

Eat milk, jackass!

There comes a time when enough... just gives you a headache.

“Would you look at this, please? How am I supposed get two loads of laundry done before I meet Amy for dinner?”

James was bitching again. It was pretty normal, actually. Just like the way he liked sneaking his boss’s first name into conversation ever since she’d said he could call her Amy.

To appease him, I forced myself towards the small-laundry area in the apartment and looked over the two half-loads waiting to be started.

“And this is bullshit!” he muttered, assaulting neatly combed auburn hair with agitated fingers as he waved two socks at me. One short black, one long white. “Are you seeing this?”

No. I wasn’t.

Leaning forward I grabbed the ends of both socks and brought them to my nose, getting a good sniff. “They’re clean,” I said, not understanding the problem.

“Christ! You can be such an idiot. They’re all I have clean!” James snapped. How is she supposed to take me seriously enough to promote me if I show up to dinner with mismatched socks?”

“I thought you were going to wear pants.”

“That’s not the point, damn it!”

I never seemed to get the point according to him, but at the moment I had the understanding that he’d expected me to do two loads of his laundry and I’d disappointed by showing up only thirty minutes ago, ten minutes before he had.

I followed as he stormed past me towards the kitchen. “And are you smelling that? How come the dishes never get done? You know, I could really use your help around here.”

Actually, there were only two bowls and one plate. The plate I assumed was from his dinner last night, the first bowl from the ice cream he’d eaten afterwards and the one with cereal crusted to the side looked like breakfast to me. The one glass I’d used for milk when I’d first arrived had already been rinsed out and loaded in the dishwasher.

And have I mentioned that I don’t even live here?

I just visit. Come visit, Taylor. Do my laundry, Taylor. Hey, Taylor, on your way out can you take the trash with you? The dumpster’s only on the other side of the parking lot.

The sad part is, after seven months and two days of bending over backwards just to get him to say he appreciates me, he still hadn’t said it. The only thing with James I looked forward to anymore was the sex, and we hadn’t had that in over two months.

Now I could see he’d only called me today and asked me to stop by because

he thought his chores would be done by the time he came home. I'd skipped work for this and now from the bedroom he was.... growling. He did that sometimes, just to make sure I knew he was really annoyed with me.

"Are you at least going to come help me make the bed?" he called.

I hadn't even slept in it last night.

Leaning against the kitchen counter I flipped open my phone and speed-dialed Bree, who had recently taken the place of my best friend, Trina, who'd ditched me to, and I quote, "make something of herself." It was still unclear

how she planned to do that in B.F. Wyoming. Not that Bree was any kind of runner-up. She'd once told me I'd learn to love her to death, and it really hadn't taken much effort.

Still stuck at home with her mom as she trudged through high school, she answered the phone as if she hoped it was someone ready to rescue her from her bleak existence.

"It's me," I said. "I'm going to need a cuddle."

"Uh-oh. James?" she guessed.

"Seriously," I said; "am I completely brain-dead, staying with him this long?"

"Umm... Jude said you were. I just love you."

I smiled. Jude, Trina's cousin, was also a loyal friend, if you didn't count that he was dating Bree's brother, Quinn, who I had a huge crush on. I still say I saw him first. The first time Jude met James he'd flat told me that any form of a relationship with him was a mistake, and he planned on saying I told you so as soon as shit blew up in my face. "Why do you think I didn't call Jude first?"

"Good point," Bree agreed. "So what is it this time?"

"Everything," I said. "I'm walking out of James's apartment right now, and I'm leaving the key."

"Seriously?" She had every right to be surprised. There had been false alarms before. But not today, I decided as I dropped the key--the one he'd given me exactly one month and two days ago--next to the picture of himself he kept on the kitchen island and headed for the door.

"I'm done," I told her.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. Oh, wait..."

I doubled back.

"What do you mean, wait?" she demanded. "You walk out that door. I'll meet you at your place."

"Okay, but first..."

"No, no. You'll change your mind on me."

I opened James's refrigerator. "I'll get out of here," I promised. "Just as soon as I grab the milk."

“The milk?”

“Yeah. I bought it.”

“In that case, get the milk and get out,” Bree said.

I lifted the gallon jug I’d brought over the day before when I’d noticed his was going bad. But, before I headed to the door again I went to his trash can and lifted the lid. Just as I’d suspected, with no one to take the garbage out for him the old gallon was still inside, and I made a point to return it to his fridge. Then, I left.

Friends are like toothpaste

Sometimes I had to wonder what provoked me to take so much abuse. The fact that he had silky auburn hair, a dimpled, charming smile, green eyes and a long, toned body had once seemed like a good enough reason. I can be petty like that. But that night as I leaned against Bree on my fold-out bed in the back room of the house I shared with my sister, Audra, listing off any and all of James’s offenses I could think of, I saw our relationship for what it was: He was the mad scientist, and I’d been neutered.

