-ending piles of body jewelry he had laid out. I was helping him sort through it for Dane. He hadn't asked me to but I figured that helping him would be better than him kicking me out for sitting on his sofa all day and being depressing.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Two and a half more hours before school got out and I could go home.

"Aren't you hungry or something?" Chad asked. "Way past lunch." He was back in his kitchen, trying to figure out if there was anything in the refrigerator that wouldn't poison him. Hmm. Thanksgiving leftovers in January.

"Nope," I said as I lifted a long barbell with even longer spikes on both ends, wondering exactly what body part something like it might go through.

"Yeah? When was the last time you ate?"

The question rubbed me the wrong way, but I forced myself not to glare. "I wish everyone would stop asking me that. I'm fine."

"Then what are you doing here?" my brother countered. "Come on, Nels. Get your ass up. We're going out to lunch."

I shot him a look that told him just how crazy I thought he was for even suggesting it. He rolled his eyes at me.

"Somewhere where you don't have to get out of the car," he amended. "Come on, it's either this or you can get your ass to school. At least if I feed you Mom won't have another reason to yell at me when she finds out about this."

I didn't argue, even though we both knew my mom wouldn't yell at him. Especially if she found out why I'd been cutting school ever since walking out of yesterday's assembly.

Haily had offered to go with me. I'd declined, telling her thank you when she swore she'd talk some sense into Joe and Caleb. But forever honest, she also informed me that she completely understood where their shock factor came from, and I shouldn't expect to not have to give them space. I made her promise not to tell Joe I'd been crushing on him for the last few years because it definitely wouldn't make things better, and then I'd walked to the nearest bus stop and ended up at the tattoo shop where I pestered Chad all day. It had taken him three hours to decide it was time for me to end the ruse I was putting on about being just fine, and I'd told him everything.

Well, not everything.

He knew my secret was out. He knew there were people who weren't happy about it. It was more than what I told my parents.

It's not that I didn't think I could tell them. They would find out, and so

on. Soon everyone would hear the rumors. The rumors were the problem, and I didn't even tell my brother that I wasn't only owning up to being gay, I was owning up to being a bona fide pervert. I just needed more time. Chad seemed willing to give that to me when I'd shown up on his doorstep that morning with my backpack, and not at school.

We took Chad's car to a taco stand he liked, and when I didn't even look at the menu he ordered me the same two-taco meal that he'd ordered for himself.

Instead of heading back to his apartment with the food he turned into a nearby parking lot, pulled into a spot facing the sun and when the light came through the front windshield it warmed the car and intensified the smell of beans and green chili.

My brother slid back his seat, and being short enough, looked rather comfortable when he threw his mismatched high-tops up on the dashboard, stretching his legs. He passed me a taco and I took a bite of it just because I was tired of telling people that I wasn't hungry.

"Heard from Caleb yet?"

I shook my head, not wanting to mention that I wasn't sure if I'd ever hear from Caleb.

"What do you think's going on at school today?" Chad tried. He was trying to get me talking.

"Learning. Stuff like that."

Chad smirked at me. "Mom and dad are going to figure out you're skipping."

I sighed, feeling frustrated. "I know. I'll tell them before that happens."

"Then what?" he wanted to know.

I shrugged. "Then... I don't know."

Chad stared out the front window for a few minutes, seeming relaxed in his makeshift winter tanning booth as we both ate in silence. I knew better than to think my brother was going to let the subject drop, though.

"Seems like you've only got a few options," he finally said. "It's not like the cat's going back in the bag."

"I know that," I said reasonably. I just hadn't really put much thought in to it. Downright refused, actually, because I was still holding out for waking up tomorrow morning, when I'd wake up and realize it had all been a bad dream. Everything would be normal again. Maybe I'd even be back in bed with Milo, him saying he was ready to hang out with me for the whole day.

"So," Chad said, "I guess you can either deal with it... or deal with it. We both know running is out for you."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "I don't know. Running can be healthy."

"You won't run," Chad said confidently. "I mean, right now doesn't count. We'll call this vacation."

“Vacation?” I snorted. “I want a refund.”

“Tell it to the cat.”

I sighed. I hated the stupid cat. Stupid broken bag. “All these people I’ve known forever... it’s like they’re all different now.”

“Nah. The people are the same as they’ve always been. You’re just learning new things about them. Maybe they think you’re different. Tell them otherwise. Show them.”

“How?”

“Hell if I know.”

I made a face at him. “Is this you trying to help?”

Chad laughed. “You can’t do anything but be yourself, Nels. Who knows. Maybe you’ll even do it better now. Don’t worry about what people think. The ones that matter are the ones who aren’t going to think anything at all... you should really try to talk to Caleb.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. It’s not that I didn’t want to talk to Caleb, or Joe for that matter. I just didn’t know how to. “He looked at me like he doesn’t even know me.”

“So set him straight. Maybe he’ll be okay, maybe he won’t. He’ll hear you out, though.” My brother smirked. “Maybe not many other people... but you he’ll at least hear out, and if you don’t think so, maybe you’re the one who doesn’t know him all that well.”

.....

I hated the quiet. I craved the crowds, the noise. Even the drunken stupidity. Company. Instead I had my bedroom with myself to keep me occupied. Not good for me, being alone so much. I was convinced that a few days of it for me had to be something like months for most people. Made worse because when I was alone, my mind drifted to places that hurt to touch. Like Milo.

I dialed his disconnected number just because it was something familiar. I stared at his painting, the one of the scarecrow, wondering if I’d see more like it this summer at Hangman, and if I did, I wondered how close I’d be able to get to look at them. I wondered if I’d still want to.

The numbness that had been clinging to me was wearing off, and I almost felt like I was mourning something, waiting for it to get better. Moments of hurt or anger crept up without warning, and sometimes I didn’t know which I was feeling. I felt jumbled. Messy.

But I smelled good. Three showers a day was going to drive our water bill through the roof, but it had become my new favorite place to turn off the lights, get lost in dark and steam and pretend that I didn’t know the difference between the hot spray of water and tears.

While visiting Chad I’d convinced him that he didn’t have to hang around at home so much, just for me. He wanted time with Leanna. He should get to

have that.

And because my brother and his girlfriend weren't around Thursday afternoon, and because I couldn't stand another movie with my parents, I holed up in my room. Alone. Craving. Crazy. More writing. A little doodling. Another call to the number Milo didn't have anymore, this time because I forgot... for just a second I forgot. Maybe that meant things were getting better. Only, I didn't understand how.

Shortly after I decided that never again was someone to worry about whether or not I was eating when I hauled an unopened carton of ice cream and a can of whipped cream down to my room and held a one-man competition to see who could get the biggest brain-freeze.

And then I picked up the phone, dialed again.

This time it rang.

"Hello?"

"You answered," I said before I could stop myself. It was a stupid thing to say, since before now I hadn't exactly tried calling.

"Guess so," Caleb replied.

I found myself silent for a moment, realizing that I hadn't exactly planned this out. Then again, maybe it was better that way.

"Caleb... look, can we... can we talk?"

"Talk," he finally said, after a silence that suggested some thinking of his own.

I let out a breath. I didn't like not seeing him. If I could see him, I could read him, know what he was thinking. "Can we meet?"

"I have a family thing tonight."

"Oh."

Caleb sighed. "Look... tomorrow. Before school. You do still go to school?"

I let out a shaky breath. "Tomorrow I do."

.....

I had to tell my parents about the whole being out thing. But I probably shouldn't have done it ten minutes before I was supposed to be heading to school on Friday morning. It took a lot longer than that to talk them out of coming with me so we could talk to a counselor, give personnel a heads-up about what was going on. Given the rumors that were flying around, I had a feeling that there wasn't a teacher in school that didn't have a good idea of what was going on. Hell, by now they probably knew more about me than I did.

I didn't really want to know what those things were, but I did want to take my brother's advice and take a chance on talking to Caleb. I almost backed out of it, though, when I didn't get to school until two minutes before class was supposed to start and Caleb wasn't waiting on the stairs.

But maybe that was because I was late. Disappointed, I pulled up the hood of my black sweater and stepped through the front doors. Calling the place Hellschool, had never seemed more appropriate.

I tried to keep what Chad had said in mind. Be yourself.

Except, I wasn't the guy who hid under thick sweater hoods. I wasn't the one that turned away from familiar faces I usually smiled at.

Maybe I was being stupid. I tried a small, friendly smile in Theresa Milldrum's direction. She flashed me a once-over that suggested she knew a secret that I didn't. Then she whispered something in her friend's ear. They laughed. I went back to avoidance.

Until I reached my locker.

The first thing I noticed was more people than usual crowding the halls. Among them were Haily, Joe and Caleb. The three of their faces were blank as they stared at the same thing that everyone else seemed to be interested in.

It caught my eye then, there on the metal door that my books were behind. Big red letters. It was an ugly word. Around it was a not so artistic drawing of certain body parts. In smaller print, towards the bottom I read, Free blow jobs! I cocked my head at it, my fingers reaching into the pocket of my backpack where they seemed to wrap around a marker on their own accord.

I pushed the hood off of my head and as I came forward and several people suddenly decided it was time to find something better to do. Others whispered. Some didn't seem to care whether or not I heard them. Among the ones I called friend, Haily noticed me first when I said, "I thought that only happened on after-school specials."

She didn't respond, her brow troubled with pity as I stepped past her, my fingers reaching to trace terrible words written over metal. And then I uncapped my marker and crossed out Free. After the week I had, there was no way I was going to be anyone's cheap date.

I turned, feeling rather satisfied with myself, but couldn't quite get the smile I wanted to form on my face. That's when Haily plucked the marker from my hand. She hooked her arm through mine as Caleb and Joe walked past us, and then she was pulling me, the two of us following the two of them out the front doors of the school and to the parking lot, where I'd parked next to Caleb's jeep, just like always. Caleb unlocked his doors, and I didn't question it when we got inside. For a brief moment I met his eyes where I sat in the front seat, and then the four of us were driving away.

Yame.

Note to self: Yame means Assface.

"Christ!" I cursed, too taken off guard to worry about the unforgiving look on his reddening face. I sure as hell wanted to snap his head off, though, when his gaze, colored with disgust, drifted to my half-dressed state. I didn't get a chance to do that either.

Not when I realized that Jame wasn't the only one in the doorway anymore. Behind him stood Mr. Trust, eyes wide on me where he stood with a small suitcase.

"This has been the worst week ever, I just wish for once something would go right, Thom. Would you just look at..." I heard Emily's voice before I saw her. Maybe it was inappropriate for me to wince at the fact that her usually smooth, clear complexion was covered in hives. I'm not sure which one of us looked worse, but she seemed to have an idea as she paused, assessed the situation. "Umm...."

And it just had to be Milo's dad. His eyes that found the bottle of lube and the liquor bottle. A tic developed in his jaw. I wondered if he was going to murder me.

Should I explain?

No, definitely not.

I wanted to be relieved when I saw Milo, but I couldn't be. Not when eyes began turning in his direction. Not when he was so pale, shoulders so rigid.

He wouldn't look at any of them, wouldn't look at me as he slipped past the crowd, into his bedroom. And then he slammed the door in all their faces.

Chapter 17: Keep your faith in your pocket

by DomLuka

"Can we go to your house?"

I jumped at the sound of Caleb's voice, glanced over and felt somewhat startled when I realized he was speaking to me. It took me a few more moments to put together his words, realize what he was asking. "Yeah."

I looked blankly out the passenger window of his jeep, realizing that we'd been driving around for almost fifteen minutes. I guess I stopped understanding exactly what was happening around the time we walked out of the school. I didn't understand why my friends were with me. Thinking it made me feel guilty, like I didn't have enough faith in them or something. But that was the truth. I didn't understand. They'd walked out of there with me, but the anger when it came to two out of the three of them was hard to miss.

Caleb was restrained. His anger wasn't the kind that tended to get him into trouble, the kind he needed a physical outlet to relieve. His was fueled from disbelief and confusion. Two things that never failed to frustrate him. He wanted to confront me but didn't know how. I could hear it in his tone and I saw it every time his eyes swept in my direction when he didn't think I'd notice. Part of me wanted to deal with it, say something. Make it easier for him to assault me with any words he wanted to. But I was also winded, too tired to hear it now. Seeing those words on my locker, my space, felt like a violation. I kept telling myself that it was minor. Nothing more than someone stepping on my shoelaces. But it felt personal. I felt attacked, no way to defend myself. I didn't want to have to defend anything. I didn't want to d

o it against people who were supposed to be my friends, like Caleb. Joe. When it came to Joe, every once in a while he shoved his knee into the back of my seat. I don't think I'd be overreacting to say it was on purpose. That little action, kick, shove. It was something he knew I hated. Something he'd consciously avoid any other day. Such a little thing. But for me, a huge difference.

Everything felt different. Waking up felt different. Leaving my house felt different. The anxiety attack that came on every time I drove past the school, let alone walked into it, was different. Driving to my house with my friends felt different.

The sound of tires on gravel abruptly stopped as we neared my house, and as I sat up in my seat I found myself looking up, wondering why we weren't moving anymore. Finally I looked at Caleb. "Want me to get out here?" His brows drew together, his expression mildly perturbed. "Your mom's home."

"Oh... it's okay."

I saw Caleb turn his head, exchange glances with Joe and Haily, and finally he shrugged, finished driving up to my house. I was out of the car first, not because I was feeling particularly anxious, but more because everyone else seemed to be experiencing discomfort that I found to be unexpected, and maybe a little heartbreaking. They were always welcome. They knew. It put me on edge, made me wonder if they even wanted to be welcome anymore. I couldn't remember being so paranoid before. Shaking my head, I led the way to my front door, letting the others come at their own pace. They were beside me before I opened it, seeming cautious as we moved inside.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Haily whispered, making me wonder if she'd mistaken my home for a library. "I'll be grounded if your mom calls my mom."

"Huh?" I frowned at her, noted that behind her Caleb and Joe looked just as edgy. And then I got it and forced a smile that almost seemed real. "No... it's fine," I insisted. "This time, anyway. She'll be fine we're here." I suddenly found myself regarding them warily. "Um... if you guys could... not mention what happened at school? She's sort of been worried about me." Each one of them including Joe, surprisingly, looked somewhat bothered by that, slowly nodded their heads. But then, they'd always liked my mom, and it mattered a lot that they'd still care about her feelings, regardless of how they felt about me. "Thank you," I said sincerely, and then turned into my house, calling for my mom outright. When she didn't initially respond I headed through the house, noticing that no one bothered to follow me. Instead, all three of them headed directly to my room. At least that seemed normal. When I reached the kitchen I noticed my mom through the glass windows, rake in hand as she cleaned up leaves around the house that the snow had finally

y melted off of. I thought about going out there, telling her I was home. I was already considering several half-true explanations for it. But instead I silently retreated. She'd know we were there eventually. For now I needed time with my friends. I needed to sort things out.

Halfway down the stairs I paused, hearing Haily's voice. Apparently they'd started without me.

"It's not like he's doing it to piss you off," she was saying, to whom I couldn't tell. "Trust me, no one's sorrier than I am that we have who we're attracted to in common."

There was a groan. "Can we not talk about this?" Joe wanted to know. "It's still... I just don't want to hear about it."

Then what are you doing here?

"He said he wanted to talk to me before school, before all... that. Maybe he was going to change his mind." This from Caleb.

What?

"Yeah. I don't think so," Haily replied. "And what are we going to do about what happened, anyway? We don't even know who did it."

"Looked like everyone did it," Joe remarked. "I'm just glad I'm not bringing my car to school anymore. Wouldn't want it to end up looking like his locker just because I hang out with him."

I winced at that, feeling horrible. I hadn't considered how this whole thing might affect them. Hell, I hadn't been prepared for what it was doing to me. Part of me wanted to keep them as far away from all of it as I could. The other part wanted to make Joe's pretty face bleed for sounding like such an asshole.

"Are we sure he's not going to change his mind?" Caleb asked, still apparently hung up. I shook my head, rolled my eyes. He sounded boggled, not necessarily offensive.

"Caleb," Haily said impatiently.

"Fine," he replied. "Whatever. It's just... it's Nelson."

"Exactly," she said. "So what are we going to do about it? We can't just let things stay like they are. People need to know the truth."

I forced a cough, not wanting to sneak up on them, but wanting to get down there, wanting to know exactly what was happening. It occurred to me, somewhere through all the mixed feelings, that we weren't necessarily here to talk about what I thought we were there to talk about--like, whether or not all of us could stay friends. Whether or not I'd be accepted. In fact, it occurred to me that I'd been attacked, and they were all still right there. They hadn't left me alone.

Silence erupted as I made my way down the stairs, unsurprisingly. I had to step past Joe, who was seated on the second to last step and who made a show of avoiding my eyes. He didn't look like he was planning to walk into

my room, where Haily had picked up an old sketchbook to pretend she was looking through it, and Caleb had seated himself with his back to the edge of my bed, arms crossed and looking bored.

“Does anyone want something to drink?” I asked.

Haily shook her head and no one else responded. I found myself a little disappointed by that, mostly because I was now standing front and center with all of them and wanted an excuse to run away. Instead, I took a breath and decided to look at Caleb, since I was afraid I might get flipped off for looking at Joe. “I’m sorry about the other day. That’s not how I wanted to tell you.”

Caleb raised a challenging eyebrow at that. “Were you even going to?”

I gave his question some honest consideration. “I think I would have, when I was ready.”

“And when would that’ve been?”

“When I didn’t think you were going to look at me the way you are now,” I said bluntly.

Caleb couldn’t seem to find a good response to that, so he scowled at me instead.

Haily put down my book, took a hesitant step towards me. “Are you okay? At school...”

I sniffed, frowning at the reminder as I avoided her eyes. “I’m fine. Should’ve known it was coming.”

If my friends were angry, I could imagine how people I didn’t even know would react.

“Well next time you think you should see something coming, a little warning might help,” Caleb remarked.

Haily flashed him a look that wasn’t very nice. “Will you just... shut up?”

I raised a hand. “It’s fine, Haily,” I insisted. “He can be angry. All of you can.” I went against my better judgment and looked out my bedroom door where Joe was seated. He flipped me off. I went back to not looking in that direction.

“Well I’m pissed,” Caleb said shortly. He suddenly narrowed his eyes at me. “You’re not going to change your mind about all this?”

Haily rolled her eyes, tossed herself on my bed behind him and backhanded the back of his head. He did nothing more than wave her off like an obnoxious fly.

“I don’t think I can,” I replied, feeling rather amused despite the nature of the conversation. “It doesn’t exactly work that way.”

Caleb tugged at his blond hair and made a face. “Fine. You’re... whatever. But I don’t get why,” he added, seeming to want that clear.

I thought he might have more to add to that, but I found myself responding first. “Neither do I,” I said, shrugging helplessly. “But I really don’t think it

's going to change... When you started looking at girls... I was..."

Caleb held up a hand. "I don't want to know," he snapped, and then met my eyes, voice lowering. "I'm not ready for that. Not yet."

I gave him a slow nod, deciding that a not yet was way better than a never.

"Okay."

Caleb seemed satisfied by my agreement, and I didn't bother to point out that I wasn't going to say anything nearly as horrifying as all the gory detail

I'd listened to from him throughout my adolescence, every time he met a new girl. Instead I made a mental note to get even if the day came that he could look at me again and see more than my sexuality.

"Are we going back to school today?" Haily suddenly asked. I said that I wasn't the same time both Caleb and Joe chimed in with no. She shrugged.

"Good with me. We need time to figure this whole thing out, anyway. Obviously when Nels goes back we're going to have a problem. We can't..."

"Hey," I cut her off, feeling both touched and worried about her concern. "It's not your problem. I can handle it. Besides, there's nothing to do about it, anyway." I was slowly accepting that.

Others, not so much. In fact, Caleb looked downright mutinous when he demanded, "You're just going to leave it alone? Wanting dick doesn't make Haily stupid. What's your problem?"

Haily took another shot at the back of his head, but this time it was more on her behalf than mine. However, this time, I was willing to be offended, too.

"I'm out, Caleb. I can't change it, so obviously the only thing I can do is leave it alone and listen to people make shitty comments like that one. Didn't say I was happy about it, I said I can handle it. If you can't, go."

"Oh, I'm about ready to go," Joe said from behind me. I lowered my eyes, refraining from looking at him.

To my surprise, so did Caleb. "Don't be an idiot," he snapped. "The whole reason we're here is because you do need us, especially if sitting on your ass is your way of handling it."

The whole reason they were here. I blinked a few times, self-consciously ran my hand over my face to cover anything it might give away about what that meant to me. Not that I wouldn't have wanted any of them to know. I just didn't want to fall apart over it in front of them.

"He kind of has a point, Nelson," Haily said, her tone a lot kinder than Caleb's was, and I found myself looking at her as I tried to remember what we were talking about.

When I did, I frowned. "You want me to fight this?" I looked at Caleb. "This isn't something you can just beat up."

"Assface is," Caleb remarked.

"So is Milo Trust," Joe said, and this time I did turn to face him. Turn on him, more like it.

“Leave him the fuck out of this.”

Joe’s brow knitted at my tone, his face twisting in anger, but I didn’t have long to pay attention to it.

“Why?” Haily demanded, surprising me, and I rounded on her. She liked Milo. At least, I thought she was starting to. “Why should he get to cut out and leave you with all of this?”

“Because it has nothing...”

“Oh, please. It wasn’t that hard to figure out, Nelson,” Haily cut me off. “Don’t you get it? The things people are saying about you--they’re really pissed. And you look like... it makes you seem like...” She threw up her hands. “You have to tell them it’s not true.”

My face fell blank when I tried hard not to show them what I was feeling. I couldn’t do that, because for days I’d been terrified of it.

I didn’t have to ask Haily to elaborate. I knew why someone took their anger out on my locker. I wasn’t just different to them, I was scary. I was the guy who broke...like, the guy code or something. The last person I ever wanted to hurt was my so-called victim. Nelson Larmont tried to rub his gayness all over Milo Trust. And maybe my friends were right. Maybe I should want to do something about that. And I could. If the people in my bedroom decided to back me up on it, sooner or later people would start believing the truth and bring the gossip right to Milo’s door. And then it would be him. My friends thought he deserved that. And I hated myself every time I wondered if he did. I just didn’t know how not to. My last night with Milo had felt honest. I couldn’t understand why he’d do it. He and Jame were friends. Milo had told me countless times that the asshole was loyal. He trusted Jame. Jame trusted Milo--that’s what Milo said. So if Milo wanted Jame to make sure no one would ever suspect him of being anything more than his father’s son... I couldn’t understand why he’d do it. Not to me.