It had started post-Quinn, as I liked to call it. It was the end of the year at school, and he and Jude were settling into their relationship nicely, while I was left completely jealous. Poor me, right? Not really. I like to paint Jude the villain, but really he hadn’t taken anything from me, because I’d never had it to begin with. It boiled down to two things when it came to Quinn. The first was, I would have had no patience for him. He’d been a serious closet case. The second was... I would have had no patience for him. However, Jude respected him and even cared about all his whining. But even knowing that Quinn and I weren’t to be, their relationship got to me.

Jealousy. I knew it had reached the red zone when I even got jealous of their fights. Most of the time I’d comment on anything I could to provoke one just to watch it play out. Sometimes I’d be in the backseat of the car, Jude driving, Quinn in the passenger seat. They’d be deep into the middle of giving each other the silent treatment for one thing or another.

It was beautiful.

It was the way Quinn would put his sunglasses on so that Jude couldn’t tell he was stealing glances, and the way that Jude bit at his lip to keep himself from apologizing for something he didn’t think he should have to apologize for. But then we’d be halfway to where we were going--probably to drop me off somewhere because I’d started all of this--and Jude would reach over, rest his hand palm-up on Quinn’s thigh. Casual. A silent invitation. And Quinn would stare at Jude’s fingers, waiting for that slight wiggle of the index finger that would always occur, and he’d very carefully tuck his hand into Jude’s, and all would be well in the world.

I wanted something like that... that wasn’t so... hollow.

I turned eighteen before everyone else I knew, meaning I got to go explore

the clubs on my own. At first it was fun as I met new people and got to know new faces, along with a few new bodies. Jude would give me hell when I'd let myself into his apartment early in the morning so I could sleep off my late nights before I went home to Audra, who considered herself my mother. But then I met James, and I had another place to spend my mornings. At first it had started casual. I was okay with that. But the smile I got when he saw me, the kisses he stole when we were dancing, and the way he called me "baby" had me missing him when he wasn't around. But then six short weeks into our budding relationship, he decided to introduce me to his friends. I'd thought nothing of it at the time when he asked me to remove my facial piercings before we met them for lunch. But thinking on it now... I never did pick up my jewelry again.

And as Bree ran her fingers through my three-inches-long, neatly cut, boring brownish hair...

"I can't believe I did that," I said.

"Eww. Don't tell me you're having second thoughts about James," she said, ceasing to pet my head as she narrowed her eyes at me.

"No," I said quickly. "It's my hair. I let him tell me how to cut my hair."

Actually, he'd taken me into the barber and told the barber how to do it. And of course the Orange-Frost coloring I had in it had to go, too.

"You let him tell you how to do a lot of things," Bree remarked. "That's why I'm on Taylor-duty until I'm sure you're over him."

"Taylor-duty?" I repeated.

"Uh-huh. If you're not good by this weekend I'm gonna have to pass you on to Quinn and Jude. I work on Saturday."

"Sounds fair," I said, cracking a smile at her that I really didn't feel. "But we should dye my hair. That way, even if I do go crawling back, James won't want me anyway."

"He always was a dumb-ass," Bree said to that. "I can say that now, can't I?"

"Anything you want."

Besides, it's not like James hadn't made his fair share of comments about my friends. At twenty, he was older, and I was still finishing high school. I'd be graduating early and only took a few classes a day, but I think that had always bothered him. So my friends bothered him. We rarely spent time with anyone but his own friends, and to be honest, I don't think they liked me any more than my friends liked James.

I guess that should have been my first clue.

If you're not cool with Bree, you're not cool with me. I'd make that my new motto, I decided as I smiled at her. My friends would come first from now on. That should keep me in line. Those were the people I needed in my life, not some high-maintenance hotty who put knots in my stomach every time

I thought I'd done something to upset him.

The intervention

Okay. Just because I needed them in my life didn't mean I wanted them in my life... all the time. There's a line, you know. Everyone needs their alone-time every now and then. And so what if mine included five days of refusing to get out of bed as I ignored calls and told everyone who came to my door to go away?

I think the depression might have hit around the time Bree had gone home after my breakup and I decided to check my messages. There were three from James. The first was almost funny because he'd assumed I'd only run out for something at an inconvenient time, emphasizing on how I didn't care about anyone but myself. How dare me.

The next two weren't so kind; both demanded I call him back. When I realized I wasn't going to, I felt sad and relieved all at the same time. Even though Bree had been there only ten minutes before, I felt alone, and part of me felt like maybe I needed to be.

I'll admit I took this to the extreme.

I loved my sister. I really did. Audra was seven years older than me at twenty-five. She was only eighteen when our parents died, and she'd made sure we stayed together. That was cool. So now that I was able I did my best to help her keep up on repairs around the house, keep food on the table and the lawn mowed. I was so good at these things, actually, she tended to notice when they weren't getting done, which led her to kicking in my door early on a Tuesday morning.

"It stinks in here," she informed me, her tall, thin figure in my doorway. We'd both inherited our lankiness from our parents, only Audra inherited Grandma's jet-black hair. She liked to keep it tied tight at the back of her head, and she looked way more serious than she really was in the black skirt she wore to work and her reading glasses.

I pulled the blankets over my head to block out the little light she'd let in. "That's probably because I haven't showered in a few days."

"Yeah," Audra replied. "I thought as much. Look, I'm going to work. Maybe we can have dinner later. Good luck today, Taylor."

I yawned, but then slowly peeked out of the covers to look in her direction, one eye open and the other half closed. "Hey! What do you mean, good luck?" Was I forgetting something?

Audra peeked her head back around the corner, her smile a little too mischievous for my taste. "I called Jude," she told me, and was out of sight before I could sit up and receive a five gallon bucket of cold water down my back.

My feet hitting my mattress I turned, still bouncing on my not-very-bouncy bed, to glare at the perpetrator. Jude had managed to sneak up on me, and s

till holding the bucket, his lip was turned up into a smirk, his one dimple showing while his blue eyes laughed at me from behind perfectly straight blond bangs.

“Jackass,” I hissed as I stood there in my sagging boxers, a puddle at where my feet sunk into the mattress. “And on my bed...”

“It needed to be cleaned as much as you do,” he remarked, and then suddenly dropped the bucket to grab my elbow. “Come on.”

I allowed him to pull me from the bed, even place his hands on my bare back and push me towards the hall. At one point I made a point to lean back on him and wiggle my butt. “Ooo, Jude. Do you get to manhandle Quinn like this? I’ll bet he’s a screamer.”

He slapped my ass and then laughed when I jumped. “That, was from Quinn,” he informed me. “He personally asked me to beat your ass.”

We’d reached the bathroom. It was no surprise that the shower was already running. Once he pushed me past the door, I turned to face him.

“I suppose he didn’t mean you were supposed to do something pleasant with my ass?”

That smirk again, and then he pushed me back further and closed the door on me, but his voice was loud and clear on the other side of it.

“You’re going back to school. You’re going back to work, and tonight you’re sitting at the table and eating dinner with your sister.”

Come, boy

Jude wasn’t that much of a hardass. He took me out to a late breakfast and pleasantly brought up just about everything but James. I knew he was dying to tell me he’d been right about my ex all along, but he was too good a friend to do so before I was ready for it. He did, however, make me pick up the phone and make the calls I needed to in order to return to work, which I’d been playing hooky from under the pretense of being sick.

By the time we made it to the school where he and his El Camino made the freshmen gush, I’d missed my first class and lunch had started. Deciding I should probably see my teachers for missed work, I headed one way while Jude, who had received his diploma outside of school went to drop in on Quinn.

I made my second class, and even study hall where I managed to catch up on at least two days of work before the bell rang. I might have thought about going home but leave it to Jude to make sure the exits were blocked. He picked me up outside the classroom door, claiming Quinn had to work and he had nothing better to do, so he’d be coming to work with me.

I guess that was supposed to be one of the perks about working for yourself. Your friends could tag along and you didn’t have to pay them. I’m sure I wouldn’t have been able to afford Jude, anyway. Dog walking didn’t pay much.

About a month after I met James, my sister's boss had paid me to check in on and walk his dogs for two weeks while he was out of town. They became regular customers of mine, and when his neighbor called things kind of took off from there. I was up to twenty-three four-legged clients. Audra had even made me business cards.

Apart from the last five days, I generally worked part-time at least seven days a week. The area I worked in conveniently had a seven-mile stretch of dog park with plenty of loose tennis balls and hiking trails. Generally I liked to take four to five dogs at a time, but not when I was walking Goliath and Aphrodite, two headstrong, young Akitas that had owners who loved them, but didn't necessarily have the energy for them. I usually took them up some of the steeper trails long before I let them off leash to play in fenced areas especially designed for dogs that tended to bolt on their owners.

As Jude and I played with them until we were covered in slobber it occurred to me how much I'd missed these two particular dogs, and not just over the last week. They were big, but they liked hugs and kisses as much as anyone, and it wouldn't be unusual to go home covered in hair after spending time with them. I'd learned early on that James didn't like it. He could spot the smallest fragment of dog hair from across the room. Sometimes he'd even claim I tracked it in on my shoes. I started to make sure I was showered and changed before I went to see him after work, but if my hair wasn't still wet he'd ask me to do it again. I'd started to feel self-conscious around the dogs, and I'd been careful about letting them jump or rub on me.

Thinking about it must have caused some sort of melancholy in my expression, because for the first time that day, Jude mentioned James.

"Hey, Taylor. Fuck'im," he'd said.

I smiled because that was all that was necessary. "Wanna go boy-watching?"

I asked as I hooked Goliath and Aphrodite back up to their leashes, now that they were well worn out.

"That depends," Jude said. "Are you gonna tell Quinn all about it this time?"

"Oh, relax," I insisted. "He won't get mad unless he wants me to tell you about the naked neighbor across from you that he's been spying on."

Sometimes my friends didn't know if I was being serious or not. I liked things that way. And for the record, neither Jude or Quinn ever turned down boy-watching. The only difference was, Quinn refused to do it in public and I liked to make offended faces at all my comments while Jude tended to be more relaxed about everything and liked to join in. Jude was definitely far better at participating in one of my favorite hobbies, and the dog park was a good place for it. Though, he did seem to go above and beyond to point out the cute ones that afternoon. My guess is he just wanted my mind off of James. His methods worked.