I didn’t want to think about it. Not too closely. That would hurt. And sometimes the only time I’d felt I could breathe was when I knew Milo wasn’t any more capable of hurting me than I was him. Never intentionally.

“I can’t.”

I blinked, feeling a sudden shove from behind that threw me off balance when Joe pushed past me. “Why the fuck not?” he demanded. “Why can’t you just...why the fuck not, Nelson?”

“Because... I can’t.”

I wished that I could put a better reason into words than that. And I understood the reason why my friends were looking at me the way they were. They didn’t understand, and I couldn’t expect them to.

Caleb stood, maybe because Joe and I were both standing and he was tired of looking up. Maybe because I’d just said the words that had him ready to get the hell out of there and away from me. He was there because he was going

to help, because that's what friends were supposed to do, and he thought I was fighting the system. I really didn't think I'd hold it against him if he wanted to walk away.

"I don't see it," Caleb said, glancing back at Haily for a moment. "I don't think anything was easy to figure out... I thought we were hanging out with that kid because the two of you had all that artsy shit in common, and I figured that maybe he wasn't a complete tool. But now you're protecting him, and if you're going to ask us to do that, too, at least say it's because you know now he'd do the same thing for you."

"Are you kidding me?" Joe demanded, turning his anger on Caleb. "He's the reason all this is happening."

"Maybe we don't know that," Haily said quietly, eyeing me carefully. "Do you know it, Nelson?"

I didn't know anything for sure anymore. "I'm not asking any of you for anything," I finally said. "But you're here, and I didn't think you would be." I let out a breath, tucked my hands beneath my arms because I didn't like the way they were suddenly shaking. Haily was frowning at me, something like pity mixed with annoyance. Caleb I couldn't quite read and Joe looked like he hadn't been sure he'd be here, either, and maybe he was surprised by it. I understood that we were all still standing over cracked ice, but I needed to tell them where I stood, even if it meant I'd sink alone. "If any of you can't deal with it, that's okay... but yeah, I'm going to let everyone think whatever they want. They don't mean anything. Milo does."

"Milo does," Caleb repeated, as if he couldn't quite make sense of the words, but he was nodding slowly, considering. "I think you're crazy."

"But," Haily said quickly, standing to place a hand on Caleb's arm, and silencing whatever was about to come out of Joe's mouth with a cold look. "We hope you're right."

Joe made a disgusted sound, shook his head. "Just watch. This is going to be the stupidest thing we've ever done."

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Monday morning I parked my car next to Caleb's jeep, stared ahead at the school, the crowds making their way inside. It was strange, how despite everything I'd woken up that morning feeling like it might be okay to breathe again. I don't know how, really. Friday after my mom had realized we were home, Haily, Caleb and Joe had quickly excused themselves and I hadn't heard from them since. I spent most of the weekend alone or working in the back of one of the bakeries, wondering if anything had really been resolved. I guess it was comforting to know I had allies, even reluctant ones. But apart from Haily, I wasn't sure how it would work with them.

As far as I could tell Joe wanted to crucify me himself before he left it to our classmates, and Caleb... I had a hard time when it came to figuring out

exactly why he was angry. I'm sure there were plenty of reasons, but picking one was a challenge because I couldn't tell if it was because I was gay, because I hadn't told him, because of my obvious loyalty to Milo Trust, or a little of all three. Some reasons that came to mind I could be more patient with than others. And then it had occurred to me... this was supposed to be a two-way street. I could just as easily be angry with him for not accepting me for what I was as much as he was mad at me for anything. It was easy feeling that anger, especially when I couldn't help but wonder if anything would ever go back to feeling completely normal with my friends.

Which is part of the reason why I waited for the bell to ring before I approached the school, determined to make it through at least one day. No more running. When I got closer I wished I would have found my balls a lot sooner, because seeing Caleb Spangler waiting for me was at that moment, the best thing that had ever happened to me. Or maybe it was the way his mouth twitched with a suppressed smile, probably caused by the look on my face. "Come on," he called when I experienced a fleeting moment of hesitation. "You're going to make me late."

A gently placed hand on my back as I passed him and he fell into step beside me had me smiling in his direction. "I didn't ask you to wait."

"Bet you wanted me to, though," Caleb remarked, looking sure of himself. I couldn't help it as I suddenly regarded him seriously. "Thank you."

His playful smile faded as he gave me a short nod. "I don't hate you... just in case you think that."

"Okay," I said quietly, and when I realized he was still regarding me expectantly I added, "Maybe I thought it for just a minute."

Caleb rolled his eyes at me. "You know I don't react well to change."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "But you're okay now?... We never really did get to talk about it much."

Caleb grew serious. "Not... okay. Disappointed, I guess... I look at you and think, it's Nelson... dude, I've known you forever. But then the second thing I think about is... well..." he shrugged. "It might take some time to get used to. I've never known anyone before who was..."

"Gay," I helped, when he suddenly stumbled over words. "And yeah, you have. You've always known me."

He awkwardly turned his eyes from me, and I came to a halt in the hallway, frowning when my eyes moved to my locker.

I'd been preparing to lay eyes on the attacks written all over it ever since we'd stepped foot in the school. I'd done my best to use Caleb as a distraction from the stares. No eye contact. With anyone. There seemed to be a method to it I was slowly learning. But I heard everything they'd whispered about me as I laid eyes on my locker. I almost didn't want to approach it because it might make me everything the nasty phrases on it said I was.

“They should have done something about that,” Caleb said from beside me. “Come on, let’s get your stuff out, I’ll give you my combo.”

I felt a small smile against my mouth over the offer, but shook my head as I approached my own locker. “Thanks, but if I share yours it could happen there, too.”

Caleb frowned, but didn’t argue as I moved to open my locker and collect my books as I tried to remember where I was supposed to be. The halls were emptying out and I noticed fewer odd looks coming in my direction, but still Caleb stood there, waiting.

“You don’t have to do that, you know,” I said quietly. “I don’t need a body guard, Caleb. I’m going to get through today.”

The corner of Caleb’s mouth turned up. “Yeah. You will.”

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When did everyone turn so ugly? Halfway through the day I felt disgusted. But I wasn’t the only one, and I think that was part of the problem. My peers looked at me as if they didn’t approve of my presence being in theirs. During class it was easy to block out. I had too much paying attention to do after missing a week of school. Except when it came to Jame Graham. Him, it was hard to face. His smugness, complete and utter joy when it came to my social downfall.

I could deal with being humbled. I’ll admit on this scale, however, it was slightly more painful. And Jame... he was too delighted about it for my utter dislike of him to be pushed away. Ignored. He was too fucking hard to ignore. And the fact that he saw Milo and I didn’t... he didn’t have to say it to flaunt it. He could tell me that with one look; did so often, every time I looked up and found his eyes on me because he’d been waiting for the chance to curl up his lip, taunt me.

There were a few reprieves for me throughout the day. No silent treatments.

No noticing the gossip or the cold stares that came my way. There were friendly faces waiting for me between classes, Haily and Caleb in particular. Sometimes Joe tagged along with Haily, but he seemed to notice the stares in our direction more than I did and was usually quick to excuse himself. It was starting to bother me, this attitude of his. Maybe I had no right to feel that way, I was just feeling high-strung, vulnerable. Couldn’t help myself. But it bothered me. Made me wonder why he came around at all. Maybe one day I’d have the guts to ask him.

By lunch I was exhausted. Days of not sleeping was getting to me, and the emotional high plaguing me hour to hour was hard to shake. I went back to my locker, wanting to lighten my load before lunch, which I’d already decided would be better spent off campus. I wasn’t exactly surprised to find Caleb waiting for me again; what surprised me was the way I wasn’t instantly assaulted by bright colors and vulgar words.

I approached my new locker door while Caleb looked on approvingly, making a face only when I touched a dent in the surface. A recycled door seemed a lot better to me than a graffiti-covered one.

“Think my combination’s the same?” I asked as I spun the lock.

“Try it.”

I did and was able to unlock it, but found myself frowning when the door stuck, as if it were hung crookedly enough to cause metal to bend against metal.

Caleb reached around me, gave a firm tug and it popped open. He shrugged when I smiled at him as I opened my backpack to unload books. “Thought that counts, right?” he remarked.

“This definitely works for me,” I said, and then made a face. “Wonder how long it’ll stay clean.”

Caleb’s eyes drifted from mine. “Don’t worry,” he muttered. “I have a good idea about what to do with anyone I catch touching your locker. Don’t think it’ll be a problem.” Before I could ask him to elaborate, he asked, “So, wanna go somewhere for lunch?” The look on his face told me he already knew the answer to that, but I gave him a nod anyway.

We drove-through for burgers, then ate in a parking lot, much like the way I’d done with Chad. Caleb and I didn’t talk about things going on with me, or us. I knew that maybe, we still needed to. I was confident that eventually, we would; but the way we conversed back and forth like the last week hadn’t been hell spoke volumes for where we stood, and I found myself laughing as he caught me up on recent dreams, feeling happy for him when he explained how he’d finally had a real conversation with Ronnie that had left him wondering if he could be the kind of guy she liked to date. Meaning, less of an overall troublemaker. I think his problem was that he couldn’t figure out if he wanted her attention because she refused to give it to him, or if he really wanted to explore whatever feelings he had in that direction. Caleb had never been the type to keep a steady girlfriend. That kind of loyalty eluded him, and sometimes when he mentioned it I couldn’t help wondering if he just didn’t want to put himself out there to get hurt. I found that I couldn’t really blame him.

Getting hurt sucked. Every day I didn’t hear from Milo Trust was like another speck of salt being dropped in the wound, slowly ground in. Every night I fell asleep wanting to just let him go, and afraid to do it more than I was afraid of what would happen if we ever came face to face again. It was hard to admit it, but he was the one person who had the power to hurt me more than anyone else had during this entire debacle. Looks from Jame, disconnected phone numbers and silence all had me terrified that that’s exactly what he’d end up doing.

Caleb and I were early returning to school, something about him not wanting

to be late to class. I was quick to realize it was because he wanted to walk me first, which led to the first incident of the day when someone muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “fags” under their breath and Caleb was quick to knock the guy on his ass. It was just a shove, but I’d hauled my friend away before it could escalate, suddenly worried that maybe he should keep his distance from me as much as Joe wanted to do. I mentioned it, and Caleb had all but laughed in my face.

“I will screw the girlfriend of any asshole who’s stupid enough to think that about me.” I didn’t have time to comment on the fact that saying things like he’d just said was probably part of the reason he was going to have trouble getting closer to the one girl he really liked before his eyes widened and he looked at me as if a sudden moment of clarity had just struck. “You know what, Nels? If I was a chick, I’d probably be a lesbian.”

I went to my next class feeling a little lighter, more so when I noticed Jame Graham looking a little less cocky, more interested in our teacher’s lecture. It was only later, before I went home that I found out why when I worked up the nerve to walk past Milo’s abandoned locker. I had another note for him tucked away in my backpack, that I wouldn’t slip through the cracks, that he’d never read. But I didn’t think on it much more than that when not far from it, another locker caught my attention, familiar graphics and promises of blow jobs marring its surface next to my x’d out free. As Jame Graham shoved his books into it his gaze drifted to mine, the look in his eyes expressing that he’d never wanted to kill me more.

.....

I’d made it through almost a full week of school, not realizing how much easier Caleb in particular had made it for me until the day he got sick. He’d called the night before, giving me the heads-up. I assured him I’d be fine, and thought I would be when I went to school. Haily and I saw each other less during the day, and I assured her that she didn’t need to skip class to spend lunch with me. Joe had walked me to at least one of my classes, kind of. Haily apparently had insisted on my needing an escort everywhere I went. When Joe walked ten paces behind me I’d finally turned around and snapped at him to get lost.

Two minutes later and Chuck Girckey happened.

I didn’t even really know him. Maybe from once or twice at Hangman after I’d lost my group and ended up throwing back canned beer with him and Brandon Sholer. They were teammates, Chuck’s dark hair and bronzed skin a contrast to Brandon’s light hair and golden complexion. Opposite in personality, too, as Brandon had always been outgoing while Chuck was uninterested in most people until he had a good buzz going on that had always left it a little too easy to tease him. I’ll admit I’d checked him out once or twice.

Nothing extreme. Nothing more, really, than a passing interest. Admiratio

n maybe, because he wrestled when he wasn't playing football and all the activity had left him with a nicely toned appearance that I'd heard more than just girls comment on before. He was the type who'd worked for his body, should have been proud of it. Just, maybe not as much when he was using it to shove me into hard metal lockers.

I hadn't exactly seen it coming. I'd made a point over the last days to avoid eye contact with anyone who might get mad at me for it. Annoyed and irritated by Joe's mixed signals, I made my way through the hall quickly, wanting to get outside, to my car, home.

Day, over.

When someone grabbed my backpack, throwing me off balance and spinning my weight towards the locker, I had little time to react, threw my hands up and caught myself against metal with an echoing thud that stopped all conversations and footsteps around me. Even with my back to him, I recognized Chuck's angry voice.

"You like looking at guys, huh? You never fucking look at me, Larmont!"

I blinked a few times, feeling shocked, winded. More than just a little bit angry. I wasn't looking at him. I wasn't the pervert he'd told himself I was, who he now told everyone around us I was, and maybe that's why my first instinct wasn't to simply defend the fact that I'd done nothing to provoke this attack. I wanted to defend my right to walk down these halls without something like this happening. Without needing a fucking escort who was too ashamed to be seen with me. So at the time it seemed to me like a great idea to turn around swinging.

I felt instant gratification in the way Chuck's eyes widened as soon as he realized my fist stood a very good chance of colliding with his nose. I let my body carry into it, awaiting the moment that would burn my knuckles and hopefully give him a pretty reminder every time he looked in the mirror over the next week, not to fuck with me. But the force behind my attack was cut short when another arm hooked through mine, pulling me back.

"Whoa," Brandon said, his hand closing around my fist, lowering it gently, but with enough pressure that warned it would be in my best interest to leave it that way. "Let's cool this down, huh?"

The look I gave him clearly told him just how little I appreciated the interruption and then I glared at Chuck more bravely than I likely had the right to do with three other oversized teenagers ready to back him up. "Don't flatter yourself," I snapped, and then couldn't help my smirk. "You're paying more attention to me than I am to you... trying to tell me something?"

Chuck's jaw twitched with annoyance as he took a threatening step forward only to run into Brandon's outreached hand as he stepped between us. "Watch it, Girckey," Brandon warned. "You heard coach. He's worried enough about your third-grade IQ; an incident like this means he won't touch you

next season and that would tick off everyone.”

I looked at Brandon, wondering how he managed to sound sympathetic and insulting all at once. Maybe it was his unconcerned smile, dimples flashing as he drew a heavy arm over my shoulders, turned me away from the guys in the hall. There were insulting phrases slung in my direction as we walked away and Brandon’s arm tightened, as if he fully expected me to turn back around. When one of those remarks implied that Brandon would soon know the difference between a guy and a girl between the sheets and was followed by laughter, I raised an eyebrow in his direction. “You can let go,” I promised, “I’ll keep walking.”

Brandon dropped his arm, but still walked close enough that his shoulder constantly threatened to brush mine. “I’ll walk you out,” he said.

I frowned at that. “Look...”

“You okay?” he cut me off, his blue eyes taking an accessing sweep that took me somewhat off guard.

“Oh yeah,” I replied, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. “Never better. I always did want to get up close and personal with that locker back there.”

The corners of his full bottom lip arched upwards, and I found myself returning his smile, maybe because he was regarding me with more curiosity than the pity I tended to get from my friends.

“Someone told Chuck you were into him. Now he’s freaked out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah. That’s me. Can’t control myself.”

Brandon smirked. “Bitter much?”

I let out a breath, feeling bad that I wasn’t exactly being social. He’d probably just done me a huge favor, but he was right, I felt bitter and that canceled everything else out. And I felt guarded. I’d never had to put up a wall before. Now I felt like I’d built it in a day and I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to take it down, not as long as I risked running into people like Chuck.

“I’m sorry. Look, you should go,” I said as we left the school and headed for the parking lot. “Um... thanks, okay?”

Brandon rolled his eyes at me, gave my shoulder a friendly shove and stepped out towards rows of parked cars with me. “Where are you at?” he asked, and when I regarded him speculatively, he threw one of his gentler smiles in my direction. “I want to walk with you, Nelson. Not that you can’t handle yourself or anything.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better?”

“Is it working?”

“No,” I admitted, but gave him a nod. “I’m way in the back... and I really can get there on my own.”

He shrugged one shoulder, slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans but stayed with me, his blue eyes slanted in my direction from beneath the straight

ht blond bangs that had fallen over them. "I haven't seen much of you around lately."

"Bet you've heard plenty, though," I mumbled, frowning at myself when I saw him look awkwardly away. It was like I was managing to get ruder by the moment and I wasn't sure how the hell to stop it.

But then, it's not like this wasn't awkward. At least for me. I wasn't out to guilt anyone. Especially him. But my reputation was ass-up in the gutter at the moment and I wasn't interested in pretending otherwise. I guess, unfortunately for Brandon, making normal conversation was out for me, too, since I had a pretty good idea of why he was interested in walking me to my car... why he'd come to my rescue in the first place. A couple weeks ago I might have been fascinated by that reason. Now I was wary of it. He'd have to bring it up. I wasn't sure I could live through one more bad reaction from someone who I actually liked.

"Do you want to hang out sometime?" he suddenly asked. Blurted, more like it.

My gaze moved curiously back in his direction. "Hang out?"

Brandon shrugged, suddenly looking like avoiding my eyes was his only goal in life. "...Sometime," he repeated. "I just don't want you to think..." He reluctantly turned in my direction, his eyes focused on my sweater. "I'm not like them, Nelson."

I felt a gentle smile curving my mouth. "I think you just proved that," I said sincerely and he looked up, grinning at my tone.

"So maybe sometime?" he asked again. "It would be cool to... talk."

I gave a slow nod that seemed oddly uncomfortable. "Sure." Thanks? Maybe?

I guess it would be an understatement to say that any friend was a good friend at this point and time... and I was grateful to be able to count someone like Brandon among them. But he confused me. Which, I'll admit doesn't make sense because he was making quite a few things completely obvious. Looking back, thinking on it--which I had--I suppose a lot of things had been obvious with him. But knowing it now... after... I found it all more regretful than helpful.

I spotted my car, not liking the way I felt relieved because it seemed to be in one piece. Not liking the way I'd almost assumed it wouldn't be. "Um... I'm just over here," I said, pausing to face him again. "Thanks again, Brandon. Really." I tried out a smile, not sure how it was coming across. I couldn't help wanting to get away from him as soon as possible. But it really wasn't personal; I wanted away from everyone.

He nodded slowly, looking as if he wanted to say something but didn't know how to do it.

"I should really get out of here," I said.

“Sure... I guess, I’ll see you later.”

I nodded. Another forced smile. As soon as he started walking away my keys were out, hand shaking as I tried to fit it into the lock. I scratched pain t, cursed under my breath but managed to tear the door open, tuck myself in side. My knuckles went white against the steering wheel and I assured myself that the deep, ragged breaths I was suddenly taking wouldn’t make me pass out.

Damn it. Fuck. Take your moment, dumbass, move on.

I felt too unsettled. Everything was too smothering. Stupid Chuck Girkey and his stupid... stupidness. I told myself I wasn’t afraid of people like him. People like him were people who were afraid of me. I could hear myself somewhere in the back of my mind, insistent upon using that information for my own benefit. Let him be afraid. Make him afraid.

Never, ever let them get to you.

Any of them.

But I felt hollowed out, used. Didn’t understand what had just happened. Being attacked for something that made me different. I don’t think I knew how to get angry over it just yet. I was still shaken over it. And I was alone. Possibly by choice. Yeah, definitely by choice. I didn’t want to do this, fall apart like this in front of anyone.

No good. I needed some sort of slowdown, the moment of clarity that was missing, that was supposed to make my brain work again. Make the ringing in my ears stop.

That happened when my passenger door suddenly opened, making me jump. I looked up, met Brandon Sholer’s eyes as he slid into my car with an awkward smile, closed the door behind him. “So,” he said, “I don’t actually have a car, and my ride just took off on me. How about we skip hanging out sometime and just do it now?”

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I’d invited him over. I’m not sure I’d even meant to.

But I think I’d wanted to.

Yeah. I had. I think I saw him as an end to my self-inflicted alone time. Brandon Sholer, my newest distraction.

We were halfway to my house when he said, “Do you think you can take me home later? I need to be there by six, I told Grace Howard I’d take her out tonight.”

“I don’t know her,” I said as if that was important, and then shook my head at myself. “Um, yeah. I’ll get you there.”

No secret that Brandon Sholer dated girls. What was more the mystery was whether or not he would if he had other options. Was he looking for other options? I eyed him sidelong, trying to pay attention as he told me about the most recent pranks and trouble he and his friends from the team had been

n up to. I think I laughed in all the appropriate places because his grin was approving as he continuously shoved his blond bangs away from his eyes, flashed the dimples. I'd bet girls loved the dimples. I liked them. I liked him... I liked that he was speaking to me as if he had no idea I was suddenly socially contagious. By the time we reached my house I was almost relaxed. At least, somewhat comfortable, bringing him over. That was, until my mom made it known she was home and gushed all over Brandon like he was the second coming.

My mom had met Brandon once or twice. He'd been over before, on my birthday, and he'd even made appearances at various barbecues. To walk into my house that afternoon anyone would have made the mistake that she'd known him forever. But then, I understood what she was doing. It had been a few weeks since I'd had friends over. Haily had dropped by twice, Caleb once. Not for very long. I think my mom saw Brandon and quickly decided that maybe things weren't so bad for me after all. It became downright embarrassing when she asked if she could call his mom and see if she'd let him stay for dinner, so I politely told her that he already had plans and we needed to get some studying in before it was time for him to go.