I ended up doing a lot of laughing. We both did as we compared, ranked and discussed what kind of boyfriends random guys would make, and when Bree called me to talk we decided it wouldn't hurt to start sending her picture mail.

By the time the dogs were completely worn out, their walk had run almost forty minutes over--their owners wouldn't complain--and I felt completely content and at peace as we sat on a bench and all four of us took a water break.

A glance towards Jude and I caught him checking his watch. I smiled. "Hey," I said. "Thanks for today, but you don't have to babysit me all the way home. I'm alright."

"That's okay," he insisted. "I'll give you a ride."

"By the time I get these two home," I said, "Audra can pick me up after she gets off work."

Jude seemed to consider my suggestion for a few moments, probably wondering if it was a good idea to leave me alone for any amount of time. Personally, I would have liked for him to stay, but I could see it in his face that he was beginning to wonder what Quinn was up to. I smiled wider to reassure him.

"Go," I insisted.

"Alright," he said slowly. "But I'm calling tonight."

"I promise I'll answer,"

He seemed satisfied enough by that and I watched him disappear behind the trees and bushes that made up the trail before I leaned back on the bench and sighed.

Honestly, I didn't mean to become a downer the moment I was left unsupervised. I think this time it was just the thought of Jude getting to go home with someone, while I...

But there was nothing to be upset about, I told myself. It's not like I enjoyed going to James' anyway. I mean, thinking about going to him, wondering what he was doing while I wasn't there... that was all a part of it. But I think most of the time once I was with him I was wishing I'd put it off a little longer... like, until he was in a good mood.

When Goliath started tugging at his leash again I realized it was time to go, so, leaving the bench I made my way along the familiar paths that would take me back to their neighborhood. I often stepped off the trail when someone else was coming. Both of my charges tended to get a little overexcited when it came to head-on confrontations with other dogs, and their combined one-hundred-and-seventy pounds could be a lot to handle, especially now that Jude was gone and I had both leashes.

They weren't aggressive. They just liked to put their noses where they didn't belong once in a while, and had on more than one occasion entangled their



r leashes with other groups, leaving disgruntled pet owners in our wake. I had them both off to one side and on a tight leash, so I wasn't too worried when the jogger came around the corner. His brindle dog was off leash and in control by his side, their steps synchronized as they made their way towards us.

I suppose I first noticed him because while most people were bundled up in a few layers, his legs were bare between his black shorts and the socks that curved around his ankle, just above the top of his shoes. Toned and golden, the muscles in his legs seemed to contract with every movement as I followed them up to broad shoulders tucked beneath a long-sleeved zip-up grey hoodie.

The cool air had left a shade of pink across the bridge of his nose and the arch of his cheeks. Blond curls stuck to his glistening forehead. The broad mouth attached to a nicely defined jaw line suddenly curved upwards, a flash of white teeth showing in his smile. When his blue eyes came in my direction as he neared, it occurred to me that I was staring.

I looked over my shoulder, wondering who that smile was for, but unless it was aimed at that tree...

My head snapped back around, eyes locking on blue ones that... yes, yes, they were definitely looking at me. He passed. His dog passed. My head turned, my body turned... Goliath and Aphrodite turned.

I'd left too much slack on the leashes and very quickly the Akitas were everywhere. Aphrodite had his dog going in circles, her leash tangling with Goliath's as their excitement escalated. And remember that thing about them occasionally putting their noses where they don't belong? Goliath stuck his right into Mister-Sex-on-Legs' crotch.

Horried, I pulled the leashes back, yelling for the dogs as I forced them under control. I didn't know if I wanted to feel relieved, or bury myself when the guy's response started with laughter as he pulled his own animal away.

"What're you feeding them?" he asked as he patted Goliath on the head. "They've got some energy."

"Um... no idea. I just watch it come out and pick it up."

The look he gave me was deserving of a remark like that, and once I realized how it had sounded I must have turned ten shades of red. "I'm just the dogwalker," I said quickly, in a poor attempt to save myself.

"Oh. Alright then."

"I'm really sorry about..."

"Don't worry about it," he said, flashing his brilliant smile again as he lifted a stick from the ground and waved it for his dog, who went to great lengths to get to it as he led her back into a steady jog. I got a wave goodbye. "Good luck with those two."

Despite myself, I think I stood there for a good five minutes smiling like

an idiot, wondering what I could pick up to make the dog owner chase me like his dog chased him.

Three weeks after that... and I think I'm stalking you

It always amazes me where inspiration can come from. In my case, I think I needed inspiration to do a lot of things. To get out of bed. To smile. To resist the urge to call James.

It was one guy in particular who helped me with all of that over the next weeks. And I had no idea what his name was.

For the first two days all I had to do was remember him smiling at me. But then when my mental image faded I started hanging out at the dog park a lot more than usual. I tagged an extra fifteen minutes onto every client's walk time and started looking over trails that I didn't usually touch. Then finally, two days after I started looking, I finally came across him. The boxer he kept as a jogging companion recognized me before he did, but she only took a small sniff at the six Pomeranians at my feet before she moved on, and while I got a nod from him, he kept going. That was a little disappointing.

So I came back the next day, and the next.

Now, if I happened to know that almost every day he ran three trails and walked two, would that constitute stalking? I mean, it's not like I followed him around every day--especially not on Saturdays because he didn't come on Saturdays--because even if I wanted to, it's not like I could keep up with him. I wasn't exactly out of shape but he was all lean muscles and energy. I liked watching it, but I found that I was better off when I just happened to be on one of his trails as he was passing by.

To my delight, this way I got a smile just about every day, and those smiles held me over until I saw him again.

The end of week two is where I started running into trouble. I wanted more than a smile after he rounded the bend in the trail and left my line of vision.

I wanted him to stop and talk to me again, even if he hadn't intended to in the first place.

So for a while I made sure to have Goliath and Aphrodite with me, hoping for another mishap. No such luck. He was much too careful when it came to avoiding those two.

I did realize that going to these lengths for a few words with an attractive guy was a bit radical. But I hadn't exactly been at my sanest lately.

When the dreams started I knew there was no coming back from the trouble I was in. I didn't only wake up with a smile slapped on my face; I daydreamed about blue eyes, broad shoulders and a firm, round ass. I constantly felt like I wanted to reach out and touch someone. Someone in particular. Who wasn't James.

I think I'd lost it completely by Friday of week three when I went to the dog park with no dogs. With a beanie pulled over the hair Bree had dyed black

k for me nearly a month ago and my jacket zipped up, I posted myself on the trail he always came up and I waited while winter flurries swirled through the air.

This was complete madness.

And yet I couldn't have been more confident when I saw him turn the corner with his dog, their pace slowing as it always did here. Before he could see me standing there, I started off jogging, gradually moving in his direction, my head low but my eyes up, keeping him in my sights as we closed the distance between us.

Because I was dead in the middle of the trail he politely moved over with his dog, so when I got a little closer I made sure to be in his way again. For a few moments we moved left to right, left again. At five feet away his posture became unsure, his pace began to slow. The boxer put her short tail between her legs and backed up a little as I came face to face with her confused owner.

I knew the moment he recognized me because the slight annoyance across his expression turned into confusion as he jogged in place momentarily, opened his mouth to say something, and then froze when I kissed him.

It was easy, really. I'd grabbed the front of his jacket, pulled him forward and closed my mouth over his. He smelled like a pleasant mixture of deodorant and peppermint. My lips moved over his, tongue flicking his teeth. He was warm, his skin smooth.

There was growling, pressure on my shoulder as my jacket tore. It seemed the boxer wasn't pleased with me, but I didn't care as I stepped back with a big, stupid smile on my face, looked at the shocked look on his, and took off running like a fugitive.

It's hard to describe the freedom I felt in the moment, consequences be damned. I'd probably have to find another park to walk in. If he happened to be seriously homophobic, maybe I'd even make the evening news. I wondered if I could get arrested for stealing kisses. A wonderful kiss that I'd desperately needed.

I ran harder, exhilarated as my phone rang and I reached for it with my now-bare left arm. "Yeah?"

"Taylor? What are you doing? You sound funny."

"Hey, Bree. I'm running."

"Why?"

I laughed out loud. "Because, I just...."

I stopped when I heard the bark behind me, glanced over my shoulder and became shocked to realize the boxer was coming, and so was her attractive owner. And they were running a lot faster than I was.

"Oh, crap. Bree, I gotta go. There's a good chance I might get gay-bashed."

I didn't bother hearing what she'd had to say to that as I lowered the pho

ne and picked up my pace, pushing myself until a cramp developed in my side, and still, he was gaining on me. And then he was next to me, reaching out, and snatching my phone from my hand.

He stopped before I did, and by the time I turned around he already appeared to be dialing numbers. His cheeks were flushed, his tongue flicking his top lip as he moved forward without taking his eyes off the phone. I took a step back in response and his dog growled at me.

"Maybe you should just keep the phone," I said, fully intending to run before the cops showed up.

His eyes lifted to mine then, his expression unreadable as he handed the phone back. His mouth didn't curve up in that familiar way until it was back in my hand, and without a word, he whistled for his dog and the two of them left me there feeling stunned, and if possible, a little more giddy than I'd been after I'd kissed him.

Still warm from where he'd touched it, I stared at the cell for a minute before I opened it up to discover there was a new addition to my phone book. I smiled. His name was Luke.

## Chapter 2

by DomLuka

A/N: Thanks to Jim for editing!

I am man!

To call or not to call, that was the question. To take a leap of faith by dialing seven digits and risking the possibility of having to hear a corny ringtone? To meet the one called Luke with blond hair, blue eyes and a nice butt? Or would it be safer to purchase another phone, change my name and my zip code and forever remember a fantasy that I'd stolen one perfect kiss from?

Like hell. I was so calling him.