That's how we'd ended up alone in my room.

"You were kidding about the studying, right?" Brandon remarked, glancing over his shoulder with a half smile as he descended the stairs ahead of me, and then turned his attention to my bedroom when we reached it. Like a lot of people that passed the doorway, his attention was drawn to my cartoonist drawings, faces he could recognize. "I forgot you could draw," he said, and then looked back at me curiously. "You still write, too?"

My brow flew up. "Yeah, I guess. Not lately... how did you..."

He flashed me an amused smile. "You don't remember the seventh grade, do you?" he asked, shaking his head but not seeming all that surprised. "We had Mr. Felon... he caught you writing something that didn't belong in his class, made you read it..."

"Oh, shit," I said, unable to avoid my smile even as I felt the color rising to my face. "The weird alien thing..." I winced, not mentioning I still had that unfinished story lying around somewhere.

"It wasn't weird. A lot nicer to listen to than Mr. Felon."

"Thanks... but I think now I'm beginning to realize why seventh grade was a blur. I probably blocked it out."

Brandon laughed, walked a circle around my room and finally seated himself on my bed, bouncing the mattress a few times before he settled and looked up at me, his tone more serious than the playful expression on his face.

"Was probably a lot easier then, than now, though, huh?"

The reminder took me off guard, had me suddenly avoiding his eyes and trying to compose myself before I made the mistake of telling him that he was su

posed to be a better distraction than this.

Brandon seemed to pick up on the shift in my mood and was suddenly standing again, this time turned towards my collection of books, fingering each one but not seeming interested in the titles. "Seventh grade was worse for me," he said. "I thought my parents were going to get divorced." He shot me a backwards glance, a knowing look. "They probably should've. Oh, and do you remember Chase Morrick?" Brandon shook his head. "Probably not, huh? He was only around for maybe a year and then moved. I went down on him and then he knocked out my front tooth. Dentist does good work, huh?"

He was tapping one of the straight white teeth filling his mouth, looking as happy as ever, but his eyes were suddenly avoiding me. I could imagine why, and did my best to wipe the look of shocked horror off my face. "Um..." "So I get it," he cut me off. "That people can react the way you never expected them to."

He was back to staring at my books while I stood there stupidly, knowing that I was supposed to react to that but not knowing how to. Probably because I was stuck on wondering if I was a terrible person for being turned on and feeling terrible for him all at the same time, and then there was the way that Milo crept into my mind, the way I wanted to call him and gossip about Brandon Sholer, share these new pieces of information with him because it was Milo, and he was the one I wanted to talk to, share this kind of thing with, and right now he was the only one who I couldn't.

Not that Brandon's secret wasn't safe with me. I think, if anything, I'd learned exactly how to keep a secret. And Brandon sharing this with me... I really did feel for him. I remembered the way Milo reacted the first time I'd worked up the guts to put myself out there with him. I remembered how much it had hurt, and I could only imagine how bad it would have felt if he'd held off reacting until after something completely monumental had happened between us. Brandon was right, I didn't remember Chase Morrick, but I felt an instant dislike for him.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," I said finally, not sure what else would sound right.

Brandon's reaction was to turn around, meet my eyes with one of his more careful expressions that clearly told me he wasn't the type to invite or expect pity. He moved across the room, stood only feet from me as he cocked his head and regarded me curiously. "Like I said, I just wanted to tell you I know what it's like... and I don't really know what you're going through now. But if you want to talk..."

I did. I did want to talk. There was only so much I could say to my family without feeling awkward. Even I had limits in that regard. My friends had figured out enough for themselves that it wouldn't seem like an instant b

etrayal to Milo to tell them how I was feeling, but Joe was out of the question, Caleb would be uncomfortable and Haily would try to fix it, which was pretty damn scary when I thought too much about it. Brandon might understand. Maybe. And I think, all I wanted to talk about was how I missed Milo Trust. I wanted to acknowledge to someone other than myself how much it hurt, how much I doubted and hoped all at the same time.

But when it came to Brandon, he'd made the same assumptions about what kind of person I was, just like everyone else had. The only difference was, he hadn't judged me for it. That's why I dreaded the next question he asked. Smile inviting, dimples playful. "I mean... what happened with Milo Trust, anyway?"

I opened my mouth, closed it again. "I..."

He sensed my hesitation, didn't look bothered by it. "Just curious... you know, about what made you go in that direction," he said, as if he thought that particular decision on my part had something lacking. "It's just... Milo? You should learn how to read people better."

"Yeah. Guess so." When it came to Milo Trust, I thought I'd read him pretty well. In more ways than one. He'd liked how I read him, damn it.

"You know, I could show you," Brandon said, his hand suddenly reaching out, catching my wrist as he gave me a tug towards my bed.

"I..."

He seated us, as if suddenly wanting to be more comfortable, and I found myself scooting away from the way his thigh touched mine, but stopped when I realized he was going to keep following me.

"Losing that tooth was an eye opener," Brandon continued. "With Chase, I got this feeling about him... got so wound up it never even occurred to me that he'd flip shit five minutes after the fact... but not everyone's like him, like Milo," he said, sounding reassuring.

He still hadn't let go of my wrist. I stared down at the way his fingers wrapped around it, his thumb tracing the bone. "Well, yeah, but..."

"Of course, Chase was just hung up on his closet while Milo's just not interested, right? But sort of the same thing... I mean, they're both the kind of people that people like me and you shouldn't be interested in."

"People like you and me..." I repeated blankly. People like Milo. People like Milo were interested in people like me. He'd said so. He'd shown me, and now he was gone.

I stared at Brandon's fingers again, the way they lifted my hand, the tips of them studying even more thoroughly than his blue eyes were doing. I wanted to snatch it away from him as much as I wanted to use it to latch on, either effort on my part ending with letting him know just how wrong he was about Milo Trust. Milo wasn't Chase. Couldn't be.

"I knew you weren't like that," Brandon said, his voice dropping a notch. H

e was looking at me again, eyes taking in my features. I couldn't meet them, too busy staring at our hands. His hand. Tanned, calloused fingers, little white scars across the knuckles. Short, clean nails. The way they slid over the palm of my hand sent a chill down my spine, pleasant and nervous. I found myself sliding my hips away from him even while he was suddenly leaning so close I could feel his bangs brush against my forehead, his warm shoulder firm against mine. "I know you like me."

I felt my voice, working its way past the sudden knot in my throat. Embarrassed, excited, stupid knot. "How?" I asked, feeling a little offended, too. How come me and not Milo? How come no one suspected Milo? I didn't want to be the one responsible. I didn't want to be the one who'd managed to wreck things for us. For him. What if all of this had happened because I was so stupid enough to ever look at him in the first place? What if I was the one who'd destroyed everything for him?

When Brandon spoke, he sounded bemused, his words snapping my eyes back to his. "For starters," he said wryly, "I know you look at my ass more than you do my face."

I flushed, but seemed suddenly unable to help the way my grin matched his. "Nothing personal."

Brandon shook his head. "That's okay. I like watching you look."

I think I actually giggled.

I also found myself straightening, pulling my hand away, and trying to wash the most self-satisfied look ever off my face. I'd had dreams like this. Except in them, I didn't recall my stomach uncomfortably twisting the way it did when I noticed that even letting go of Brandon's hand didn't prevent the way he was touching my arm. Tone growing serious, I said, "Look, Brandon, I think...this isn't something..."

My mouth opened under his, maybe it was the abrupt impact of his firm lips. Shock. Silent plea for help. Any of those things might open a mouth. He felt soft, his tongue aggressive enough that I hadn't realized its presence until it was teasing and pressing against mine. I felt myself responding to him for a fleeting instant while my eyes widened, right before I lifted a hand to his shoulder, pulling away, pushing him away.

I think I sounded winded, way more breathless than I should have been for such a short kiss and I quickly regretted the satisfied look that put in Brandon's eyes.

"Wait a minute," I insisted, feeling stupid for even suggesting it. But if only this had happened before. Maybe. I think... only if it had happened before maybe I never would have spoken to MiloTrust. Maybe. I didn't like what thinking about that did to my chest. Pressed it, strangled it, hurt it. "Brandon, I can't..." Because I'm not ready. "I don't think I want..."

"Your mom isn't coming down here anytime soon, right?" he suddenly asked, h

is gaze drifting to my lap as a secretive smile crossed his mouth. "I'll get you off."

Well, that was forward. I was suddenly on my feet, somewhere around the time his fingers were at the hem of my jeans, seeming as if the way I was suddenly standing in front of him was all the invitation they needed. I'd had dreams like this, too. Except, I hadn't felt so trapped, guilty for feeling even flattered.

Swallowing, my hands flew to cover his, my jaw feeling heavy as my eyes widened on him and I said the only thing that came to mind in a strange tone that didn't sound anything like me. "Before your date?"

Slowly, his eyes came up to meet mine, and he let go of me to move his hand over his face almost soothingly, like it had just been slapped. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, feeling like an idiot.

But still...

"Okay," he said carefully, his gaze growing accessing. I wanted to hide from it.

"I didn't mean it like that," I said quickly. Because in part I could totally understand what he could be thinking and why. It wasn't like he'd made any promises to me. One fucking kiss wasn't exactly a display of commitment, and I didn't expect him to confess his undying gayness and cancel his date or anything like that. Actually, I didn't want him to do anything like that at all. I found myself shaking my head, taking a few steps back because I didn't know how to be anywhere near him at the moment. Because there was someone else. Because I couldn't even think about how I felt about one of my biggest crushes or what he wanted with me while I was still waiting... wondering... while I was still with Milo. Milo, who could be laughing at me right now. No. He wouldn't. I could see his green eyes, the way thick, dark lashes cast shadows down his cheeks when he looked at me. I could hear the soft sigh he let out when I got close to him. That was real. If it wasn't, well then I might have to kill him. Milo. Because when I thought about him, the pressure weighing down on my chest, the churning, horrible knots that developed when I wondered if I'd ever see him again, those things were real.

They were real, and during the occasional overdramatic moment, I was pretty sure that they were killing me. That's what I wanted Brandon Sholer to know. "I can't..." I said, both to what I wanted to tell him and what he wanted to do with me. "It's really not you..." I paused at his disgusted snort, the roll of his eyes. Brandon Sholer, and I was offending the hell out of him. "Seriously, it's not," I said, feeling snappish when he stood. My tone got his attention.

"Hey, no worries, Nelson. I get it." He didn't sound like he was even trying to make that sound sincere. His smile was gone, his eyes were elsewhere.

"But you don't," I insisted, not sure why I was pushing this.

He sighed, regarded me warily as he tugged at his blond bangs. "I think.. . would you mind getting me home now?"

Longest, awkward ride ever. He looked dejected. I tried to think of ways to let him know I hadn't been trying to reject him, except then I realized that was exactly what I'd done. What I'd meant to do. If only he knew why... I opened my mouth, several times, wanting to tell him. Maybe it was stupid that I didn't, all because I could also see Milo's eyes, hurt and terrified of the truth I was helping him avoid.

Brandon Sholer had come to my rescue, confided something I doubted he'd ever mentioned to anyone else, threw himself at me and I'd let him walk away silently, leaving me to wonder if I could still consider him among my friends.

I wanted to hate Brandon Sholer. Just like I wanted to hate Milo Trust. I don't think I was capable of doing either, but it would have made things a hell of a lot easier.

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By Friday, Caleb was back in school, and I felt like I'd passed through the day like a zombie. I hadn't slept well the night before, and I couldn't count how many times I'd caught myself yawning through my classes while I ignored the knots in my stomach that told me I was different every time I looked over my classmates.

I wished that I could go back.

I wanted to stop feeling numb. I wanted to smile and mean it. When I walked out to the parking lot at lunch with Caleb I wanted Milo to be waiting, ready to spend the next hour with us talking about stupid things, eye me with an interest that was just between the two of us, even while Caleb went on and on about whatever was on his mind this week. I wanted...

My hand shook as I reached into my locker between the last two classes of the day, the folded slip of paper slipping carefully between my fingertips. I found myself shielding it with my body, eyes straining to see sentences made out for just me as I unfolded it in the privacy of my locker.

Nelson--I wanted...

"Hey, sorry. Got held up in my last class," Caleb said as he approached from behind. I was quick to slip the note into my pocket, turn around. Not quick enough to hide the look on my face. Caleb frowned at me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded slowly, tried to make enough eye contact to end his concern. "Just wanting the day to be over."

"We can skip if you want."

That did make me smile. "Can't. I still have too much catching up to do."

Caleb shrugged, walked with me when I closed my locker and headed to my next class. "We should do something this weekend. Get you out of the hou

se.”

I eyed him warily. “I don’t think crowds are a good idea.”

Caleb frowned. “Just think about it, okay?”

I gave him a nod, made no promises. The minute we reached my class and he headed off on his own, I turned around, headed to the nearest restroom and I locked myself in a stall. My fingers fumbled with the note as I pulled it out of my pocket, frowning at the way I’d left it crinkled, torn. I opened it, my eyes scanning black ink. Yeah. I wanted to hate Brandon because he’d slipped a note into my locker, and Milo because he hadn’t.

Nelson--I wanted to check up, make sure I didn’t weird you out or anything. I think I might have given you the wrong impression. Something about you brings the idiot out in me. Wouldn’t mind talking about it some time.

I let out a breath. Neither would I. But then, I didn’t know if I had it in me now to figure out Brandon Sholer. It’s not like I hadn’t been thinking about him. He’d kind of made it hard not to.

And then the note. I almost hadn’t come to school today, confused about Brandon. Confused about Milo. Brandon wanted to talk again.

He thought I got the wrong idea.

I knew he had.

I splashed water on my face, walked into my last class late. I’d been late a lot lately, should’ve known better by now and ignored the way everyone eyed me and the teacher dropped a slip of paper on my desk. Another invite to talk to a school counselor. Third one that week. I didn’t go. I didn’t want to go. If I did I was afraid of what I would say. Word salad. Crazy. Because I’m broken, and I can’t fix it... and it doesn’t just fit back together. It doesn’t. It doesn’t stick! How am I supposed to fix it, huh? How am I supposed to fix it if I don’t work anymore?

I felt frustrated, uncharacteristically sweaty as I walked out of class at the end of the day. I was gross. Caleb was with me by the time I walked outside, and it was hard to pay attention to what he was saying.

“... maybe a movie or something? I’ll call you tonight, unless you just want to come over and hang out, but I’ll have my niece for a few hours...”

My feet stopped moving. Caleb didn’t seem to notice. Perfect timing, I guess, the way a girl from his French class stopped to ask him something about an assignment. She was being too obvious. Caleb couldn’t speak a word of French. Give him five minutes or less, he’d ask her out. All obvious. Not like dark-haired boys who drove green Hondas with dents in the door.

It was parked against the curb and he was waiting, studying his fingers like he was bored when I knew better, knew he was vexed by a speck of paint beneath his nails that he couldn’t quite get to. He looked up when someone passed by his front window, reached across his car to unlock the door for Jam

e Graham. I watched silently, frozen as he started his car. And then it was like the first time I'd ever seen him as his head turned slowly, like he'd heard his name but couldn't quite tell what direction it was coming from. Green eyes stopped on me.

I took a step forward, small but steady, bracing myself for when he turned away, drove away. Told me everything I needed to know.

But this wasn't like the first time I met him because suddenly his hands were on his keys, they were leaving the ignition and his door was opening.

Milo stepped out of his car, paused long enough for Jame to suddenly catch up to him, pull him back when he saw what had Milo's attention. Me. That's right, Assface. And Milo shook him off. I wanted to go help. Another step forward, and the smile left my face.

He didn't know. Milo didn't know. He was there and he wanted to see me and he didn't know. But maybe I knew enough. Looking around I felt panic rising. Students everywhere. The gossip. Viciousness I was ready to feel the bite of behind smiles that were too deceivingly friendly. I'd promised Milo wouldn't have to feel that. Not like I did.

The buzzing that had been floating through my mind, the constant headache of it all stopped. I stopped, trying not to see the way his full mouth turned down when he realized what I was doing when I turned away from him. Walked away.

Back into the school, through the crowd. Away from him as Caleb followed, confused, and I made up a story about leaving something in my last class. I didn't look back. If I did, Milo wouldn't be there and it would hurt again, and I'd hate myself because this time, I was the one who'd caused it.

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"Nelson," Caleb said patiently. "I think it's safe to leave now."

"What?" I turned back, noticing he'd stopped in the hall just outside of the last classroom I'd checked for a notebook that technically didn't exist. Caleb had been following me around for at least the last fifteen minutes, and obviously he wasn't interested in doubling that time.

"Haily and Joe are waiting... and, I'm guessing Milo's gone by now." Before I had a chance to react to that, he turned on his heel, meaning to leave the almost-empty school and my wild-goose-chase behind.

Letting out a breath I found myself slowly following after him, my eyes stuck on the black backpack between his shoulder blades. "You saw Milo?" Caleb glanced back, slowed his steps until I caught up and then stared straight ahead. "I would've offered to get rid of him, but then I started thinking, doesn't make much sense for you to want me to... why didn't you talk to him?"

I frowned, still shaking over the moment I'd realized that coming face to face with Milo Trust again was possible. Happening. "Because if I did that her

e, he'd be as out as I am."

Caleb made a disgusted sound, not interested in hiding his disapproval over the situation. "So?"

"So," I snapped, suddenly growing irritated. "I..."

"You what?" Caleb demanded when I didn't continue.

I closed my eyes briefly, wishing myself calm. I felt like I was on the edge of something, some big emotional high that wanted to throw me into something hard and then crash down from above all at the same time. Relief, because Milo hadn't run away from me as fast as he could, didn't look at me like I was something to regret. Frustration, because Caleb had called me on my bullshit excuse for running away and downright hatred towards myself for giving up what could have been the only chance I'd ever get to speak to Milo again, regardless of my reasons.

"You wouldn't get it. You don't want to get it."

I was being short with him, and Caleb was quick to sound offended. "That's because you won't explain it to me."

"You said you didn't want me to," I retorted.

Caleb suddenly stopped walking and gave my shoulder a strong enough shove to send me back a few paces. "Don't do that!" he snapped. "I'm... trying, Nelson. I told you to give me time, not to fucking shut me out. So don't stand there and talk to me like it's my fault you're miserable. I get you're pissed off about everything going on, but maybe things wouldn't be happening like this if you'd just tell the truth!"

I felt my teeth grinding. "The truth is I promised him, Caleb. I'm the one who pushed him, and I promised that if he let me get close it wouldn't hurt him... will you-- just look at the people in this town! I've known all of the m... I grew up here, and now I can't even walk into church with my family and my mom comes back on Sundays pretending she hasn't been crying. I know what people are talking about, behind my back, and I hate that I can't walk through a crowd without checking to see who's there first because I don't want the wrong person to feel like I'm trying to piss them off by breathing the same air as they are. If I told the truth... if everyone knew, then he'd have to feel that, too. It would be everything I told him wouldn't happen."

"You like him." Caleb said it as if it were the first time the thought had ever occurred to him, and I couldn't help the bitter laugh that escaped me.

"Yes. You fucking moron, I like him."

Caleb narrowed his eyes on me, leaned in my direction. "Then stop taking it out on everyone around you and do something about it."

"Like what?" I demanded. "I can't talk to him when he shows up here because he has no idea what that would do to him. I can't call him, his number's disconnected. Probably because his dad walked in on us right after Jame did."

"Caleb's eyes widened appropriately because no one was supposed to know ab

out that particular detail except my family. "I fucked it all up, Caleb. Not even sure how I did it, but I fucked it up."

Caleb stared at me for so long without saying anything that I felt myself deflating, felt the loss creeping up again.

"Nels ... even if you did, what's gonna make you feel better now?" I met his eyes and his lopsided grin appeared over his cleft chin. "And what do you want me to do to help?"

Chapter 18: Back

by DomLuka

I was out of my fucking mind.

"You're out of your fucking mind," Caleb said.

I nodded in agreement as I glanced over at him where he sat behind the steering wheel of his jeep. He'd gotten out of his promise to babysit, took Joe and Haily home and shortly after met me at my house. Now we both looked up at the Trust house from where we were parked on the curb, and I found myself wishing for clouds to develop in the clear sky as if they could cradle my surroundings, offer some sort of protection.

"So, you'll call my parents if..."

"Let's focus on not getting arrested," Caleb suggested. "And if not... Ray's probably better at stuff like that."

"Right. But if they let me in..."

"I'll knock in five minutes to make sure no one's burying you in the basement."

I swallowed. "Neat." I took my eyes from the house, looked back at Caleb. "They're going to slam the door in my face, aren't they?"

Caleb gave a small shrug and looked kindly sympathetic. "Maybe he'll be the one who opens the door."

I looked at the cars in the driveway, feeling doubtful. Hell, even if Milo did answer the door there was no guarantee that he wouldn't slam it in my face after I'd walked away from him. I wanted to explain. And fuck Jame for not doing it. I'm sure it was possible that Milo had heard the rumors by now. But then, Stratfort was an entirely different crowd, and even if he had heard something there was no telling what Jame might have told him.

I took a deep, nervous breath. "Okay. I'm going now."

"Okay."

I didn't even reach to open the door.

"Caleb?" I asked quietly. "Do I look like I might cry?"

He reached over and twisted my nipple. Hard.

"Ouch!" I objected, swinging my fist roughly into his big arm.

Caleb laughed at me, grinned approvingly. "You look pissed."

I rolled my eyes at him as I rubbed soothingly at my chest. A small smile formed on my mouth as I worked up the nerve to leave the jeep, but faded qui

ckly as I opened the front gate enough to slip through and headed up the front walk.

It felt like it took me an unreasonable amount of time to choose between ringing the doorbell or knocking. Eventually I went with the doorbell. Not long after the front door was opening, and I refrained from the strong urge to take defensive steps back down the stairs.

Juanita's dark eyes took me in, widened slightly even as I tried to force a smile.

"Hi," I said, my voice suddenly ragged, as if I'd been screaming for hours. She cocked her head at me. "Hi," she repeated, her tone both expectant and worried.

"I want to see Milo." She'd at least understand that. "Please, Juanita. Could you please tell him I'm here? I need to see him."