Just as soon as I was brave enough to do so.

Pre-James, I liked to change my hair color for every occasion. Post-James was no different. The black had been depressing and angry... and on me, I'll admit it was a little bit frightening, too. You know your friends really love you when they have the guts to tell you your hair is a disaster. Bree had made sure to inform me of that fact at least once a week after she'd helped me do that to myself--out of pure loyalty on her part, mind you. She'd been against it from the get-go.

That's probably why she was thrilled when I called and told her my hair needed an emergency intervention. We went shopping together in search of the perfect color. I felt I needed something solid. Bold. When I told Bree that I needed bigger balls to call a boy she suggested red. A good, prime color.

But I didn't want just any red. I wanted it to pop. I wanted to be the stop sign you saw coming a mile away. I needed the red that would make any respectable sports car jealous.

After finding the perfect one we argued about whether or not it looked like it had a little purple in it. Bree thought so. I really didn't care. I'd wear it, anyway. My hair had grown out another two inches and I was even contemplating a Mohawk. Bree said absolutely not, so I went to get it trimmed up instead, leaving enough on top to look messy when I wanted to.

She was proud of me for cleaning my room when we got back to my place and stained my bedroom carpet and a spot on the back of my neck with the dye. Thirty minutes later I was feeling rather confident as I towel-dried my hair and posed in the long mirror attached to the door. I flexed, inspecting my bicep, which was respectable but in no way a muscle that belonged to a super jock.

"Do you think I should get muscle implants?" I asked.

Stretched out on my bed, Bree was flipping through last year's yearbook with a ballpoint pen, adding silly pictures to peoples' faces. We'd been working on the masterpiece together for months. I had devil horns and she had a halo and a cigar sticking out of her mouth. Leaving the book alone, she raised an eyebrow at me.

"People do that?"

"They have things that make penises bigger," I pointed out.

She shrugged, conceding that I had a point. "No. I think you're fine the way you are. And the hair looks good, so call this guy."

Facing the mirror again I squared my shoulders, ran my fingers through my hair and then attempted to wipe away some of the creases worry had left on my forehead. Finally, I turned back to Bree.

"I can't," I whined.

Unceremoniously tossing the yearbook aside she crawled off the bed, an exasperated huff escaping her mouth and blowing her dark bangs skyward as she came closer and stared up the foot and a half it took her to meet my eyes.

"Since when? You know, I'm really starting to hate whatever it is this James-the-jackass did to you. You know how to flirt, Taylor."

I nodded slowly. "This is true."

"And you've asked tons of guys out. Sometimes even for me."

I wrinkled my nose. "Yeah. But only to annoy your brother."

She waved that away. "My point is, there can't be anything different about this guy." She gave my shoulder a firm pat. "You've got this. Besides, what's there to be worried about. He didn't say no when you asked him for his number, right?"

I thought about that for a minute. "Technically speaking... I never actually asked for it."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "Well... he kinda just gave it to me after I kissed him."

“What?”

“You know, the other day when you called and I said I was gonna get gay-bashed? He was chasing me with his big-ass dog. I think it might have been because I kissed him.”

The look on her face suggested she would need more of an explanation than that, so I went ahead and told her the whole story. Starting with the way I’d stalked him for over two weeks. By the time she was finished interrupting my story with questions, and I was finished telling it, she was regarding me like she would have a child who’d broken a rule he didn’t know he was breaking.

“But we know it’s bad to stalk people, right?” she asked.

I sighed heavily. “I guess so.”

“Because it doesn’t always end with cute boys giving you their numbers... right?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay. So... how cute is this guy anyway?”

I retrieved my phone from the pocket of the pants I’d been wearing before we’d dyed my hair and I’d showered, opened my Pictures folder and scrolled through. “Um... no, that’s not a very good one... he’s a little blurry here... and that’s his dog...”

As I scrolled through she moved beside me to look over my arm, her eyes widening before she elbowed me.

“Hey,” I said defensively. “We’ve already established I was stalking, alright? Oh, here’s one of him. You can see his face.”

She took the phone, whistling. “Wow. If you don’t wanna call him, I will.”

I snatched the phone back. “I’ll do it.”

“Okay, then do it already,” she insisted, giving me a playful shove.

“Okay.... A little privacy, please?”

She didn’t bother to pretend she wasn’t laughing at me, but the look I gave her forced her hands up in surrender. “Alright, alright. I’ll just go order pay-per-view and blame it on you when Audra gets home.”

“She’ll never believe you unless it’s something dirty,” I warned her as I walked her out my bedroom door.

“Doesn’t matter. She always takes my side over yours.”

She had a point there.

Bree smiled at me as I closed the door on her, and then I moved back into my room and procrastinated by cleaning things that didn’t need cleaning before I moved back to the mirror and stared myself in the eye for a good solid minute. Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders. “Stop being such a pussy,” I told me.

Nothing to be afraid of. Might even get another kiss out of the deal. Remembering the last one I closed my eyes, smile curving my lips. “I’ve so got this,

"I told myself, and then lifted the phone to call the number he'd stored in it.