She opened her mouth to speak, but then suddenly the door she was tucked cautiously behind was being pulled from her hands and she looked up the same way I did at the way Mr. Trust hovered, his eyes narrowing angrily on me.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, but didn't bother waiting for an answer as he looked down at Juanita. "Vas aseguradas que él está en su cuarto."

The lines between Juanita's eyes deepened as she let out a breath. "Esto no ayudará."

They glared at each other for a moment while I looked between them, and then took it upon myself to add, "Gracias." And I rolled my r. I didn't tell them where I'd learned to do that, though, as they both looked back at me until Juanita finally rolled her eyes and walked off.

I faced Mr. Trust's anger with disappointment. "So, she's probably not going to get him, is she?"

"You're not wanted here."

I held his eyes evenly, despite the way his intimidating glare had me wanting to look anywhere else. "Thank you." Big, scary, mean man. "But if you could ask Milo to come out here, I think I need to hear that from him."

Mr. Trust cocked his head, incredulous. I was slightly less intimidated by that look, having plenty of exposure to it from a younger version of him.

"You need to leave, or I'll be calling the police and they can make you leave."

"Tell my uncle I said hi." Oops. That slipped out. But at the moment I wasn't trying to be cocky. I was serious. Mr. Trust could do whatever he wanted. I just wanted to see Milo.

"You arrogant little shit," the man hissed, this time causing me to jump, step back. "You stay away from here, and you stay away from my son. I won't let you brainwash him into thinking he's something he's not."

That stung, but I found myself calling out anyway, before he could close the door. "I'm not the one who wants him to be something he's not." I was surprised how steady my voice sounded, that I seemed to have struck a nerve because while obviously perturbed, Mr. Trust paused long enough that I continued. "He thinks you hate him." Maybe that wasn't my business to say, but I couldn't seem to help myself. "I don't think that's true, because I don't know him, and I don't understand how anyone could. But maybe you don't know him." Mr. Trust opened his mouth, so I threw words out quickly. "I would never want to hurt him... You don't know me, but I think, for the most part, I'm not a bad person. I like Milo for who he is, not who I want him to be. I mean, I even like him when he's cranky and that has to count for something, right? You might love him because he's your son... but can you say the same thing?"

Despite the emotionless slate that had taken over Mr. Trust's face, there was no doubt about what he felt about me and what I had to say, in the way his glare pinned me as he closed the door. "Do not come back here again." I heard the lock, instinctively raised my hand to knock at the door, make him come back out here because obviously, I hadn't done enough to convince him to let me see Milo. It was Caleb's whistle that stopped me, had me hesitantly leaving the Trusts' doorstep, hoping that Milo would come through it before I reached Caleb's jeep; that he'd know when I'd walked away from him it wasn't because I'd wanted to. And I wondered how long it would take my Uncle Ray to get here, or if Mr. Trust would request Trujillo, because he stood a better chance of convincing that officer to shoot me.

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I had clammy hands. I never got clammy hands. I wiped them on my jeans, leaned back in the uncomfortable theater seat and stared at the screen, pretending the stench of hot popcorn and the way spilt soda on the floor was sticking to my shoes wasn't bothering me. That I wasn't ready to snatch the half-eaten bucket away from Caleb just so I could puke in it.

Feeling normal, sitting in a dark theater with my best friend had worked for at least the first half of the movie. It was one of those comedies that had little plot, but plenty of outrageous situations that normal people were supposed to laugh at.

I hadn't wanted to come, but Caleb was determined to end my life as a hermit. I guess, initially it wasn't as bad to get out as I'd thought it would be. Somewhere where I was guaranteed to run into people. But Caleb and I stuck to ourselves, sat in the back, and I tried not to pick out potential enemies in the crowd. And I tried to relax, forget. At least, I figured I owed Caleb that much.

It occurred to me that maybe I'd never given my best friend enough credit. I couldn't say that I would have told him all of my secrets had I not been fo

enced to, but I was beginning to realize I didn't have to regret him knowing.

Maybe he didn't like it--in fact, I know he didn't like it. He would have liked it if I liked girls, if we had two of them sitting through that movie with us, not odd stares that would likely result in rumors that would affect Caleb as soon as we got back to school on Monday. But then, that, I think, is where Caleb surprised me the most. He didn't seem to give a fuck. Or maybe he did, but wasn't interested in letting it show. He wasn't worried about being seen with me. And more importantly, he hadn't attempted to pick any fights over it. And I knew he wanted to, especially when one of the basketball players from our school and his girlfriend whispered cruel things behind our backs while we were waiting for tickets.

And he'd gone with me to Milo's house when I'd told him the only thing that would make me feel remotely better was to see him. Caleb didn't like that, either, but I guess the point was that he didn't have to, not to be my friend.

So I felt bad when my mind couldn't stay in the movie, couldn't return Caleb's whispered comments about it. But I couldn't help it, not when there was so much to think about. Like, what I'd do about getting face to face with Milo somewhere safer to say the things I wanted to say, or ask the questions that had been stacking up for weeks. And later, when I went home and found my Uncle Ray waiting for me with my parents, I wondered how much harder that particular task was about to get.

He asked to speak to me alone, and from the way my parents looked at me I knew they didn't know why he was there. In uniform. But once alone, I didn't flinch when he told me to stay the hell away from the Trusts. He wasn't pleased when I told him I didn't intend to make any promises.

"Nelson, this isn't a joke," he informed me where he stood in the living room, pacing in front of the chair I'd made myself comfortable in. "I promised Mr. Trust that I'd keep you away, and in return he's not going to request a restraining order." He looked at me pointedly. "That's not something I want to see you in court for."

I met his eyes evenly while considering what he was telling me. Finally, I responded with the first thing that came to mind. "Mr. Trust is a douche bag."

Uncle Ray looked aggravated and amused all at the same time as he tugged at his wiry, red beard. "You're not going to make my job any easier, are you?"

I gave a small shrug and tried my best to look apologetic. "It's nothing personal."

He let out an exasperated breath and seated himself on the sofa across from me. "Your parents talked to me a few weeks ago. Told me what was going on with you."

I nodded slowly, acknowledging that I'd guessed that on my own. But with Ray, it occurred to me that I didn't feel nervous. He was still there, talking to me like I was the same nephew he'd always had. What was there to be afraid of, anyway, after already facing everyone and everything else? Instead of commenting on it, I told him, "Milo wants to see me. Ask him. No one else will let me do it."

"Nelson... Milo has parents."

"A parent," I replied. "And he's a douche bag."

Uncle Ray shook his head, frustrated. "What can I do to help you let go of this?"

My eyes widened slightly, and I was surprised by how I took offense to the very idea as my eyes drifted to the painting on the wall, the one Milo had put his time into, something he was proud of and something he'd done for me.

"Let go of it?" I repeated. "I tried that when I lost the choice to say who I care about is no one's business but mine. Now I'm being told I can't be with the person who I want to be with. But why should I listen, if there's a chance he wants to be with me, too?"

His eyes crinkled at the corners, turning sympathetic. "You're so young."

I snorted at the excuse adults seemed to love using. "Maybe, but that doesn't mean the way I feel isn't real... and even if it isn't, I should get to figure that out. I don't want... I don't want to let it go."

He rubbed at his face, not seeming sure of what he wanted to argue next. "You know I have to tell your parents you went over there today, right? I'm going to have to tell them they need to keep you away."

"I figured."

"Nelson..." he paused, regarded me sternly for a long moment. "How about a compromise? Give me a chance to talk to Mr. Trust. Maybe I can convince him you're a good kid. I won't make any promises on how it'll all turn out, but in the meantime... do you think you can stay away? Give it a little distance?"

I pressed my lips, met his eyes. "Sure I could, Uncle Ray."

I'd like to point out that could and would are two completely different things, so I didn't consider myself a liar the next day when my parents visited Grannie Tenny and I declined so I could stalk out Milo's house again. And stalk is sort of a strong word, I think. More like I drove past it six times in an hour, hoping I'd catch him coming or going. Maybe it was a bad idea to begin with. Or maybe it was a good idea that led to a bad idea, when Jame Graham was dropped off by an older woman, and ten minutes later was leaving, alone, in Milo's borrowed car. It did cross my mind that following him was a bad idea. It did. I think maybe, I was just past caring about it anymore.

Gracie's Dancers.

I stared at the little pink building, Milo's car tucked into the parking lot. The building again. Jame walking into it, black duffle bag in hand.

Really?

Suddenly, following Assface didn't seem like a terrible idea at all. I sat in the parking lot for several minutes, mind moving in several directions before I decided there was no way I was waiting out here.

The building was familiar enough when I walked into a wide hallway equipped with lockers and chairs. There were older women and a couple of men packing up bags or stripping out of their street clothes, stuffing items into lockers, moving in and out of the rooms to both sides of the hallways. The rooms were visible through glass walls and lined with mirrors and various ballet dancers stretching against the wooden bars that wrapped each room.

I would have liked to see my own face when my eyes were drawn to Jame Graham, black unitard stretched over his long body, his leg stretched upwards and his toe perfectly pointed. Who. The. Fuck. Knew. I suddenly needed to sit down, and felt fortunate that there happened to be a chair directly behind me.

"Nelson?"

I was on my feet as quickly as I'd gone off them, turning to face Leanna as she walked towards me, covered head to toe in shiny pink fabric, her glasses replaced by contacts and her hair clipped to the top of her head.

"Is everything okay?" she asked. It wasn't often I visited her at work. I hugged her back when she neared me, shook my head and tried to force my expression to appear perfectly untroubled and normal.

"Yeah, I was just..." My eyes darted to Jame Graham, and then quickly back to Leanna. "I was... so, how are you and Chad doing?"

Leanna raised a thin eyebrow at that. "Fine... wait, did he say something?"

"No," I said quickly, feeling like an idiot. "I mean... he loves you, and don't tell him I said anything because I like living... and he really didn't say anything. Swear."

"Okay...and you're here because?"

I sighed, let my gaze drift pointedly through the glass to where Jame was now lined with several other students, his focus on the instructor. "He's why I'm here."

Leanna looked. "Oh, you know him?" she asked. "Great dancer."

"I know him." I replied, and Leanna frowned at my tone. "You know how every once in a while when I mention that kid, Assface?"

Leanna did a double take at Jame and then frowned at me. "That's the guy who outed you?" She sound indignant on my behalf, and I felt some satisfaction over that, but then her brow creased with worry. "Nelson, please tell me you're not getting yourself into trouble."

I looked back at Jame and made a face that resulted in her narrowing her

eyes on me and grabbing me by the shirtsleeve. Small as she was, Leanna meant business as she pulled me away from the windows towards the exit. "You have to go."

"Wait," I insisted, turning to look at her pleadingly as I lowered my voice. "Leanna, please. There are things I need to say to this guy. I don't know when else I'll be able to do it. I won't cause a scene in here, I promise. Please.. . just pretend you didn't see me."

Leanna regarded me warily, her grip on my sleeve slowly loosening. "I have a class to teach," she informed me, pointing into another classroom. "You can stay, but I'm watching you."

I smiled at her. "Thank you."

She was silent for a moment, and then curiously cocked her head at me. "Will it make things better, Nels? Talking to him?"

I shrugged. "I don't think it can make things worse."

She sighed, gave my shoulder a reassuring pat. "I'm coming to dinner with C had tonight. Tell me what happens if I don't catch you after class?"

I smiled at her. "Sure."

She left me then to venture towards the window where I looked in on Jame, half wishing he'd see me so he'd trip over one of the strange little twirls he was doing. Shaking my head, I seated myself and watched, and slowly came to resent the fact that Leanna was right. Jame Graham was good at this.

The class seemed advanced, and the instructor seemed to gravitate towards him as an example for others more than correcting him. He made things look easy that I didn't see myself pulling off, and something about that fact rubbed me the wrong way before I realized why. It was because for Jame Graham, this seemed entirely out of character, especially since at every school dance I'd ever spotted him at he came off as an uncoordinated moron. He stepped on toes, he bumped into other people, and then he'd laugh about it with them. Here he was... kinda graceful. Partnering wasn't a problem for him either, I noticed as he performed lifts with more than one girl in class.

Who knew? Milo, probably. But maybe not many others, and that made me realize that maybe it did all make sense. Maybe he pretended he couldn't dance because he cared about what people thought. He was the kind of person who'd changed his name for the sake of being different, but wanted to fit in so badly that he pretended he was a terrible dancer so no one would suspect he was a ballerina. Ballarino? Whatever. Jame Graham had toe shoes. And he knew how to use them. Regardless of how much it irked me, the more I watched him the more I respected what he could do. This was something that defined him. Made him a little bit different than most of the guys

I knew, and he wanted to hide it.

In an odd way, it had me thinking that we had something in common. So it pissed me off that much more, that he'd done what he'd done. And there was

no question about it, either. It was Jame. The rumors. Everything. It couldn't have been anyone else. And I couldn't understand it.

I knew he hated me. But he didn't hate Milo... so why? And what the hell was his deal, anyway? It had crossed my mind before now that he'd known what he'd find that morning. My car would have been easy enough to spot, and if Milo had skipped out on him to spend time with me, well I could understand the confrontation. I could even understand him wanting to catch us, because it was obvious he'd had his suspicions. The fact that Emily got sick on their trip and Mr. Trust was around to witness my downfall, too, well I'd dismissed that as an unfortunate coincidence; but still, if Jame cared about Milo as much as he seemed to think he did, as much as Milo thought he did, then why no warning? There were probably still things that Jame knew about Milo that I didn't, just like Milo likely knew about Jame's dancing thing... so he'd know. Jame would know how Mr. Trust would react to all of this. He'd know that Milo was already miserable at home, know that my involvement could make things worse for him. If he'd wanted to hurt me then his methods had worked. But they hurt Milo, too. If he cared about Milo, then why the hell would he do anything to make things worse for him?

I found myself straightening a little an hour later as class let out, my composure breaking as Jame Graham walked through the doors, chatting up two girls following behind him, my anger over everything becoming more difficult to control. But I remained where I was, knowing the moment he noticed me because of the way he went red in the face, and it had nothing to do with being winded from his class.

This wasn't like at school; suddenly I was the last place he wanted to look, and having turned the tables brought me a sense of... well, decidedly, I think it was peace I was feeling. And maybe, a great deal of fuck-you-Jame-the-Assface-Graham, too. Dick. And it got better. So much so that I found myself barely suppressing the same kind of smug smile he'd been throwing at me for fucking weeks, when I realized that I'd seated myself close enough to the locker he was using that he couldn't avoid me, his posture suddenly becoming cramped, as if he wanted to shrink out of the skintight ensemble, hide the fact that the black fabric covering him left little to the imagination. And toe shoes. Remember the toe shoes.

And the sad thing was, I didn't even want to make fun of him for it. If I had more respect for him, which I didn't for obvious reasons, I may have even told him how... well, how fucking amazing he could be. Flexible. Long. Steady. I found myself eyeing him, fantasizing about what Milo would look like in the same clothes, pulling the same moves... coming from me that was a fucking compliment where Jame Graham was concerned, so take it or leave it, okay? Assface had every ounce of discomfort I was currently inflicting coming to him. He saw it, too, because as he hastily dragged his jeans out of

his locker and pulled them on he cut his eyes hostilely in my direction. Hostile, wary, downright paranoid. It was as if he fully expected me to have our entire school hiding behind me, ready to chime in on his secret hobby. And then my laughter slipped out. Not because I was making fun of him. Humorous laughter that bubbled and slipped as I moved my arms wide, gesturing at our surroundings. "All this," I remarked. "I can't keep it a secret what I do when I'm naked, and you keep all this a secret."

"Fuck off, pervert," he hissed.

Smile disappearing, I couldn't help the way I stood, crowded him at his locker. His eyes darted over the crowd, his classmates. He didn't want to make a scene any more than Leanna wanted me to. Somehow, that made it easier. "Pervert?" I spat. I was so sick of that word. "Does Milo think I'm a pervert?"

His eyes cut to mine, dark and furious as he shook out a t-shirt but avoided pulling it over his head, as if it would have the same effect as him turning his back on me would. "What do you want?" he demanded.

I crossed my arms, leaned my shoulder against the lockers, effectively closing his with it, preventing him from reaching into it again. Escaping. He noticed it and his frown deepened. "What do I want?" I repeated, and then suddenly grew passive, serious. Just not pleading. The last time we'd met like this all I could do was beg. I wasn't going to give him that again. "I want to know why you had him picking you up from school when he doesn't have a fucking clue, does he? Why would you do that to him?"

Jame looked uncomfortable. More than a little offended, and even more defensive. "Don't you fucking dare. If you'd just stayed away..."

"He didn't want me to stay away," I cut him off, and noticed the way his eyes narrowed in response. "And you knew that," I added carefully. "Didn't you?"

Jame turned towards me, shoulders growing stiff. "He doesn't know you."

"You don't know me," I corrected. "And turns out, you're so fucking self-absorbed that you can't even figure out when you're hurting him. So tell me something, fuck-head. Do you actually give a damn about Milo, or do you just think getting close to him makes you normal? There's a reason why people don't like you, Jame. And know what? I think if I've ever said that before..

. I didn't really mean it until now. Did it ever fucking occur to you that starting shit with me would hurt him?"

Jame took a quick glance around, so I didn't expect it when he suddenly shoved me off his locker, opened it, and tore his belongings out before I could close it again. Deodorant and a little white comb fell from his duffle bag onto the floor and he quickly moved to retrieve them.

"You got exactly what you were asking for," he informed me, his voice raising enough to draw attention. He noticed the looks as much as I did, took

a moment, and dropped into a whisper again. “You’re such an asshole. You got what you deserved, Larmont. I just made sure it happened to you before you could do it to Milo.”

Shaken, furious over those words, I hardly had time to realize I was reaching for Jame, my hand gripping his shoulder the way I wanted to wrap it around his neck, and I pulled him up to his feet, turned him and pressed him against the locker in the most subdued way possible. “You stupid piece of shit.” I was so in his face that I could smell the strawberry milkshake he’d had for lunch, but what was worse was the burning in the bridge of my nose, the wetness behind my eyes. “Stop lying. You read what I had to say to him. I’m not the one who’d do that to him. You--you’re the one. What did you think saying shit like that about me would do to him? Does he even know? What have you been telling him, huh?”

Furious, Jame pushed away from my hand, meaning to get off the lockers but I found myself pushing him back, his back slamming against metal. “Back off,” he warned.

“What I can’t figure out,” I said, “is if you did it because you don’t give a fuck about him as long as everyone thinks you’re as cool as he is, or if you did it because you care as long as you’re the only one he cares about... do you wanna kiss him, Jame? Does he miss me, huh? Are you the one that gets to make it all better?”

He shoved me, hard enough that I almost ended up against the glass window behind me as I watched his face contort in disgusted rage. I was pushing, I knew, but I was so tired. Fuck the high road. Fuck being patient. I wanted my life back. Milo, too, and at the moment I was looking at Jame Graham, and somehow he became the one thing standing between me and both of those things.

“You’re fucking twisted!” Jame snapped. “Stay the hell away from me.”

“Then make it right!” I retorted. “Not for me. Make it right for him and tell him exactly what you did.”

“Nelson!”

I jumped at the sound of Leanna’s voice. Gentle, even while sounding stern, I couldn’t help but look to where she was standing in the hall, her eyes wide on me, and then at the rest of my surroundings. Okay. So much for not making a scene. It appeared she had to leave her class. There were people standing in the halls, at the classroom doors, eyes turned silently in my direction.

I met Leanna’s eyes. I’m sorry. But I couldn’t get the words out, my scorn sliding back in Jame Graham’s direction, my voice tearing from my throat in a strange, painful whisper. “You fuck. Make it right.”

Leanna moved towards me, but I didn’t let her get close as I turned and fled the studio. Not because I was afraid, but because suddenly I understood how

Caleb felt all those times I was pulling him off someone. Except I was sober. Sinking. I felt out of control as I practically ran through the parking lot and snatched my car door open, dropping myself unceremoniously into the driver's seat before staring blankly at the blinding glare against the windshield.

Perv.

Faggot.

Shitlicker, even. Who'd said that? Right. Theresa Milldrum had no doubt heard one of her syphilis-providers mention the word, and of course from there it became part of her favorite vocabulary.

Ugly words. Ugly people. It gave me the warm-fuzzies, picturing Jame Graham buried beneath all of them. If I was losing it, whatever. Didn't feel like it was the first time through all of this.

I held up my hand, watched silently at the way it shook. I couldn't even feel it anymore. I wondered when it would happen--when I'd wake up and not feel anything. I felt something hot and wet rolling down my face, reached up and caught it with my stupid, shaky hand. I resented tears. I waved my hand away, as if to send the warm droplet elsewhere. Away from me.

I let out a breath, choked on it. Asked myself when I'd stopped breathing, if I sealed it in every time air reached my lungs. I couldn't breathe.

But then there was the notebook on the floor beneath my passenger seat. I stared at the yellow cover, labeled from last semester's physics class. The corners were bent, edges of papers frayed. Footprints even, from everyone sitting in the front seat of my car.

I reached for the glove department first, found a pen. Then the notebook. I flipped for a blank sheet of paper and I wrote. My eyes slid from the dance studio to paper and I was opening the door of my car before I was even finished, my eyes scanning for where Jame had left Milo's car.

I went to it, slid my fingers over the hood as I peered through the windows. Driver's door locked. Passenger door wasn't. I pulled it open, dropped myself in the seat and for a moment inhaled what I hoped was Milo as I looked over the interior, cursing him for being more responsible than I was when it came to keeping the inside clean. Nervously, I glanced back at the studio, worried I was running out of time and finally pulled open the glove compartment. No fucking telling when he'd look in there, I thought as I tore my scribbled-on sheet of paper from the notebook, shoved it in. But Jame wouldn't. And who knew... maybe I could get Uncle Ray to pull Milo over or something...

I shook my head at the idea, but left it regardless. Maybe it would be my only way to get to him. Maybe it was all I could do.

For now.

I didn't know when Jame came out of the studio. I didn't know when anyone

did. Milo's door was closed, and I was gone long before then.

.....

I think I was a little in love with my brother's girlfriend. Seriously, if I swung that way there was a good chance Chad would have some serious competition. He showed up with Leanna for dinner on Saturday night, just as she'd said they would, but she didn't mention a thing to my parents, or Chad for all I knew, as they all seemed relaxed and happy to have all of us around the table. But that didn't mean she was going to leave the situation alone. The nervous glances she sent in my direction all through dinner told me that Leanna definitely had other ideas about that, and I had a feeling I'd be visiting with her well before she and Chad took off for the evening.

I had no objections. In fact, now that I'd had the chance to cool down and shower two times more than necessary, I figured I owed her an explanation, anyway. I imagined she wasn't pleased at all when Caleb came knocking on the door just as we were finishing dessert and she realized she probably wouldn't be getting one--tonight, anyway.

His arrival was a surprise. He'd told me earlier on he was going to a party, one I refused to show my face at. When I asked him what he was doing there he'd explained that he'd gotten bored and that was that. He came in, sat with us for a while.

I think one of the reasons why my parents loved Caleb was that he never turned down a free meal, and regardless of the fact I knew he'd probably eaten already he made my mom feel like her cooking was the best thing that had happened to him all day as he joked with Chad and my father, told Leanna her new glasses looked cute. But then that might have been a mistake because Chad hadn't exactly noticed them yet and Leanna made it apparent my brother would be catching hell for that for the rest of the evening.

"Do you want more pie, Caleb?" my mom asked.

He'd been sitting with us for over an hour and was the only one who had a plate left.

"That would be awesome," he replied, grinning and thanking my mom as she cleared her glass pie pan, dropping the last piece onto his plate. I think he had his fork in it before she was finished, and I found myself rolling my eyes at him as my parents excused themselves to go to the living room, where Chad and Leanna were already putting on a movie, despite how late it had gotten.

"You spending the night?" I asked Caleb when we were alone.

"Nope," he said before shoveling more apple and dough into his mouth. "We're going out."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "If you knew what kind of psychopath I've been today, you wouldn't be encouraging me."

Caleb frowned. "What do you mean? What happened?"

I forced a smile, shrugged his question off. If I told him, we'd be hunting down Jame Graham all night long. "Never mind. Where did you want to go?"

"To meet Haily," he replied, once again focusing on his pie before he eyed me almost cautiously.

"Where?"

He cleaned his plate, and when he stood to rinse it in the sink I found myself following him. "What time is it?" he asked.

I glanced at the clock. "Almost ten."

"Yeah. Okay." He turned, regarded me seriously. "So what would you say to your parents if we needed to talk about something serious and didn't want them coming down to your room for a while?"

My brow flew up. "What?"

Caleb shook his head as he reached for my shoulder, suddenly pushing me towards the living room. "Never mind. Think of something. Hurry up, okay?"

I found myself frowning, nerves working themselves through my gut. Something serious? Things had felt almost normal when it came to Caleb, and it was hard not to worry about what was on his mind as I regarded him suspiciously, allowing him to guide me closer to my parents nonetheless. "Is there something wrong?" I demanded. "If there is, just say it, okay? I'm tired of the guessing games."

He had the nerve to look irritated. "Just, tell them something."

Suddenly on edge I made my way into the living room, trying hard not to glance back at Caleb, who was keeping his distance but watching me intently while I tried to come up with a list of things that were unsettled between us. I didn't like the idea of having to talk about something serious. Not now. Not today. My day had been shit.

But still, when my parents asked when we could start the movie I found myself telling them that I needed to talk to Caleb for a while. Made it sound as serious as he'd indicated. My parents looked optimistic while Chad looked curious and Leanna was still eyeing me with concern, probably wanting to volunteer to sit and moderate whatever it was. She hadn't exactly seen the best side of me today.

Caleb was still waiting in the kitchen and wasted no time in leading the way to my room.

"Caleb... I thought we were supposed to meet Haily."

"We are," he replied as he moved down the stairs ahead of me. "That's what I wanted to talk about."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is it because of Joe? Because look, I get he doesn't want anything to do with me. Just say it. It's not going to hurt my feelings."

Much.

Caleb frowned back at me as we reached my room and he flipped on the light.

“Joe’s not talking to any of us, so I wouldn’t worry about him... look, I talked to Haily about yesterday.”

“Yesterday?”

“You know,” he said, shrugging. “How you’re supposed to be pulling your head out of your ass.”

“Caleb--”

“Don’t tell her, but she’s a bitch. And she wants you to know you’re an idiot for asking me for help with anything.”

“What?”

He was across my room, staring up at my window as he pulled the string for the blinds, sending them upwards. “I’m letting her get away with it for now because she probably has a point.” He paused, shook his head as he looked up at his own reflection in the glass while he reached to unlock the latch.

“I’m never going to fit through here.”

I was already next to him. “Why would you have to fit through there? We have a door.” It was like a familiar sixth sense, the moment it occurred to me

I’d just ended up trapped in one of Caleb’s schemes, or Haily’s by the sound of it. I was more worried than excited about it. “Caleb, why aren’t we using the door?”

“How do you open this thing?” he asked as he stretched in an attempt to get the glass to rise.

Despite my reluctance, I pushed past him, jiggled the frame in the way only I knew how and shoved it upwards.

Caleb looked at me in approval, and then he was suddenly shoving my screen into the window well.

“Hey! My parents are going to notice that!”

“Will you be quiet!” Haily’s voice suddenly hissed around the same time feet appeared just outside the window, only slightly visible from the light in my room.

“What the...”

Haily was suddenly crouching, her head tilted to look in on us. She looked over the room and then smiled at me. “Hi, Nels. I’m your favorite, right? Because I should be.”

“Will you guys hurry up?” a muffled voice came from outside.

“Who’s that?” I demanded. “Joe?”

“Jerry,” Haily replied before looking at Caleb pointedly. “Ready?”

Caleb released a sigh that suggested he wasn’t entirely enthused, but ready nonetheless, and before I could ask any more questions, he was lifting himself up the wall, twisting his body the best he could to fit through my bedroom window.

“Why are we going out the window?” I asked again.

Haily peeked around Caleb's broad frame, pulling at him as if she stood a chance in hell of supporting any of his weight. "Not we, him," she told me. "I didn't have a chance to tell him," I heard Caleb whisper.

Haily flicked his ear with her fingertips, and since he was in no position to fend her off, he settled for releasing a string of cusses that blocked out everyone's voices. But then Caleb's feet disappeared through the window, and I was feeling both annoyed and curious enough to follow him out of it.

But the moment his feet were gone two more replaced them, followed by jean-covered calves that had me stepping back so I wouldn't get kicked.

"You guys!" I hissed, taking a quick glance back at my bedroom door, which was still cracked open. I could only imagine what anyone in my family would have to say about all of this.

But by the time I turned back the feet had turned into a body, and I found my eyes widening on a long, lithe form with paint stains on an old t-shirt tucked under a dark jacket, and stepped back, just before Milo Trust landed on my bedroom floor, the cap that I assumed had been on his head hitting it just after he did.

I watched him pick it up before he ever even looked at me, folding the material in his hands, knuckles white against it as his green eyes darted over his surroundings as if he hadn't yet figured out how he'd come to be there. I looked over his messed hair, the way his jeans were stuck inside of one shoe from his struggle with the window, and finally settled my gaze over the dark purple bruise that blemished the arc of his left cheekbone as his eyes finally settled in my direction, his lips parted as if they hadn't quite released all the air he'd been holding in his lungs. I hardly had time to take notice of Caleb as he pushed the window down as best as he could from outside before he and Haily disappeared altogether.

For a moment all I could do was stare before a reaction hit me and I found myself turning, trying my best not to slam my door as I fumbled with the lock, suddenly understanding Caleb's emphases on needing privacy. When I turned back Milo seemed to be working on composing himself, his nervous gaze more steady in my direction. He looked pale, but it could have been the bruise against his complexion. Nervous. Terrified. Trapped.

Holy fuck.

"Did they kidnap you?" I was looking for explanations, I guess, and that was the first that came to mind.

It led to a break in Milo's shock. He made a sound. Half laugh, half something else. "No," he whispered.

I took a few tentative steps in his direction, paused and reached out, not really knowing what I was doing, just knowing that I didn't want him looking like that. Scared. Hurt. It was the way he lifted his hand, let the tips of his fingers brush my wrist that urged me on as I moved closer, brought my wa

rm hand to his cold face while my thumb carefully brushed over the bruise there.

“What the hell?” I demanded, feeling horrified, shaky as he closed his eyes, leaned into me. “What happened to you? Did your dad do this?”

He released a short laugh, eyes cracking enough to show me green. “He doesn’t have time to hit me.”

“Milo--”

I was cut off as he leaned into me and I moved my arms around him, my cheek drawn to his even as he moved to rest his chin tiredly against my shoulder. “I didn’t think you’d want to see me,” he whispered. “Even after I heard you...” he paused, suddenly pulled back and glared at me in a way that was all him. “I can’t believe you said those things to my dad. Are you out of your mind? Do you ever think?”

My eyes widened. “You heard me?”

I found myself staring at him, not missing a thing as his gaze drifted back towards my window, his body shaking with a silent tremble that had me moving away from him long enough to close the blinds before I moved back, slid my fingers under his jacket and pushed it off his shoulders. He shook out of it, didn’t seem to care as it landed on my floor and allowed me to take his hand and guide him towards my bed where we seated ourselves and I drew him against my side. “I only did it because...” I started. “I wanted...”

He was regarding me intently, but somehow didn’t seem very focused on my words. Maybe less than I was, and the moment his gaze dropped to my mouth

I leaned into him, covering his lips with mine. I felt him open and for a while the only thing I was interested in was exploring his mouth with my tongue as he sighed and his fingers warmed where they were laced through mine.

I slid my hand down his side, my fingers digging just below his ribs, holding on as if I worried over something tearing him away from me. He leaned in to me only to wince and pull back as his bruise brushed too roughly against my cheek and as our mouths parted I lifted careful fingers to it again, frowning over its presence even as his eyes slid back towards the window. “They said they’d be back in twenty minutes,” Milo whispered.

“What happened to you?” I asked, not wanting to think about what he was saying. Not wanting to wonder how much time I had left because now that he was there, I didn’t want to keep track. If he asked me to I’d lock everyone out, fuck the consequences.

I watched his mouth turn up in one corner, his lazy smile making me want to imitate it, kiss him again.

“Jerry,” he said as he pressed his palm against his sore face.

My eyes narrowed at that, suspicions rising. “Does he know...”

“He knows everything,” Milo explained, not looking as nearly as bothered as

I was as he met my eyes and lifted his fingers to tug at my blond bangs. “Haily has a big mouth.”

My eyes widened on that, and suddenly I found myself growing angry. Milo noticed, shook his head at me and pointed to his face.

“Jerry did this for you,” Milo said wryly. “Or her, maybe. I think he was trying to impress her, since I, apparently, hurt one of her friends.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Milo, you didn’t...”

“It didn’t work,” he continued. “She got pretty mad at him.” He paused, met my eyes evenly. “She told me what happened.”

I nodded slowly, trying to hide my sudden apprehension over that. “No one knows about you,” I said, wanting to reassure him. “I swear, I haven’t said anything about you. I didn’t even tell Haily, but she...”

He made another strange little sound, another bitter little laugh. “No one should have known about you. Fuck, Nelson. You were supposed to leave, let things cool down with my dad... I heard you were out a few days later and I thought you did it. Jame said...”

“What did Jame say?” I said shortly, my tone rougher than I meant it to be.

Milo let out a breath. “I thought you decided to do it yourself, because he saw you. I wasn’t upset, Nelson.” He shrugged helplessly. “I thought you’d blame me for it. I’m the one who asked you to stay. I thought we were safe. I’m sorry...”

I don’t think he understood it when a short laugh escaped me as I pressed my forehead carefully to his, mindful to stay away from the hurt part of his face as my mouth moved to kiss away his frown.

Idiot. That’s what came to mind, but I had no idea which one of us I was referring to. I’d been so worried about whether or not he’d ever want anything to do with me again that I hadn’t considered much when it came to how he was doing with everything. Figuring out that he’d probably been struggling at home was the easy part. I guess it had never occurred to me that Milo was willing to take blame for our current predicament as much as I was. It replaced my burden with something else, something touching, relieving, but uncertain, too as I worried over how much time we had, knowing it wouldn’t be enough to talk about all the things we needed to talk about.

“I’ll tell them to go when they come back,” I whispered against his mouth. “Don’t leave.”

Milo pulled back, his concern too apparent to miss. “I’m not supposed to be here. Your parents...”

“My parents like you,” I insisted.

“But I’m still not supposed to be here,” Milo said, and I couldn’t exactly disagree with him. After the latest visit with Ray, my mom or even my dad would feel obligated to let Mr. Trust know where his son was.

“Where are you supposed to be?” I asked him.

“Jerry’s. My dad made sure first. Jerry will cover for me, but I can’t stay here.”

I reluctantly nodded my agreement. “Then we’ll go somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know... just, give me some time, okay? Don’t leave.” Don’t leave.

Milo nodded slowly, closed his eyes as I moved my mouth back over his. I just needed more time with him. I needed Caleb to walk out the front door with me first, so I could have it. And then we’d figure it out, because saying goodbye to Milo Trust wasn’t on my list of options tonight.

Chapter 19: Mr. Fix-it

by DomLuka

A/N thanks to Jim for editing!

thanks to Mary for the advice & to Linxe Turmoil for seeing things I didn't & helping me get un-stuck.

I knocked at the apartment door for the third time, placed my ear against the surface for a moment, and then finally felt confident enough to slide my hand over the doorframe. My fingers touched a small silver key which I quickly used to unlock the door. I let it swing open and looked back at Milo’s shadow as he shifted from foot to foot, his cap low over his face. I held a hand back to him, the tips of his fingers hesitantly reaching to touch mine. “Come on,” I insisted, not sure why I was whispering.

“Are you sure this is okay?” he asked.

I closed my hand more firmly over his and pulled him along behind me through the front door so I could close it. The light in the hallway was the only one in my brother’s apartment turned on, and as I locked the door I watched as Milo regarded the place curiously.

“My brother only has one roommate,” I explained, “and if either one of them came home they wouldn’t say anything.”

Milo gave a short nod as he released my hand and slowly moved towards the white sofa where he seated himself quietly. I followed after him, a little surprised that he wasn’t arguing over how we should be somewhere that we didn’t risk people walking in at all. But then, he hadn’t argued that he had to go back to Jerry’s, where he was supposed to be, either. I went to the kitchen first, borrowing two cans of soda from my brother’s refrigerator before I joined him, seating myself almost a foot away as I offered him one of the drinks.

Milo’s hand covered mine as he moved to take the offering, his body shifting until we touched thigh to knee. I felt a smile tugging the corners of my mouth upwards, despite his unsettled expression as he hid beneath his hat, the bruised part of his face turned away from me. He hadn’t wanted me looking at it since I’d made a comment about how I’d like to let Jerry know how I felt.

It about it and Milo had begged me not to because his friend felt bad enough. Jerry, apparently wasn't usually much of a fighter, but he hadn't been pleased to think Milo would be so low as to play a part in destroying someone else. Me. But then, I'm sure Haily was to blame for the situation just as much. But that seemed to be before she finally realized that I wasn't the only victim in all of this. And Milo had a point: there was no use in being angry over any of it now since they were helping us.

Actually, in some ways I was blown away by just how much. Caleb hadn't flinched when he lent me his jeep, and he'd left with Haily and Jerry in Jerry's van. They'd all looked rather pleased with themselves in the process. I would be an idiot to complain about any of it, given the outcome.

I lifted my hand to carefully pluck the hat from Milo's head, watching the way his eyes drifted closed as he self-consciously raised a hand to smooth over his dark hair.

"Being here's okay with you?" I asked quietly, my nervousness finally catching up to me. He opened his eyes, turned the glint of emerald in my direction. "If you want we can still go anywhere else."

Milo slid his hand into mine. "Here's good."

I nodded slowly, my eyes drifting over the lines of his face, dropping affectionately over his mouth before forcing them back towards his eyes where I felt I should be focused as I regarded him pointedly. "How bad is it?"

Milo's brow drew together as he allowed his gaze to drift towards our hands, but he didn't pretend he didn't know what I meant.

"My dad called it acting out. He thinks you are acting out." Milo made a face. "I don't even know how many fucking degrees he has and the word gay doesn't exist in his vocabulary."

"So you tried to talk to him?"

Milo met my eyes, suddenly seeming disappointed that I'd even ask. "When you left I didn't want it to be forever."

"I didn't want to leave in the first place," I couldn't help letting out. I think that was still the moment I regretted the most, leaving when he asked me to, forcing myself to wonder.

Milo sat up, his back lifting away from the sofa to better face me. "I told him that... that we were..." His brow crinkled, his mouth turning down. "I couldn't have done that with you there. It would have made it worse--and you shouldn't have talked to him, Nelson. I mean... really? Why would you...."

"Because I couldn't think of anything else," I said quietly. "I couldn't let you talk to me at school. Can't call you. Shit. My mom couldn't even get Emily to call her back. All I did was wonder..."

"Emily's gone."

My eyes widened, and I found my hand tightening slightly over his. "What happened?"

Milo bit at the inside of his top lip. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "My dad thinks... well, I'm acting out, right? I think he figures Emily couldn't handle it... but maybe she couldn't handle us screaming at each other. I dunno."

I found myself sliding closer to him, my fingers drifting to massage at the back of his neck as I looked over him worriedly, knowing that regardless of what he claimed to know or not know, the idea of his dad holding one more thing against him, like Emily, was probably weighing on him. "It's not your fault."

Milo rubbed the back of his hand over the tip of his nose, looked away from me briefly as he took in a breath. "Anyway, she's gone, so now all he has to do with his time is... me. Unless he's working, and he's been working from home since... he's smothering me, Nels. And nothing I do is good enough, and I don't even want to try anymore. I told him everything, and he can't even accept me. He's not going to accept you... telling him he has to isn't going to help anything." He shrugged helplessly. "I'm stuck."

"So what do we do about it?"

His face fell blank, as if he didn't even know where to begin with that question.

I sighed. Me neither. But then, it wasn't fun hearing that your boyfriend's dad would never, ever want anything to do with you... and would never want his son to have anything to do with you. Maybe Milo was right. Telling the man he'd just have to deal with it probably wasn't a good idea, but somehow remaining passive felt wrong. The way Milo suddenly pulled his hand from mine, drawing my attention, felt wrong.

"You don't need this," he said. "You don't need any of it, and you shouldn't want it. Your family doesn't care about what you are or who you want to be..."

"Stop," I hushed him, taking back his hand, nodding approvingly when he didn't hesitate to wrap his fingers around mine. "I know I'm lucky, Milo. And what I am, being gay's only one part of it. Hasn't felt like that lately, but that's how I see things. Maybe your dad just needs time to figure that out with you. And don't tell me what I do or don't want... you don't even know what it felt like to see you tonight. I'm hoping it's not just so you can say goodbye." But, one glance at Milo and I knew that was exactly what he was thinking about. "Wow. Is that what you're thinking?"

Suddenly, I couldn't quite meet his eyes, either, even as he drew my hand into his lap. "Look... I know what things have been like for you. Haily told me. You're going through it and I feel like it's my fault. I don't want to hurt you anymore."

"You didn't do it, Jame did it," I informed him, not bothering to beat around the bush. His eyes narrowed the same way they always did when I mentioned

d Jame, but this time there was something like reserved guilt behind them, too. "Or maybe we did it," I said quietly. "But mostly Jame... and don't feel guilty because I'm the one going through it. I don't want you going through it with me if it means I never see you again. So I'm here, okay?" I forced myself to meet his eyes. "But you've gotta tell me if you are, too."

Because this was when I was supposed to stop wondering. And I knew in some ways, wanting to keep seeing each other was a lot to ask for. Milo was just more prepared to mention it than I was. Knowing what was going on at home for him made it seem that much more impossible. Telling his dad he had feelings for me was one thing, telling everyone else was another that could potentially end us all together, given his family's opinion on the matter. And that meant Milo couldn't come out. Accomplishing that while being with me... well, it made me feel like I wouldn't be seeing any more of him than I had over the last weeks. But at the moment, I didn't care about that. I just wanted to know what he was thinking. I wanted to know I hadn't lost him on top of everything else.

"I want to try," he finally said, but still unable to keep the doubt from his voice despite the way his fingers wrapped around mine in a way that suggested he didn't doubt anything at all.

"Then that's what we'll..." my eyes fell closed, my mouth interrupted when his lips landed on it. His lips teased until I parted mine, touching his tongue as I curled my fingers in his jacket and let myself fall back on the sofa, pulling him with me and letting his weight soothe away new worries. And because I had a lot of kissing him to make up for.

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I slid my hand further up Milo's back where it was tucked away beneath his jacket and held him more securely over the steady rise and fall of my chest. My eyes, comfortably closed, I sighed against the way his warm breath tickled my neck where his face was rested. He snuggled in deeper when a cool rush of cool air entered the room, the sound of the front door quietly opening and closing around it.

There was a decidedly feminine gasp, and then some fawning with Leanna's happy little, "Aww."

"Oh, hell," Chad's voice complained, and then, "Don't get too close, babe."

Nelson brags too much when he figures out he has a reason to and the other one's kind of jumpy."

Against my better judgment, I let my sleepy eyes open a crack to glare at my brother and his girlfriend where they were staring down at us from behind the sofa.

Chad looked unimpressed. "You're determined to drag me into trouble with you, aren't you?" he remarked, despite the smirk on his face.

Leanna elbowed him and tilted her head, smiling down at Milo while Chad

shook his head at me and gave a sharp, pointed nod that suggested he wanted me to follow him when he led Leanna away from the couch.

“Pack you a bag?” I heard her ask my brother.

“Might as well.”

I closed my eyes for another moment, opened them again and then delicately shifted myself out from underneath Milo, giving his hand a silent squeeze when it suddenly latched onto me. He settled against the couch cushions as I left it. I glanced down at him and his eyes cracked open just enough to tell me he was awake before he drew his arms over them, never failing to hide when an opportunity presented itself.

I smiled down at him, and quietly moved to where Chad and Leanna stood just inside the hallway, rolling my eyes at the way my brother whispered in her ear just to nibble on it, and made a mental note to borrow that particular move. But as soon as his eyes slid in my direction the playful look on

Chad’s pierced face looked serious as he regarded Leanna, meaning to dismiss her. But being Leanna, she waited until I was close enough and asked.