The other end of the line rang four times. No cheesy ringtone. We were off to a good start.

"Hello?" Smooth and deep, his voice sounded sleepy, like he'd just come out of a restful nap.

And I hung up on him.

Dropping my forehead into the palm of my hand, I shook my head at myself, gared at my reflection in the mirror. "You are such a loser."

You can run...

I jumped when my phone rang from the palm of my hand. I'd hardly hung up, and blanched when I saw who was on my caller ID.

Now that I realized I'd dropped the ball and it was no longer in my court, I realized it was now or never as I hesitantly brought the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, I just got a call from this number?"

God, I loved his voice. It was almost as nice to listen to as he was to look at.

"Hi." that was about the most coherent thought I could come up with.

There seemed to be an unnaturally long silence between us.

"It's you." He sounded both accusing and amused, all at the same time. "Man, I didn't think you'd have the guts to call me."

A challenge? That perked me up a little.

"Maybe I was checking to see if you had the guts to give me your real number."

A chuckle. That same husky sound he'd made the first time I'd met him. "Alright. What are you doing tonight?"

Was he asking me out? This was a lot easier than I thought it would be. I found myself grinning like an idiot as I paced my room. "I don't know. There's this guy I met at the dog park. Thought I'd do something with him."

"Ambushed at the dog park," he corrected me. At least he didn't say assaulted. "Blue apartments, right off of Seventh and Union. Know where they are?"

As a matter of fact, they were less than a block away from Jude's.

"I think I can find them."

"Number Three-B. Seven o'clock."

"I can't make it until seven-thirty." The only reason I would say something like that would be because I insisted on having the last word most of the time. Besides, I didn't want to sound as desperate as some guy who stole kisses from unsuspecting bystanders in the park.

"Good enough." And with no goodbyes, he hung up on me.

I did a happy dance until Bree walked in and made fun of me.

## Hallway tease, Noodle Central beats out the Weenie Palace

Three-B was a little too easy to find. I was there at seven. That was no good as far as I was concerned. No way was I knocking on that door until seven thirty.

And that just brought the nervousness I was feeling to new heights as I got back in my car and circled the block for about twenty minutes.

Bree was right. I was better at this dating thing than I was letting on. But this time seemed different. I felt out of practice. I wondered if that had anything to do with the way James controlled everything we did. I'd never had to plan a date with him. He preferred that I didn't even try, because he liked things done on his schedule, in his own way. No spontaneous picnics for him.

Seven thirty. Seven thirty-two. Seven thirty-five by the time I was standing outside his door for the second time. This wasn't because I wanted to make him wait. More like, it took me about six attempts before I got out of my car. Maybe I was trying to convince myself that this was all a setup. He was working with the police to catch the at-large, east-dog-park kisser. Maybe I was trying to avoid the hurt feelings and messiness that happened when things didn't work out, telling myself that this was all happening too soon after James. What a crock of shit. I was the kind of guy who rebounded about six or seven times, maybe more, and I knew it. If I was feeling that I wasn't ready for this guy then that was frightening indeed. Maybe all the stalking and fantasizing had given me high hopes. Maybe I was in for a big, fat letdown.

I had the urge to pick up my phone and call Bree. Or Jude. Hell, even Quinn, the queen-of-reserve, for some sort of pep talk. But then I had been challenged, hadn't I? Didn't think you had the guts. That helped. Before I could change my mind, I forced myself to knock on the door.

The dog barked, and I had a flashback of the large boxer eating my sweater sleeve for lunch. I wondered if I'd have to win her over now. I suppose the idea didn't bother me. Sometimes there was simply more about dogs that I liked than there was about people.

A shadow moved over the peephole. I expected it to open shortly after. It didn't. Instead, his voice came through the door, muffled but clear enough to understand. "Who is it?"

I found myself rolling my eyes.

"I saw that," he informed me.

I smiled. "Then you can see who it is," I replied.

"That doesn't mean you're not a mass murderer."

"True," I said. "What if I promise I'm not?"



He was silent, pretending to think it over. "Umm... you're gonna have to prove it. Hold up your driver's license."

I stood there for a moment, wondering if he was serious. When he didn't say he was just kidding, I released a sigh, caved in and opened my wallet for the identification he'd requested. I held it up to the peephole.

"I can't read it from in here," he said.

"Then open the door," I suggested.

"What's your name?"

"Taylor."

"Okay... not bad..."

"As opposed to Timothy?" I remarked.

"Timothy's okay, too."

"So are you going to open the door?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"If you're leading up to a strip search, don't think I won't do it," I warned.

He was silent for a moment, and then he sounded amused. "Right there in the hallway?"

I grinned, reached for the bottom of my shirt and started lifting.

The door opened.

In this lighting his hair looked a shade lighter, the curls tighter without the sweat from his workout. He was dressed cleaner than I was used to when it came to him, even if it was only jeans and a t-shirt. And he wore those jeans and that shirt probably even better than the designer had ever intended.