“Can I stop worrying? You didn’t seem very happy this afternoon, Nels.”

I smiled at her. “I’m better.”

Chad frowned at us. “What?”

“Never mind,” Leanna and I both replied, and she reached up to tweak my nose before heading towards Chad’s room, probably to pack the bag he’d requested so they could head to her place for the night, leaving my brother to stare at me curiously.

“We’re not staying,” I told him.

“And where, exactly, are you going?”

I shrugged, then sighed at the suspicious look on his face. “I’m not going to do anything stupid,” I insisted. “Just... please pretend you never saw us.”

Chad nodded slowly, his eyes moving towards the sofa. “Okay... did he already do something stupid?”

“Like what?” I asked, my voice lowering.

“You’re not going to convince me his dad knows he’s here.”

“No, he doesn’t,” I said, beginning to feel a little defensive. I didn’t like his line of questioning, especially if it was leading to anyone telling me I shouldn’t be anywhere near Milo.

Chad seemed to pick up on the shift in my mood and shook his head. “Relax. I just want to know that he didn’t run away or anything like that... What’s the deal with his face?”

I frowned. “His dad didn’t do it.”

“Try not to look so disappointed about that,” my brother remarked, and I might have taken offense if I wasn’t desperate enough to want any reason to get Milo out of that house. Away from his father. Back to me.

I don’t think I’d ever been more selfish in my life, and unwilling to apolo

gize for it. But maybe that was still me just being angry over how unfair the whole situation seemed. And I felt like I had every right to feel like that. I kissed a boy. And it was perfect. And it was Milo, and it had hurt when he was away from me. Oddly enough, I wasn't sure I'd been fully aware of just how much until he was back with me. It wasn't an experience I was interested in repeating, and I didn't know how to deal with anyone who was there to tell me I had to.

"I don't feel like I have a lot of time, Chad," I finally said.

I didn't know how else to explain myself, but before I knew what was happening my brother was hugging me, and I found myself hunching over his shoulder to return it, not knowing I'd needed one until just then. When I pulled back he gave my cheek a firm pat, rolled his eyes at me. "You can stay if you want. But I don't know what Greg's up to tonight, so try not to give him any surprises, okay?"

I smirked at him. "You're no fun."

He gave my shoulder a shove and went back to his room to help Leanna grab whatever he intended to take with him to her place, but she seemed to have it under control, and a few minutes later I was promising my brother I'd remember to lock the door on my way out.

When I closed the door behind Chad and Leanna I turned back to Milo where he'd already sat up on the sofa, his fingers working to straighten his hair as he smothered a yawn with his other hand. His face was flushed from a nap that was likely too short, given that his eyes appeared even more tired than before.

"Do you want to get some sleep?" I asked when his eyes finally reached me.

Milo shook his head. "I want to get some coffee."

.....
I couldn't take him home with me, but it was just off the gravel drive leading to home that I parked Caleb's jeep, private and secluded, especially in the middle of the night. I'd cut the headlights but the sky was clear, the stars leaving enough light to make out Milo's face where we sat on the hood of the jeep, which was still warm from the engine. I watched him drink coffee, taking a silent interest as he turned up his nose at the bitter substance every time he took a sip, all because he'd refused to put anything in it, claiming that if coffee tasted good it canceled out the caffeine or something like that. He caught me watching and his eyes shyly drifted away before coming curiously back in my direction. "You're quiet," he commented. "You're never quiet."

I felt the corners of my mouth turn up. "I missed you."

Eyes drifting again, I knew that if I could see his complexion better I'd be able to see his nervous blush. But then he was regarding me seriously, putting

g me on edge. "Nelson... I don't know when I'll be able to..."

"We'll figure it out," I said quickly, brushing my shoe against his. I didn't want to think about how long it might take to see him again. I didn't even want to think about how I'd have to say goodbye to him in a few hours."

"It's just..."

"I get it," I insisted. "We'll figure it out."

Milo looked unconvinced, and I found myself letting out a breath, wishing I had words to express how I felt, how I just needed the time I did have with him, and how I didn't want to spend it knowing I had reasons to be unhappy. But whatever he wanted to express, it became obvious that I wasn't going to keep him from it. "Things are rough at home... I thought if I did everything my dad wanted me to, it would change. So when he told me he was enrolling me back in Stratfort I didn't say anything. I'm taking the classes he wants me to take. I'm seeing the people he wants me to see. That morning..."

"Milo..."

"He accused me of a lot of things," Milo cut me off. "What he saw, was everything he can't stand about me." He released a disgusted laugh. "And the stupid thing is, half of what he thought he saw isn't even true. You know, he was going to throw me into rehab before I convinced him to take me to a doctor so I could take a piss test. He didn't even apologize for thinking those things, just kept rattling on about how he's going to do what it takes to protect my future... so I figured I'd just, do what he wants, you know? Maybe if I'm enough of what he thinks I'm supposed to be, he'll let me be who I want to be, too. But the problem with that is it's all I ever do. Getting out of Stratfort for a while is the only thing he ever really let me have and I think he only did it because he figured I'd lighten up and do better with Emily." He shook his head. "Maybe if I'd tried harder with her..."

"She didn't leave because of you," I insisted. "And maybe... maybe you would have wanted to try if he'd handled things better."

He smiled at me for that, but it was quickly replaced by one of his darker expressions. "The thing is, I'm tired of waiting for him to realize I'm not a fuck-up. And I'm tired of hearing I'm wrong about everything, that I'm not smart enough to figure out what I want. And everything he thinks of me... even if all of it were true, the one thing he can't say is wrong is the way I feel about you. I figured if I could just tell him... if he knew, then maybe I wouldn't have to worry about waiting for him to tear me apart over that, too. But you know what he said? He said everyone experiments with one thing or another and it's a good thing I got it out of my system." He paused, shook his head and regarded me with a wry smile that didn't reach his eyes. "So I guess there was nothing to be afraid of, huh? I tell him I'm gay and he has nothing to say about it... Except, he's full of shit for that. You know what I think? I think he's more afraid of you than I am of him. And that's sca

ry, Nelson. My dad being afraid of anything is scary.”

I slid my hand into his. “Hey. I know I have to stay away. I’ll do whatever you need me to do.”

I wanted to be reassuring, for both of us, I think, but Milo’s frown only deepened.

“I don’t know what he’ll do if he figures out I’m seeing you again, but he’s going to. I know he’s going to.”

“Why? He doesn’t have to. Not if we’re careful... Milo, you can’t tell Jame you saw me.”

I watched him carefully, the way he was suddenly avoiding my eyes, growing troubled but holding back what was on his mind. I hated trying to talk to him about Jame. I’ll be honest and say I didn’t understand their friendship. Not anymore, anyway. Maybe when we’d first met they’d been close. Milo’s belief that Jame was loyal had never seemed that far-fetched. But over the last few weeks I’d come to see the difference between loyal and obsessed. Maybe in Jame’s mind he cared about Milo. Maybe part of him really believed that doing everything he could to get rid of me was protecting Milo.

But then again, maybe he’d only convinced himself of that because it was the only way to convince himself that he wasn’t being completely selfish where someone who was supposed to be his friend was concerned. And now...

“I don’t trust him,” I said. And I didn’t understand how Milo could, either.

“He lied to you.”

“I know,” he said, sounding short, frustrated. He let out a breath. “I know he did.”

And that hurt him, I realized. It hurt him more than it angered him, and I suddenly found myself more concerned about Jame than I’d been before. “Milo, if Jame finds out you saw me, there’s no telling what he’d have to say next ... and trust me, he can say a whole lot when he wants to. What if he says the wrong thing to the wrong person... like your dad?”

Milo slid off the hood of the car, suddenly seeming agitated. I could relate, especially since he wasn’t exactly denying that Jame would go that far. So I felt torn, wanting to shake him over it and wanting to make that look on his face go away all at the same time, because the last thing I wanted to do was fight with him over this. So I did my best to wait him out as he tugged at his hair, winced when his palm inadvertently pressed too roughly against his bruised face.

Finally he turned to face me, and I found myself attempting to smile when he allowed me to reach for him, pull him between my knees where they hung over the jeep.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Milo, it’s not about trusting you,” I insisted. “You’ve asked me not to worry about Jame and look where that got me. It’s not your fault,” I added when his

eyes fell. "I can't trust him."

"But can you trust me?" he repeated. "I told you I want to try to stay together. You said you would do whatever I need you to do. I need you to trust me."

But, Jame. And trust him to do what, anyway? At the moment all I wanted from Milo was to trust him not to tell Jame about tonight. About anything to do with me, or us for that matter. I couldn't understand why he hadn't promised that he wouldn't yet. Trust him. I wanted to. But instead I found myself studying him, wondering what was happening behind those green eyes of his. "What's going on here, that I don't get?" I asked carefully.

Milo pressed at his lips, his brows drawing together. "I need time to figure it out," he finally said, as if that should answer all my questions, as if I should just accept it. I'm sure what I was feeling was written clearly enough in my expression because Milo sighed, leaned forward and allowed his face to rub gently over mine as if to smooth it all away. "Jame won't be a problem for you anymore," he said as my eyes fell closed and I tilted my head enough for my lips to brush his. "I'm going to fix it."

I felt his tongue move to tease mine, but found myself pulling back enough to meet his eyes. "Fix it?"

Milo sighed against me before he was once more pulling away, only this time his fingers laced with mine as he stepped back, guiding me off the hood of the jeep before he stepped into my arms and rested his chin against my shoulder. "I want to go back to that gas station," he whispered, and I closed my eyes, willing myself not to argue over the way he seemed determined to change the subject.

"More coffee?"

"No, but I want to stop before you take me back to Jerry's."

"Okay. Whatever you want... not now, though, right?"

"Not yet."

Stop. Stop. I wanted to go back to not worrying, back to not thinking. Back to just spending what time I had with him, like I'd wanted to in the first place. Everything else could wait.

.....

I slid a tray over the tile counter top, looked out into the dining room at Hollander's and called the name on the ticket in my hand.

Another Sunday morning, another week of avoiding church. I hadn't slept all night and could still feel Milo's mouth moving over mine when I'd climbed into bed that morning. More not sleeping. Smiling, talking in whispers when one of the two prepaid phones Milo had walked out of a convenience store with before I'd taken him back to Jerry's chirped next to my head. His voice, complaining he couldn't sleep because he'd had too much coffee. Five minutes later he was talking around yawns and I let him go, the apprehension

nsion I'd felt when I'd kissed him goodbye easing enough to close my eyes. Twenty minutes later my mom was sticking her head in my door, telling me they were headed off to pick up my grandmother before church. They'd barely made it out the door before the phone was ringing again, the manager in one of the bakeries telling me she was going into labor early and needed my dad because they were going to be short on staff. I told her congratulations and didn't bother to try and catch my parents before they disappeared down the driveway.

Sunday mornings were always busy at the bakery. It came in waves. Mostly seniors made up the first rush. After the earlier church services they came with their newspapers and coupons and drank decaf in bulk.

Then the families came, indecisive children holding up the line, wide eyes looking over an assortment of pastries while the tip jar filled up.

I felt lighter, enjoying the chatter around me as I focused on tickets and customers, too sleepy to care about my current coworkers, three other students from my school who would have been gossiping with me, not about me, not so long ago. But then, they weren't exactly rude or anything, just all business where I was concerned. Christina Randelle, apparently only hired two weeks ago, even flashed me a small smile when I told her she could take her break first. Of course, watching how she made a beeline for a booth across the room to hug one of the guys there was how I realized Brandon Sholer, like several others from my school by now, had chosen Hollander's for breakfast.

I found myself watching him, feeling mildly amused as he let go of Christina and waited for her to squeeze in next to another girl in the booth before he reclaimed his seat. Caleb could learn a thing or two from Brandon, I mused. At least, Brandon's ex-girlfriends didn't want to skin him seven different ways. In fact, I was pretty sure I counted four of them at the table with him.

Brandon had a lot of ex-girlfriends, or at least there were a lot of girls he'd dated at one time or another. Kinda hard to accept that maybe he didn't like girls as much as he seemed to like them. Or maybe he did like them. Of course, I was a lot more interested in the way Brandon liked guys.

I felt my shoulders straighten when he suddenly looked up, blue eyes turning in my direction, and made a point to turn around, grab the next ticket and pretend I hadn't noticed.

I'll admit it. I'm a chicken.

But in my defense I think it had a lot to do with the fact that I hadn't been, and still wasn't entirely prepared for him.

First of all, he'd been nothing but nice to me and I was determined to do whatever it took to make sure he couldn't be too nice. Unfortunately, it seemed rather difficult to tell a guy I was definitely attracted to that I wasn't inter

ested, especially since he knew it and I couldn't exactly tell him why.

Second, Brandon Sholer was pretty damn persistent, I had to admit as I turned around with the next order to go out and found him standing at the counter, dimples aimed in my direction.

"You work here now?" he asked.

I attempted to return his smile, but felt awkward doing it. "This is one of my dad's places."

He nodded. "Right. I forgot. So are you just helping out?"

"Yeah. For today. Can I get you anything?"

He glanced back at his table. "I'm good... so, when do you get off?"

"Umm..."

He chuckled, probably at my awkwardness as he leaned over the counter and dropped his voice as if he were getting ready to tell me a secret. "A bunch of us are going out to Hangman a little later, while the sun's still out. Wouldn't be a problem if you want to come. Maybe we could talk."

"Actually, I'm supposed to meet Caleb," I replied. "We have plans." That wasn't necessarily true, but if I needed it to be I'm sure it could be arranged.

"Maybe some other time," I added, when Brandon's smile fell just a little and he straightened.

"Did you get that thing I left for you in your locker?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, I..."

I paused, my attention turning towards the entrance as the glass door opened and a dark-haired woman came through it, sunglasses covering her eyes above a reddened nose as she clung to her leather handbag and made her way to an empty table. We took orders at the counter, but she either didn't notice or didn't care as she seated herself, rearranged the salt and pepper shakers and smoothed a paper napkin over her lap.

"You know, I'm really sorry if I freaked you out the other day," Brandon said, drawing my attention back to him. "I had some time to think about it, and I think you might have gotten the wrong idea about me. I have this bad habit of coming on too strong sometimes, and maybe I wasn't really thinking all that clearly. I know you had a lot going on, so..."

"It's fine," I cut him off, my eyes drifting back to the woman alone at the table. I tried to smile at Brandon again, tried to look sincere. "Just forget it ever happened, okay? We're cool."

I tried not to notice how put off he seemed over that as I turned away from him, announced I was going on break and headed to the kitchen where I grabbed a tray and looked over our current breakfast choices. I settled on the next plate of egg whites and ham that our cook put out, told him we'd need another one and added toast and two glasses of orange juice on my way back out. I paused, observed the way she was dabbing at tears with a napkin beneath her sunglasses and reached for a chocolate muffin, too, before I headed

out to the table, put down the tray and quietly seated myself across from Emily Hill.

She looked up, cocked her head for a moment and then a slow, watery smile touched her mouth. "Your mom always said this was the best place in town for breakfast."

"If you're here looking for my parents, they'll be out of church in about twenty minutes. Probably be heading home."

Emily's smile faded and she shook her head. "I'm so sorry. I know they've been trying to reach me, and you must be so upset..."

"I saw Milo," I said, not sure why I felt like I could tell her when I couldn't mention it to my own parents.

She digested that for a minute and then sighed. "That's good."

I glanced down at the tray I'd brought and pointed to the eggs. "Those are better when they're hot."

Emily looked over the food, and after a moment, obligingly picked up a fork. "I always liked you," she confided, and then made a face at me.

"Even if you are a little weird... your whole family was so nice to me. You all must think I'm a terrible person."

"Why didn't you call my mom back?" I asked, feeling I wanted an answer before I made a point to disagree with her.

Emily sighed. "Because I thought staying out of it would be best... Nelson, you have to understand, I love Milo's father. I don't always agree with him, but I do love him."

"Then why did you leave?" The moment I asked I regretted it as she tucked the napkin under her sunglasses again, gave a little sniff.

"Because I wanted a marriage, not a dictatorship," she said, her tone suggesting that saying so out loud felt better than the sad expression on her face suggested. "I went back to my family last week. I'm only here until tonight so I can get my things."

"Are you going to see Milo?" I asked.

Emily shook her head. "I really don't know."

I lifted one of the glasses of orange juice, took a sip. "You should. He thinks his dad blames him, for you leaving."

Emily's expression darkened. "Thom would know better than that... I know he seems hard. And I know how he can be when things don't go his way, but ..."

"No offense," I cut her off, "but since you just left him you're probably the last person who can convince me he's not... a jerk."

To my surprise, Emily actually laughed. "You know what? You're right. I am being a hypocrite, aren't I?"

"I didn't mean..."

"It's okay," she insisted. "I didn't get involved because I thought it would

help my relationship to stay out of things when it came to Milo. His dad didn't want me involved... you know what's sad? My brothers and sisters, they all have these huge families. I'm the youngest, so I've been looking forward to my turn. When Thom told me he didn't want to have children I thought he'd be enough, but when I found out about Milo..." Her smile turned soft, and I found myself smiling back at her, probably because that's what his name did to me. "I knew he was already grown, but I think I was hoping... that I could be involved. I mean, I know he already has a mother, but I would have liked to be a part of his family, I think. But now... I think it's just best for me to go." She took a drink of her own beverage, swallowed hard and suddenly released a small laugh. "And I'm babbling to you. I'm sorry."

"I don't mind," I said honestly; and then, "You really think it's too late?"

"For now it is... tell Milo for me... it's not his fault?" She paused, a self-satisfied smirk crossing her features as she lifted her glasses and allowed her puffy eyes to regard me thoughtfully. "You know, I told Thom it was no good trying to keep the two of you apart. Good for you, Nelson."

I was sorry for ever working against this woman.

"If you change your mind about leaving you can always move in with us," I said, only half joking, but then regarded her seriously. "Do me a favor and at least call my mom before you go? She's been worried... and she doesn't know I saw Milo."

Emily considered that and then finally nodded. "Good luck, Bobby Nelson," she remarked, laughing. "I do hope things work out for you."

.....

I parked next to Caleb on Monday morning, not feeling as if I had to wait for the bell to ring before I left the safety of my car. I figured that was an improvement.

For all my worrying over when I'd see Milo again, I found myself loving his idea to use the phones as I headed across the parking lot and it started ringing in my back pocket. I smiled to myself as I reached for it, brought it to my ear. "Hi." I wondered if he could hear the smile in my voice, if he was blushing the way only he could do, rolling his eyes at me.

"There's a bug in my room," he said, sounding as put out as ever. "And I think it bit me."

I laughed. "A bug?"

"On my stomach," he continued. "It's all red."

"I'll take a look," I volunteered.

"I'm going to kill it," Milo swore. "As soon as I figure out where it is. And what it is."

"That's a little extreme," I remarked.

Milo was silent for a moment, and then had the nerve to sound indignant. "You're taking the bug's side?"

“Only because I understand why it would want to bite you... have I tried that yet?”

He laughed. “Not that I can remember.”

“Just wait. Next time I see you... Hey, are you at home? Aren't you supposed to be at school?”

“I didn't do homework last night. It's better to show up late than without y our homework.”

I found my steps slowing, my voice lowering. “You alone?”

“Juanita's here... it's Jerry's birthday tonight. He said Haily's supposed to invite you.”

I grinned. “I'll see you tonight.”

Milo started talking, but his words were suddenly drowned out by the chanting of uglier ones. Faggot, faggot, faggot. Wincing, I pressed the phone to my ear, turning away from the noise and unable to help glancing over to where Chuck and his friends paced me through the parking lot.

“Nelson? What's happening?” Milo said, his voice soft, concerned. He'd heard.

I tried to sound upbeat. “I'll see you soon,” I said. “I've got to get to class.”

I hung up before either of us could say goodbye as I quickened my pace, trying to figure out why I suddenly felt so guilty. So dirty. It was like someone I cared about had just learned the most horrifying thing there was to know about me and there was nothing I could do about it. I glanced back at Chuck, eyes narrowing. Don't touch him.

Fucking asshole.

I'd almost reached the school, saw Caleb waiting for me on the stairs when I noticed Joe talking to a girl. He saw me, but just like the way he turned away, I kept walking. Obviously he didn't want me acknowledging him. I would give him what he wanted.

The way Caleb grinned from ear to ear as I approached almost made up for it. Almost.

.....

I got through the day thinking about the evening. I'd see Milo again. He wanted to see me. That counted for everything. Jerry's birthday. I'd have to get something for him. And it made me nervous, wondering about who would be there. Wondering if I'd have to pretend that Milo was just a friend... and maybe worse, if I didn't have to pretend anything. My friends knew about us but they hadn't exactly been exposed to it. I wondered if that would make a difference.

I wanted to hold his hand. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to ditch the potential crowd and end up alone with him as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Haily didn't have to invite me. As soon as I saw her I told her I'd pick her

up and we would go together. At lunch, Caleb told me it was time to give him details about the night, in part thanks to him, I'd had with Milo. I'd gotten two words in before he told me never mind because Milo wasn't a girl. But, he still wanted to know if we'd been able to resolve anything. I think it felt something like relief, as I told Caleb what had been happening with Milo, my unexpected meeting the day before with Emily Hill. How I wanted to tell Milo what she'd said because I hated the idea of him feeling responsible for something out of his control. Feeling wrong. And to my surprise, as I sat across from Caleb in the school cafeteria because I felt brave enough to stay for lunch, I found myself saying much more than I'd ever intended to. "I hate that I'm out," I admitted. "He's not. He can't be, because if his dad found out... that would be it. And I don't want this for him. This morning... so meone..."

"Who?" Caleb asked, before I could even state the offense.

I smirked at him. "Someone said something. All could think about was if Milo heard that..."

"Maybe he should hear it," Caleb remarked, and when I raised a challenging eyebrow in his direction, he shrugged. "Look I'm happy for you and all, but it's still kinda seems like he's leaving you hanging. I don't like it."

I frowned, understanding that no matter what I said, Caleb would stand by that one particular opinion. So instead of arguing my points, I wanted to make one thing clear. "I wouldn't be okay if he was out, Caleb... I just got him back."

Caleb had shaken his head at me, changed the subject. I didn't bother leaving it open for conversation again. I was more than willing to be Milo's dirty-little-secret, especially if it meant there was less of a chance of anyone ever taking him away from me again.

By the end of the day I was tired, had way too much homework to be going to any party tonight, and already thinking about which excuses I'd use for why it wasn't done.

I was going to see him. I would have called him to remind him of the fact if I hadn't decided for the both of us that him calling me would be better, all because I was terrified of his phone going off at an inappropriate time. I was going to see him. Again. This could work. It could all work.

Caleb met me by my locker, and as we passed Joe in the hall I realized that Caleb didn't acknowledge him as much as Joe and I didn't acknowledge each other. When I raised an inquisitive eyebrow at that Caleb replied, "He found another ride.... hey, can you tell Haily I'll be there in a sec? I want to wait for Ronnie."

Joe temporarily forgotten, I raised an eyebrow at that. "Ronnie?"

Caleb smiled, and if I didn't know him so well, I might have accused him of blushing. "Yeah... since you and Haily have your thing tonight I figured I

'd ask if she wants to come meet my niece."

I smiled at him. "Cool...why don't I give Haily a ride home? Take your time, okay?"

Caleb was more than pleased with that, and me, too. Probably because I figured the sooner I could get Haily to Jerry's, the sooner I could see Milo. At least, it worked in theory.

I parted with Caleb, moved quickly down the stairs, towards the parking lot. I was so eager to get on with the part of my day that didn't involve school that I hardly noticed it when the redhead fell in step beside me before she opened her mouth and started talking.

"Hi, Nelson."

I looked at her, slowed. "Hi, Christina." I suddenly felt awkwardly timid, out of practice when it came to social situations. Even with Christina Randelle, who I'd voted for for homecoming queen, but never spent so much time with that it would hurt anymore than it did when someone else wanted to tell me what they thought of the new me.

So I guess I should have been relieved when she smiled at me. "Your dad was really nice, hiring me at Hollander's... I really needed the job, you know?"

Somehow that lightened me up a little. "Yeah? That's cool."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Really great guy. So anyway, I can't figure out why he'd have such a jerk as a son."

I think it took me a second, before her words actually made sense. I stopped walking, confused, and maybe a little annoyed, as I raised an eyebrow at her.

"You heard me," she said before I could get a word in edgewise. "You're a jerk." The short little redhead pointed her finger at me as if I were supposed to flee from it.

"Christina, look, if this is because I went over on my break on Sunday it was because there was someone there that I really needed to..."

"Brandon's a friend of mine. A very good friend. I don't know why he likes you," she said giving me a once-over that had the nape of my neck prickling.

"I really don't but he does, and all you can do is blow him off? You're a jerk. He may seem like a lot of things to you, but he's great. He's great. And he doesn't open up to anyone. Hardly ever."

I held up a defensive hand. "Wait. Brandon? Brandon talked to you about me?"

She crossed her arms. "Okay. Now you're an asshole--just tell me why you're blowing him off. Actually, tell him and don't even mention I talked to you. Jerk."

"I'm not..."

"I really don't like you," she cut me off again, and I'm pretty sure the sound

she made as she glared at me was an actual grunt.

Okay. That's it. Who the hell is this girl and where under her ninety-five pounds of crazy is she hiding Haily?

"Not that it's any of your business," I said, "but I do like Brandon."

She had the nerve to look annoyed. "Then what's your problem? Because no way am I letting him think he's not good enough for you."

I opened my mouth, beginning to feel defensive. "I never said that!"

"So what did you say?" An all too familiar voice interrupted. "Because it sounds like you should have mentioned you already have a boyfriend."

I spun around as soon as I recognized his voice, my gaze landing on Milo, then Jame where he stood beside him looking so red in the face that I thought he might puke.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demanded, too afraid to look back at the look on Christina's face.

Milo gave a small shrug, his face seeming pale against his bruised cheek, paler than it should, even. "I'm fixing it."

And because clearly, he'd lost his mind, Milo Trust reached for my hand. I grasped his fingers more out of habit than anything but released them quickly, took a full step back from him and looked at Christina long enough to find her red brows arched skywards. Christ.

"Okay then..." Christina pulled her backpack more tightly over her shoulders, glanced between the two of us and started walking away.

"I've gotta talk to her," I said quickly, already moving to follow. "Maybe she won't say anything."

I hadn't gotten two steps before Milo reached out and grabbed my hand again, this time sliding his fingers securely between mine. "Don't," he said, but when my wide-eyed gaze turned in his direction I found that he wasn't even looking at me. His focus was Jame, who couldn't seem to lift his dark eyes from the way Milo was clutching my hand. Instinct told me to let go before it was too late. Fucking let go! But a sudden bout of anger had me stepping between the two of them, wanting to shield Milo from whatever was going through Jame's head.

"No more games," I snapped, drawing Jame's attention. "Say anything about him to anyone and..."

"He doesn't have to, Nelson," Milo cut me off, sounding eerily calm despite the way his eyes were suddenly darting around us, leading me to follow his gaze, not liking the way eyes were suddenly coming in our direction, hands raising to mouths to shield whispers. I tried pulling my grasp from Milo's again, too stunned to put up an argument as once again, his grip tightened and he refused to let go.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

"You're making a mistake," Jame said, content to ignore me as he glared at

Milo. But as I watched I wondered what was going on that I couldn't see, because Jame didn't only look horrified by the situation he looked devastated, too. "You think this is supposed to make everything better? Look what you're doing!"

Milo raised an eyebrow at that. "What I'm doing?" he repeated. "it's a lot better than waiting around for you to do it for me."

Jame's jaw dropped, eyes squinted in offense. "You think I'd do this to you?" he demanded.

"You did something just as bad when you did it to him," Milo whispered, his gaze falling on me for a moment before he suddenly glared at Jame and tossed the keys to his Honda at him. Jame wasn't prepared for it and they bounced off his chest, landed at his feet, and no one moved to pick them up.

"You can take yourself home. Nelson will drive me."

He will? "What? You want me..."

"What the fuck ever," Jame snapped. "Just don't forget you made this mistake without me."

"Maybe the only mistake I ever made was you," Milo retorted.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded, not really keeping up with either one of them.

"I guess I'm acting out," Milo remarked, tugging at my hand, pulling me away from Jame, further into the parking lot.

"Fuck you!" Jame called after us, and I had no idea which of us he was referring to, nor did I care at the moment.

"Milo, what the hell?" I demanded, pulling my hand more forcefully out of his than I'd intended to, shocking him into stopping, turning to face me.

"What are you doing here? What are you even doing? Fuck!"

He was leaving again, that's what he was doing. Be careful. Be fucking careful. My eyes sweeping the busy parking lot I was suddenly torn between throwing my jacket over his head to hide him and chasing after Jame with the intent to bury him so deep he didn't stand a chance of telling anyone what he'd just seen.

I tugged at my earring, agitated, suddenly only interested in getting Milo out of there. Grabbing his shoulder I pushed him forward, got him walking again. "You can say you lost a bet, or... something."

Please take it back. I wanted him to take back everything he'd said in the last five minutes. We'd see each other tonight. He'd call before he went to sleep. He wouldn't be gone.

"I'm not going to do that," he said patiently, and when I couldn't help the way I glared at him he matched it in a way that seemed much more practiced. "Were you listening? When I told you I'm tired of other people making decisions for me?"

"This shouldn't count," I argued. "You don't even know what you're doing."

“And you sound like my dad,” he snapped. “So shut up and let me do this because I want to... and because I found something you left for me in my glove compartment. And I read it... and so now we're trying. Just, without hiding.”

I was too busy shaking to tell him how terrifying those words were to me before Milo topped off his point by doing the one thing neither one of us could take back. He stepped closer, his chest coming against mine before he kissed me, nervous lips finding my mouth.

It was a thunk off to the right that shocked me away from his mouth and I turned in time to watch as Caleb recovered from walking right into someone's car. Red in the face he lifted a hand, indicating he was okay. “So... I guess I'll take Haily home then? Um... so, later.”

I stared after my best friend, then desperately back at the determined look on Milo's face.

Nucking futs.

Chapter 20: Nucking Futs

by DomLuka

A/N thanks to Jim for editing!

I'd been in better moods. Definitely, around Milo, I'd been in much better moods. I was frustrated, not really sure I was even thinking clearly as I drove aimlessly through town, not looking at him. If I did then I'd see how sick he looked, and then I'd stop being mad at him long enough to feel sorry for him for something that could have been avoided altogether. If Milo needed to puke he'd just have to say something.

I wasn't going to look at him.

“This isn't the way to my house,” he said.

“You really want me to drive you home?” I asked, sounding rougher than I meant to, but not necessarily regretting it.

“If you're going to keep acting like this, yeah.”

I gave in, looked to where he was buckled in, his back rigid against the passenger seat and his eyes forward, but not seeming to see what was in front of him. And he still looked like he was going to puke.

I released a shaky sigh, turned on my blinker, cut off a delivery truck and pulled into a dentist's office parking lot. I moved my car into a shaded slot, facing away from the road. “I'm sorry, Milo.” I was sincere. No less stressed over his actions, but honestly sorry for my reactions. Maybe Christina was right. I couldn't exactly argue that I wasn't being a jerk right now. When Milo didn't face me and turned to press his forehead against the cool window instead I reached to touch his shoulder. “I'm sorry,” I repeated.

He bit at his thumbnail and glanced at me sidelong. “Did you mean what you

wrote?" he asked. "All of it?"

I worried at my lip, let out a breath when his eyebrow arched expectantly. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

"Then I'm not sorry. I'm not sorry I did it for me, or for you."

I wanted to ask him which one of us he was trying to convince. "What does this even mean? What happens now? Your dad..."

Milo shook his head. "I don't care." He noticed when my face fell, because he quickly added, "This isn't just about us--I mean, it is..." He paused, tugged at his hair hard enough to make himself wince. "I'm explaining this wrong."

And I frowned, mostly at myself because I wasn't exactly making things any easier for him. But I couldn't get past what a terrible choice had been made.

I'd experienced what could happen when it came to his dad's involvement, and that was with us attempting to see each other in secret. I didn't want to imagine what would happen now. And it's not like this was something that was easy for Milo. I wanted to respect him for it but I couldn't get past being angry over it. I wasn't supposed to lose him because he didn't want to hide he was with me.

"It's not worth it, Nelson," he said, drawing my attention. "It's not worth being with you if you have to be miserable so I can keep my secret."

"I wasn't miserable... that was only when I didn't know if... it's when I didn't know."

"When you didn't know if I cared about you," Milo said, sounding offended and resigned all at the same time. "Well now no matter what happens, you won't think that again. That's good enough for me."

"No matter what happens?" I repeated, not liking the sound of that at all.

"And what's supposed to happen now?"

Milo leaned back in his seat. "You could stop being mad at me," he suggested. "And maybe I could go home with you for a while."

"My house?"

Milo nodded. "I don't really want to be anywhere near mine right now."

.....

I unlocked my front door, already feeling grateful that for the moment, my parents weren't home. I looked up when Milo slid his hand into mine. I squeezed his fingers, knowing my mood was bothering him, wanting him to know that I still wanted to be with him. I just needed to act like it.

"Do you want some iced tea or something?" I asked as we moved inside.

"Can we just go to your room?" he asked. "I figure I already know I can fit through the window if I have to."

That provoked a smile from me, but I didn't comment as I led the way there, closed the door behind us and shed my backpack and jacket as Milo stood at the door and watched me. "You can come in, you know," I remarked.

“Are you still upset?” he asked.

I sighed, reached for him and slid my arms around his waist as I let my mouth touch his. “I’m tired,” I said. “It seems like I haven’t had control over anything forever now... and I’m worried about what this is going to mean. And if you’re going to regret it.”

Milo met my eyes. “Me too,” he admitted. “But right now, I think... I’m feeling pretty good about it.”

“How much of that is because you think you’re getting even with your dad?”

“Maybe, just a little bit,” Milo admitted, his mouth turning up as if he couldn’t quite help it. I rolled my eyes, only because I couldn’t resist smiling back at him.

But, I was still finding it difficult to keep my sense of humor. “What about Jame?” I asked. “What was that?”

Milo pushed gently away from me, cocked his head. “I think I’d rather talk about Brandon,” he remarked. “What was that?”

I probably had no right to consider that question unexpected, but still, the way he changed the subject didn’t escape me, and neither did the way he moved onto my bed, stretching out in a way that had my eyes moving to a strip of skin where his sweater lifted away from his jeans, slightly up his abdomen.

“I kissed him.”

The skin disappeared as Milo sat up, forehead creasing. I found myself moving to sit with him, my hand moving over his knee.

“Technically, he kissed me,” I explained. “But I did kiss him back--it was only for a second. It was after I came out at school, when I didn’t know what was happening with you. I stopped it because it didn’t feel right, and I’m sorry it happened.”

Milo nodded slowly. “That’s all that happened?”

“We had a misunderstanding,” I replied, deciding that elaborating wouldn’t help anything. Obviously Brandon was still bothered by it, and I was, too, Milo being at the top of my reasons. “He didn’t know about you, Milo, just the rumors. Obviously I couldn’t tell him the truth so it complicated things.”

“You could’ve... but it doesn’t matter, because now it won’t be a problem.”

I sighed, not liking the reminder. “I’ll talk to him... unless you don’t want me to?” I asked awkwardly. Caleb always said it was trouble to talk to his ex-girlfriend in hearing range of a new one... not that it stopped him. I’d never experienced a similar problem.

Milo shook his head. “I’m not worried about it. So how did you figure out he was...”

I found myself smiling because Milo suddenly looked more interested than bothered. “I think after I came out he figured he could just put it out there.”

I shrugged. "Kind of weird, huh?"

"It's kind of... cool."

"Yeah... hey, do you think Jame will say anything about him? He heard..."

Milo sighed, obviously not liking Jame's name entering our conversation again, but this time there was less avoidance on his part. "I don't think so... but if you talk to Brandon you might want to mention his girlfriend isn't exactly careful when it comes to sharing information."

I nodded. I hadn't thought of that. Maybe Christina meant well, but Milo had a point about her.

"But Jame won't say anything?"

"I don't know, Nelson. I'm not sure I know anything I thought I did about him."

"So tell me," I insisted. "It would be so much easier to see him coming if I knew what was going on."

"He doesn't like you."

I frowned, frustrated. "Yeah. I get that part."

"He hates you, Nelson. That's what I'm saying... I'm not sure he had a reason for doing what he did other than that."

I digested that for a moment, bothered. There was always a reason. At least, there was supposed to be. "I had a... conversation with him. He told me he did it because he thought he was protecting you from me."

Milo shot me a glance that suggested that he didn't like that reasoning any more than I did. Only, Milo didn't even seem to be considering whether or not it was a valid excuse.

"Nelson... Jame spends a lot of time at my house. I know you know that, but when I say a lot of time--he keeps clothes over there. When I met him..." Milo paused, pressed his lips. "He doesn't tell people about his parents, and I'm not sure I should. So let's just say that half of the week, he considers my house his home."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "Yeah... I'd rather hear more about that."

Milo rolled his eyes but thankfully, didn't avoid the topic this time. "His dad tells him they're not even related all the time. It's not true, anyone could look at them... anyway, Jame hates the guy. It's worse, because his parents are together, but his dad has a girlfriend. He stays with her four days a week and Jame and his mom pretend not to notice. When he's home... Jame started staying with us. I didn't mind," Milo said quickly. "I really didn't. .. and it was kind of nice, you know? Jame actually likes my dad. Usually I don't bring friends anywhere near my house because I worry about him trying to talk to them. When you and me started hanging out, Jame figured I was telling him he couldn't be over as much. I don't know. Maybe I was. And that morning, after you left, he didn't. My dad didn't even ask him to. I did it, when he tried acting like everything was normal. After everything, he was just

t smiling... because he was there and you weren't. Something just seemed completely fucked up about it. I went almost a week without talking to him and finally asked him to come over because I wanted to hear about you."

I couldn't help rolling my eyes at that, and Milo sighed.

"I know," he agreed. "Not the best source. But the worst part is, I don't think he even has a problem with me being gay as long as you're not around. Today... that was me, having enough of it. I want to care about him. Maybe I still do. He was a friend... and I don't know how I'm supposed to deal if the only reason was because he wants my life more than I do. Is it fucked up, Nelson? To think that about someone?"

"I think what would be fucked up... is if it's true."

"Yeah. It kind of would be. I guess I'm about to find out, huh?"

I frowned at him. "You mean if he goes straight to your dad and tells him you're with me? Milo, you handed over your fucking car."

He nodded. "Yeah. I did that."

I shook my head. "You're the one that said rubbing it in your dad's face that we're together isn't going to help anything, so why are you trying to do it?"

"I'm not," he said quickly. "Nelson... I don't know if Jame's going to do that. I don't know what my dad will do if he does and I don't know what we're supposed to do now about anything. But today on the phone, when I heard those things people were saying... I'm tired of never doing anything. So I fixed it. And no one else gets to have an opinion about that, not even you. Not unless you can look at me and say you wouldn't have done the same thing if I was the one out and you were the one... if you were me. So stop. I don't want you to protect me anymore."

But I did have an opinion, and it wasn't just Milo I was trying to protect, it was us. I didn't know how to tell him how frustrated I was and sound reasonable at the same time. I understood what he was telling me. I even understood that I was supposed to be happy about this, him being out. Being with me and not afraid to admit it. I wasn't supposed to feel like him wanting that was what would pull us apart again, but I did. That was the frustration. People broke up all the time, I realized that. But they were supposed to have a choice about it. We were supposed to have a choice, fight, hate each other, something that would justify it. That wasn't what I felt when I was with Milo. I reached for him. "Come here."

Milo leaned into me and closed his eyes as I kissed his face, sighing as his forehead came to rest against mine. "Don't be angry," he said, sounding tired. "I don't have a lot of time before I have to go. I don't want to spend it telling you not to be angry."

.....

I was willing to rethink things. I mean, I told Milo all the time that he shouldn't stress out so much. At least, I used to, before there were actually things t

o stress out about.

What we had to put up with, just to see each other, it sucked. There was still all the same kind of unfairness about it. I was angry about it. But maybe I didn't need to be angry at him about it. What he was doing, all these things that were so unlike the Milo I knew were making him smile. Maybe I didn't have to understand it. Before he always left the impression that he thought I was too brave about things for my own good. Maybe he'd been right.

But maybe, I'd never been the one who'd been brave. Maybe it had always been him, working up to the moment he was ready to just... let it go.

I'm not sure when it had all left me trying to keep up with him, but maybe

I was supposed to just go with it. Maybe Milo was right, and it didn't matter what was going to happen as much as what was happening now. I wanted to be with him. That was one of the few things I wasn't uncertain about. So maybe I was supposed to be doing that while I could. Maybe that's all I really wanted. Maybe. Or maybe he was just really good at keeping me distracted.

He laughed as I caught his earlobe between my teeth and my fingers found his ribs. I had him out of his shirt, the button on his jeans undone and I could feel him, hard against me where he straddled my knee on my bedroom floor. His breaths became heavy as I moved my mouth to his neck, my lips tracing patterns while my thumb brushed over his nipple as I explored his bare chest.

Milo tugged at my shirt, decidedly frustrated as he pressed his hips forward and tilted his head to catch my mouth with his. He sighed when I cupped him through his jeans and sat up as my fingers hooked in his pants, over his boxers as I tugged them downwards, his clothes catching on his hip before we both looked up when there was a knock on my door.

"Nelson?" my mom called as she tried the door, which thankfully, I'd locked

"I'm... changing!" I yelled, already moving to my feet with Milo, who nearly zipped up his pants with my fingers still in them.

"Well I'm home, and I'm leaving your laundry right here," she said. "Make sure it gets put away."

"Yeah, okay" I agreed, feeling as relieved as Milo looked.

I held onto him as we both waited, straining to hear as my mom moved back up the stairs. His green eyes turned to mine, a slow smile moving over his mouth. "Do you think she heard us?" he whispered.

I shook my head. "No, but if I stay buried down here she'll be back. I'm pretty sure it was my turn to feed the goat."

Milo was already reaching for his shirt and I sighed as I watched him pull it over his head and smooth his hair down with his fingers. "Milo? You don't have to go just because she's home... maybe we could talk to her."

He raised an eyebrow. "What for?"

I shrugged. "I don't know... she kind of has experience with this kind of thing. She's a parent. Your dad's a parent..."

"Your mom doesn't need to talk to my dad," Milo said, eyes wide. "Nelson, he's an ass, and your mom..."

"I think she could handle him," I insisted. "Maybe she could...I don't know, help us?"

He sighed. "I know my dad talked to your uncle, Nelson. What makes you think she won't just... maybe she'll want you away from me. Why risk it? It seems like we already have enough problems and I don't want to spend my time with you trying to solve the ones that can't be fixed."

"It's not that she wants you away from me," I insisted, feeling somewhat defensive on my mom's behalf. "It's true, she doesn't want me in trouble... but she's never let me down when it counts. It's worth it, to see if she can help."

And if she says she can't... I'm still not going anywhere. Besides, if I have to drive you home I'm not sneaking you out the window."

He made a face. "I should get home... look, if you want to talk to your mom, we'll talk to your mom."

I raised a suspicious eyebrow. "You're being agreeable."

Milo rolled his eyes and shrugged. "I'll do whatever you want if you stop stressing... but it's not going to work."

I had a sneaking suspicion that he was right. My mom would likely be more than willing to talk to Mr. Trust, but there was no telling if he'd be willing to listen. Hell, even if he'd listen enough to try to accept his son there was no saying he would have any desire to allow Milo near me.

I reached for his hand and watched him as his eyes drifted towards our fingers as they slid together, wishing I understood him better. As ridiculous as it seemed to me, the fact that he wasn't putting up more of a fight when it came to parental intervention was what set off my second thoughts.

Maybe it would be better if my mom never even knew he was there. Maybe I was supposed to drop him off a block away from his house and wait to hear from him again, wait for him to tell me his dad knew he wasn't hiding anymore so naturally, he'd never be leaving his house again.

That was bullshit. I remembered when Chad finally brought Leanna home to meet the family. He'd been talking about her for weeks, not seeming to mind when my mom badgered him about inviting her to dinner. Chad had never brought home girls very often, so when Leanna showed up it was like him telling us she was special, but then so was the way she'd had him blushing all through dinner. I'd wondered if I'd ever bring anyone home. By then I'd known my family would be accepting, so it was more a frustrating matter of whether or not I'd ever find someone who I wanted to bring home.

But now I wanted that with Milo. No more windows for him. Not for me, either

r, I guess. Strange, how I'd been out for weeks, listening to what people thought of me, wanting to go back. Milo had been out for a couple hours and as much as I wanted to shove him back in the closet I couldn't help wanting other things, too. Like, to bring him home for dinner, or hold his hand at a party and gloat because I had him because he wanted to be with me. And because he wasn't afraid of it anymore.

"Come on," I said as I reached to unlock my door and gave his hand a tug.

"I want you to meet my mom."

"Um... I've done that. A few times..."

"I know," I said, smirking at the annoyed look on his face. "But she's never met my boyfriend."

I opened my bedroom door, but he was suddenly tugging me back, regarding me seriously. "Nelson, before we go up there, I have to tell..."

"Nelson?"

My mom's voice, somewhere above the stairs reached my ears and I sighed as I looked over my shoulder. "Yeah?" I called, and then looked at Milo again. "What?" I asked.

"If your mom's going to talk to my dad..."

"You need to come up here!" my mom said urgently, and then, "Bring Milo with you."

I turned to face him, wide-eyed and frozen. He stared at the stairs behind me, expression blank.

"How did she..." I started, but Milo's green eyes suddenly snapped to mine, his fingers tightening around my hand.

"I'll call you tonight," he said quickly. "You should still go to Jerry's." He leaned forward and dropped a kiss over the corner of my mouth so quickly I hardly noticed he was there, and then he was letting go of me, heading up the stairs.

"Hey, wait a minute," I insisted, catching up to him before he was halfway up them. "Milo..."

"I don't want to sit down," a gruff voice reached my ears, cutting me off and forcing my gaze at Milo, who looked resigned, even while his steps slowed.

"Mr. Trust... Thom," my mom said, sounding frustrated. "If Milo is here..."

"He's here," Mr. Trust insisted as I managed to catch Milo's wrist and forced him to meet my eyes.

I opened my mouth, wanting to say something but he cut me off. "I have to go, Nelson. Trust me, you don't want to be anywhere near my dad."

"Just, give it a second. Let my mom talk to him. You can stay right here."

"If that's the case," my mom was saying, "then what's the harm in it? Our boys have been friends. They don't get in too much trouble..."

"I believe my son's juvenile record started when he met your son," Mr. Trust

st replied, seeming unconvinced. "Now Nelson is dragging him into whatever sick ideas..."

"Hey," my mom snapped, her tone growing into something Chad and I had only ever heard for our worst offenses. "Let's not pretend we don't know what we're talking about here, and let's not pretend that you're stupid enough to believe Nelson has convinced Milo to do something he doesn't want to do. Your son is gay, and mine didn't cause that."

Milo, who was still attempting to remove his hand from my grip suddenly froze, his head cocking in a way that suggested he wanted a better hearing advantage, and I frowned as I watched his eyes narrow at his father's next words. "He's confused, there's a difference. Now I've told your son and I'll tell you--stay away from him. Now get him out here, Mrs. Larmont, before I have to call the police. Again."

"I'll call them for you," my mom retorted. "I'd like to make a few complaints of my own."

"Excuse me?" Milo's dad demanded.

"You heard me, Mr. Trust. You just walked into my house, talking about my son. You may think it's okay to bully yours, but you won't do it to mine. Now the way I see it, you can sit down and we can talk about this like adults, or you can get out of my house because I just decided that Milo isn't here."

"You've got to be kidding me," he snapped.

I looked at Milo.

"Stay here," I insisted.

"Nelson, don't," Milo hissed.

But I was already letting go of him and moving towards the living room. It took a moment for them to notice me. My mom was uncharacteristically red in the face as she shook her head at Milo's dad where he held a cell phone, glaring at it as if he expected it to call the cavalry all by itself. And then he noticed me.

I should have been used to it by now. The way he looked at me almost hurt.

I actually had a physical, gut-wrenching reaction to it.

"Where is he?" Mr. Trust demanded, and I suddenly felt as if my mother's presence had been an amusement for him until I arrived, ready to feel all the anger he'd been saving just for me. I saw him coming towards me and had the sudden defensive urge to flee. But then my mom was standing between us and I wanted to watch him melt because the way he kept coming, like he was going to walk right through her, was infuriating.

"Mr. Trust!" my mom snapped, moving a protective arm over my shoulders as I stepped up beside her.

"I told you to stay away!" Thompson Trust growled, his finger threateningly in my face. My mom waved it away.

"Milo's not here," I said, but my voice didn't sound like my own, but something smaller, afraid.

Instead of responding to me, Mr. Trust glared at my mother. "And he's a liar, too. You must be such a proud parent."

So, maybe the lying part was true, but he had no right to talk about my mom's parenting skills.

"You think you're a parent? That's fucking hilarious!" I retorted, trying not to notice the way my mom had moved between us, looking like she was more than ready to gag me.

"Where. Is. My. Son?"

I snorted. "You're such a great parent, figure it out yourself," I remarked.

Milo's dad looked at my mom in a way I didn't appreciate at all. "I'm giving you one minute to figure out where he is."

"Or what?" she demanded.

Mr. Trust glared at me again. "His car shows up. He doesn't. Where is he, Nelson?"

"I'm right here," Milo said, and I looked twice before I accepted the fact that he was standing beside me, looking apologetic as he faced my mom. "Thank you for trying," he said quietly, and she sighed before smiling gently at him, reaching out to touch his shoulder. I wanted to reach for him, too, but I felt like he was avoiding my eyes as his gaze reluctantly drifted to his father. "I would have been home soon."

Mr. Trust wasted no time opening our front door, glaring at Milo. "Get in the car. Now."

"Nelson was going to take me home," Milo said quietly, as if he didn't have the energy to argue but thought that he should try, anyway.

Milo sighed, looked at me even as he headed to the front door. "I'll see you later," he said.

"No you won't," his dad remarked.

"Mr. Trust..." my mom started, but he raised a defensive hand and glared at her, cutting her off.

"Leave us alone." He regarded us for a moment as if he needed reassurance we weren't going to follow him before he turned to go, but he came up short as he found Milo standing between him and the door, the younger of the two Trusts shaking his head slowly, disappointment touching his features.

"I hate you."

Mr. Trust's shoulders stiffened, as if he hadn't seen that coming, and when Milo turned and walked away his father followed, closing the door between us and them.

My mom let out a breath she'd been holding. "That man... ugh. Are you okay?" her frustration turned to motherly concern as she hugged me.

"Yeah," I replied, and oddly enough, I meant it. Probably because this time

I'd seen it coming. Because Milo said he'd call. "Milo came out."

"I know. Emily called me. I take it his dad still isn't interested in accepting it."

I shook my head. "He came out at school, too."

My mom's brow creased and she looked at our front door as if there was something bothersome on the other side of it. "Nelson..."

"I'm not staying away from him," I said quietly, regarding her seriously when she turned and met my eyes. "I'm sorry, but I can't. He doesn't have anyone else."

My mom worried at her lip and rubbed at her temple. "Does his dad even know? After everything that's happened to you..."

"I couldn't really tell," I admitted. "But Mom, his dad isn't going to be okay with it."

"I'm seeing that... I'm going to call your father; meanwhile, you stay away from that man."

I opened my mouth to object but she shook her head at me.

"I mean it, Nelson. I'm not saying don't talk to Milo... I'm saying don't get caught. And stay away from that man." She shook her head again, this time incredulous. "Actually, I'm not calling your dad, I'm just going to drive down to Hollander's, talk to him that way."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I don't know. But I'm angry."

.....

Milo said go to Jerry's. I think, despite knowing it was impossible, I'd hoped he'd be there. That was the only reason I would have gone in the first place, and it was the only reason why I still picked up Haily and drove over there when she called three times in a row demanding to know what was taking me so long.

I told her what had happened and she decided it was an even better reason to get to Jerry's, despite the way I asked her not to make a big deal about it because I didn't want to disrupt Jerry's birthday and I didn't think Milo would want to, either.

She told me disruptive would have been the way I insisted on waiting in my car when we got there.

There was a reason why I'd avoided parties, even ones where there were people who I could call friend. Haily had insisted that Jerry was only having a small get-together, and I believed her when there didn't appear to be many cars around his house. And I guess normally it would have helped that apart from Jerry and Jonathan, I didn't really know anyone else. Or more to the point, they didn't know me. But they knew Milo. These were people who he went to school with, and after the events of the day I found myself terrified as I walked into Jerry's basement, wondering what they saw when they look

ed at me, what they knew. If they knew anything about him. As far as I knew he hadn't come out to anyone in Stratfort apart from Jerry, and as impossible as it seemed, I wanted to keep it that way. On the off chance that Jame hadn't mentioned what Milo had done to Mr. Trust, I wanted to keep it from his father for as long as possible.

And I guess the people attending Jerry's party seemed nice enough. I guess I didn't really make an effort to find out for sure. I was too busy staring at the basement door, waiting for someone who wasn't going to walk through it and wondering if I should have stayed home to wait for my parents.

Don't think about it. Don't obsess over it.

"How's it goin' Nelson?"

I looked up and tried to smile at Jerry as I took a sip of the soda I was holding.

"Hey, happy birthday."

Jerry smirked. "You already told me. Thanks for the hat."

"Haily picked it out."

"She told me." He glanced at the drink in my hand, followed my gaze to the door when it drifted that way before I could stop it. "If you want to drink something harder than that, you can both stay here tonight."

"That's okay... but thanks."

Jerry nodded, looked as if he might walk away for a second, and then opened his mouth again. "I hope he shows up."

I sighed. "Me, too." I looked at Jerry, feeling awkward because it was his birthday and I was being miserable, but unable to resist the invitation to bring up the only thing on my mind. "I don't think he's going to. I don't think he can."

Jerry nodded in agreement. "I figured... his dad's pretty bent out of shape, then? Haily said he came to your house. That must've been interesting."

"Yeah. Interesting," I muttered.

"Milo's dad likes gettin' his way," Jerry said, as if I hadn't figured that out. Then he smiled at me. "But so does Milo, right?"

I nodded awkwardly, knowing he was trying to cheer me up but not sure I was in the mood for it. The feeling passed as the phone rang in my pocket and I scrambled for it, nearly spilling my drink in the process before Jerry reached out and grabbed it from me, laughing.

I flashed him a grateful look for saving my shirt as I got the phone to my ear. "Hey."

"What are you doing?" Milo asked. His voice sounded hoarse and he was speaking in a whisper, leading me to wonder where he was hiding.

"I'm at Jerry's," I said, walking across the basement in search of a quiet corner, away from listening ears. I stopped just in front of the door and turned away from the noise. "Are you alright?"

“Yeah. Can't get out, though. Will you tell your mom I'm sorry about my dad?”

“She's not upset with you, Milo,” I insisted. “Look, her and my dad want to try to talk to him again.”

Milo released an exasperated sound. “Please tell them not to, Nelson. He's just going to be a jerk. Look, I can't talk long. My dad was supposed to go out of town tomorrow, now he wants me to go with him because he says he can't trust me.”

I frowned. “How long?”

Milo was silent for a moment. “Actually... I figured I just wouldn't go.”

I considered that and tried to ignore the sudden knot those words caused in my stomach.

“What are you going to do?” I whispered. “Milo, if you're going to do something to make things worse...”

“It can't get worse... I want to see you.”

“I thought you said you can't get out.”

He was silent again.

“Milo?”

“I'm sorry.”

I could hardly hear him. “Why are you sorry?” I was beginning to wonder if we were even having the same conversation, and he sounded so down I couldn't help worrying over it. “Tell me what's going on.”

“If I asked you to meet me in the morning, would you?”

“Where?” I asked, because we both knew he didn't have to ask.

“Hangman should be quiet. Earlier would better.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Now will you tell me what's going on? What happened after you left? Are you okay?”

“I'm okay... I'll call you in the morning.”

I didn't believe the first part of that, but he seemed unwilling to let me say so as he hung up, leaving me to stare at the phone while fighting the urge to throw it at something. It didn't help when I looked up and spotted the perfect target.

The way Jame Graham was looking at me, eyes narrowed and cheeks red was expected. The way he was suddenly moving hostilely in my direction wasn't.

As far as I was concerned, this was the worst timing he'd ever had.

My boyfriend was upset. He was hurting and I couldn't reach him, and at the moment that was Jame's fault, because he was there, looking at me like I didn't belong. He wanted me away. And he could go fuck himself.

“Every time I turn around,” he remarked before he even reached me. “What the hell are you trying to do, Larmont?”

“What about you?” I snapped. “Do you even have any idea what Milo's going through right now? Do you even care? You couldn't just for once, think

about someone besides yourself? What did you think would happen to Milo after you told his dad he was with me?"

"What did you think would happen to him because you won't go away?" Jame retorted.

"You did what?"

I looked up the same time Jame did, feeling somewhat startled to find Jerry next to me again. But I was suddenly more concerned over the curious gazes that were aimed in our direction and I bit my tongue, frustrated because I'd drawn exactly the kind of attention I'd wanted to avoid. It seemed like a good enough reason to worry, that I was the only one who noticed as Jerry regarded Jame questioningly and Jame made a point to look offended. It was Jame, as usual, who had something to say first. "What is he even doing here, Jerry?" he demanded. "You know what's going on."

"That's Milo's business," Jerry replied. "He'll tell Nelson. And Nelson is here because I happen to like him."

"No, you like his friend, and you're putting in way too much effort. She's a slut."

"You really shouldn't say things like that about me," Haily said before I could respond to that. "When I'm standing behind you. With a drink." Jerry shot her a warning look that was rather impressive and she rolled her eyes at him. "Whatever," she remarked, and did nothing more than sip her drink. I found myself frowning at Jerry, not caring about the current subject as much as the last one. "What will Milo tell me?"

"Not what he should," Jame mumbled, and I glared at him.

"You told his dad on him? What are you, five?" Jerry asked Jame, going back to his earlier question.

Jame shook his head, incredulous. "No. Fuck. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Oh, shut up," Haily snapped. "Don't act like it's not a good question after what you did to Nelson. And you're lying."

Jame turned enough to look at her. "You shut up, bitch."

"Alright," Jerry said, shaking his head at Jame as he moved closer to Haily.

"I think you should leave."

Jame opened his mouth as he regarded Jerry with more hurt than I thought Jame Graham was capable of before he abruptly snapped it shut, shook his head and walked away.

He hadn't gotten far before Haily narrowed her eyes on Jerry. "Just because you're not supposed to hit Milo doesn't mean you can't hit him."

"What does Milo have to tell me?" I cut off any response Jerry might have, and the amused look he was flashing at Haily quickly disappeared.

"You've gotta ask him," Jerry insisted. "I'm not even supposed to know but Jame doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut. Sorry, Nelson, but I think

I've hurt Milo enough for one week."

I gritted my teeth, but didn't bother arguing with him. There was still one other person close enough to tell me what was going on, and if the news was bad I highly doubted he'd avoid rubbing it in my face.

"Nelson, hold on!" Haily called after me as I headed after Jame where he'd walked out through the garage.

"Jame!" I called out as I moved out the door leading out to the side of the house but it didn't seem necessary when I nearly jogged into Jame's back. "Hey, wait a minute."

He made a disgusted sound and picked up his pace. "You need to stay away from me. You really, really need to stay away from me."

"Jame." I caught up to him as we reached the driveway, falling into step alongside him but cautiously distant. "You didn't tell his dad." I sounded awed by the statement to my own ears. Jame spun on me suddenly, furious and offended. He opened his mouth to respond but I made a point to jump in first. "Hey, like Haily said... given your track record..."

"Milo isn't you," Jame retorted. "I wouldn't..."

"He thinks you would," I cut him off, and he seemed to come up short as he clenched his jaw and avoided my eyes.

A few short breaths and Jame lowered his voice to a growl. "Congratulations. You win."

That offended me. "This isn't a competition to me!"

Jame narrowed his eyes, curled up his lip and took an aggressive step in my direction. "Really? Because the last time I checked, everything was a game to you. The way you walk around like you own the world. You take everything. You and every one of your asshole friends!"

I shook my head at him, more stunned than anything. "What have I ever taken from you?"

Jame snorted, nodded towards Jerry's house. "Look around. You have people bending over backwards for you and you don't even care about what it could cost them."

"I didn't steal your friends," I snapped. "And you cost Milo, not me. You didn't like a choice he made and decided to do something about it. Did it ever occur to you that coming after me would get to him? I didn't want him out any more than you did, but it's done, and I'm not leaving him. If you're really his friend, you won't either."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, actually." I frowned at him. "Trust me, after everything you've already done I'd rather jack off with a cactus than watch you get close to him again. But he cares about you, no matter how he's feeling right now and I care about him. And you don't even know--you have no idea, do you? He's probably the most loyal friend you've ever had. You know sides of him I'm just ho

w seeing and I hate you for it, but I need you, because I don't know how to get through to him. I don't understand what the hell he's trying to do, but if he keeps up what he's doing with his dad he's going to end up miserable, and I'm hoping neither one of us want that."

Jame shook his head at me, incredulous, made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "You think I don't care about him? I care. Why do you think I tried to stop him from getting anywhere near you? And you're the one who doesn't get it. His dad cares about him, too. He wants things for him, and none of it includes you. And now thanks to you, Milo's forgotten about all of it. What do you think his dad will have to do now to fix it?"

"Are you even listening? His dad, Jame. He wants things for him? What about what Milo wants? He's the one who's supposed to be your friend. All I hear about from you is what you want. What his dad wants. Fuck. Why doesn't what he wants count for anything?"

"What he wants," Jame spat, "is to be normal. Thanks to you he can't do that here anymore, and he's not going to realize it until he's gone."

I felt a chill, a cold drip down my spine. "What are you talking about?"

Jame rolled his eyes. "Are you really that self-centered? You think he has feelings for you?" he mocked. "We'll see how long they last when he's a thousand miles away." Jame paused, laughed at the look on my face. "His dad told him he was going to buy a ticket this morning. If he'd just stayed away from you, he wouldn't have to use it. And think whatever you want, but I didn't want him to have to use it, either."

.....

My boyfriend was a liar.

He'd known. He knew what was coming and he didn't tell me.

Gone. He'd be gone.

I didn't get it.

And of course, if he'd known he was leaving...I guess it made sense. Coming out, not caring anymore... maybe this was why. Except, there had to be more. He was supposed to stay away from me and didn't, and now there were consequences. The thought of him wanting to accept them all because he didn't want to stay away, because he wanted to fix what had been done before he was gone made me want to be closer to him. In a way it made it all too impossible for me to stay mad at him. But the fact remained that he hadn't told me. Was he even going to?

"Nels? Are you alright?"

I looked up as Haily approached me where I'd sat on the curb in front of Jerry's house and watched Jame disappear on foot around the block. I shook my head at her. "No."

She took a seat next to me and frowned. "Hey, Jerry just called over to Milo's. He's not coming."

“I know.”

She placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You know, if you want to talk to him, Jerry has the number. Maybe if he calls back you can...”

I forced a smile in her direction as I moved my hand to my jacket pocket, gripped the thin cell phone. “That's okay. He'll let me know when he can talk.”

“So do you really think Jame told Milo's dad?”

I let out breath. “Actually, no. But he's not exactly helping anything. Look, do you think Jerry can get you home? I kind of need to get out of here.”

Haily sighed. “Nelson, don't leave. Jame's gone, so...”

I was already standing up. “I'm sorry. I just... need to sort some stuff out okay? I'll see you at school.”

“Maybe I should go with you,” Haily said as she followed me towards the street where I'd left my car. “Nelson, if you need to talk...”

I smiled at her. “I'm okay,” I insisted. “So can you get Jerry to take you home? If not I can come back, or...”

Haily rolled her eyes at me. “I'll be fine, Nelson. Just, call if you need to talk, okay? I'll be home early.”

We'd reached my car and I paused as I touched the door and looked back at her. The sun was still setting and it wasn't dark enough for the street lights just yet. Plenty of light to see that she was sincere, and for a moment I felt bad about it. It hadn't been so long ago that she hadn't been speaking to me, and now she'd gotten past everything. I wondered if I'd appreciate that about Haily more if every time I turned around there wasn't more drama, more worrying about Milo.

“That thing Jerry didn't want to tell me... Milo's dad wants to send him away. Jame thinks the last straw was when he came home with me today... it's because he won't stay away from me.”

Haily frowned as she moved a little closer. “That seems a little... extreme.

Are you sure? Because if this came from Jame...”

“I feel like, Milo doesn't care what happens to him anymore,” I explained. “I've spent all day, trying to figure out why he's pushing things, and why he's doing things that he never would have done if... he never would have had to do, if he'd never met me.”

Haily shook her head. “He's lucky he met you,” she insisted. “Think about it, Nels, if he'd never met you, all he'd have was Assface.”

I smirked. “And he wouldn't have to leave,” I said quietly. “He didn't even tell me, Haily. His dad's going to send him away because I'm that big of a problem. How is he lucky? I feel like I've taken his whole life away. And he needs to do something to stop that, or I'll do it for him.”

Haily narrowed her eyes. “What does that mean?”

I sighed. “It means I should have left him alone.”

“Well that's just stupid,” Haily remarked, raising a challenging eyebrow when I frowned at her. “Well, it is. You should let Milo decide that. Maybe you're more important to him than what he had before. I'd ask him, Nels. Because I really, really don't want to see you hurting again. After what Milo did today--I don't think he does, either.”

I let out a tired breath. “What does that matter if he leaves?” Haily looked at me as if she wanted to say more encouraging words, but I shook my head before she could. “I'm going home. I'm supposed to wait...I'm tired of waiting.”

It seemed like waiting was all I ever did anymore. I waited for Milo to call, to see him. I waited for his dad to take him away from me over and over again and now I was waiting for him to tell me goodbye. Was he even going to? I'd go home, I'd wait, and then I'd ask him.