"I think I should warn you that experience shows my neighbors are the kind that'll call the police," he said, and I lowered my shirt slowly as his dog pushed past him to come sniff at me. There was no growling this time, only curiosity as I offered her wet nose my hand.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Cheyenne, but she responds to Chey better."

"She's protective of you," I commented.

He smiled at that. "I don't think you've gotta worry. If she didn't like you she would've taken more than your sleeve... I've got that inside, by the way, if you want it back."

"That's okay," I replied as I gave the dog a gentle pat on the head. "She can keep it. I figure I got a fair trade."

I looked at him pointedly, liking the way the color moved into his cheeks before he shook it away and whistled for the dog to go back inside. "I'll take you out later," he promised her before locking his apartment door and facing me. "Listen, I don't really know what you're into, and I've only lived around here for a couple months, so I was going to ask what you feel like doing. I don't really care what it is as long as I'm not stuck with another TV dinner tonight."

“How do you feel about hot dogs?” I asked. I could never get James to touch the things. The look on Luke’s face suggested he didn’t consider them any better than TV dinners. “Come on,” I insisted. “Trust me, they put so much crap on these things you can’t even tell you’re eating one.”

“That’s a good thing?” he asked as he adjusted his coat and followed me out of the building.

“It is with these ones,” I replied, turning towards my car, but he reached out to give my arm a quick tap.

“Do you mind if I drive?”

I smiled at him. “Don’t trust me, huh?”

He laughed. “Not at all.”

Luke drove an older-model Jeep, the kind he was probably buying parts for all the time. But the ride in it was perfectly smooth as I gave him instructions through town. He really was new, his knowledge of the area restricted to the three blocks around his house and the dog park. The drive felt longer than it was, and as I made comparisons between him and James it occurred to me that I could be a much better date than I was living up to. It was obvious enough that he hadn’t decided whether or not he wanted to feel comfortable with me, and I suppose I couldn’t blame him for it. But nonetheless, he still seemed pretty laid-back, and that was a quality I liked. Maybe that’s why when we reached one of my favorite lunch spots, The Weenie Palace, I thought better of walking him in there and led him next door for pasta instead.

I didn’t do much eating. Not because I didn’t have an appetite. It seemed like I’d developed a staring problem. I blame it entirely on my company. There was so much more to see sitting across from him than my fantasy version had had to offer. He chewed on his bottom lip when he was thinking about something, leaving it permanently pink. He pretended not to notice whenever he caught me watching him, and surprisingly, seemed comfortable with this. Maybe that shouldn’t have been a surprise. I imagine a lot of people looked at him. Maybe he was used to it. Or maybe he liked it. Maybe he liked it when I did it.

“Do you wanna try this?” he suddenly asked, pushing his plate towards me.

I looked down at my own, hardly touched, and wondered why he’d be offering me more food. “It doesn’t look like you like yours,” he explained. Then he picked a piece of ground sausage off my plate and popped it in his mouth. I watched the twitch of his jaw as he chewed, and the slow bounce off the Adam’s apple on his smooth, golden neck as he swallowed. “Not bad. Kinda spicy.”

“Do that again.” I requested.

His amused, blue eyes snapped to mine, his mouth turning up again. “Are you always this distracted?” he asked me.

“Lately,” I admitted, watching his long fingers as they toyed with the corner of his napkin. His nails were clipped short and clean, but even from across the table I could see that the pads of his fingers were calloused. I wondered what kind of things he liked to do with his hands.

“Do you wanna go somewhere else?” he asked me. His voice had dropped a full note, and I sensed innuendo there. Coming from him, I was flattered.

“Actually, I’ve got the perfect place,” I told him.

Getaway on display

Luke wasn’t so concerned with where we were going as he was with the way I’d neglected my dinner. He made sure we walked over to the Weenie Palace before we got back into the car and he insisted I order a hotdog. I became impressed when he ordered the same and didn’t wince at the prospect of eating all those large globs of greasy cheese, peppers, green chili and fried onions. I quickly decided that this was probably the nicest thing a guy had ever done for me and silently gushed over him all the way to our next destination.

A good hour later and as promised, we were at the perfect place. The oversized sofa that we’d sunk into after kicking off our shoes was comfortable enough to hibernate on and the brick fireplace burned prettily, the scent of burning wood warming the air.

“Is this the kind of thing you do when you’re not walking dogs?” he asked.

“Sometimes. I’m also finishing high school this year,” I decided to put out there, more of a challenge than I intended for it to be. That one thing had been such a big deal to James that he didn’t like me mentioning it. Just don’t mention what kind of school you’re finishing. That had always pissed me off. It’s not like I even looked old enough to be finishing any other kind of school. Besides, mentally speaking, he couldn’t have been that far away from me. Helping him move into that pretty apartment of his had given me some insight when I found the high-school diploma he’d received online. Not that I was judging his form of education. It was the fact that he hadn’t received it until he was twenty that made me feel he was being a little hypocritical.

“Ugh. I’m glad I’ve got that over with,” Luke said. “So I take it you mostly end up at the dog park in the afternoons?”

I tried to read any negativity into that response, but finally decided I was just plain trying too hard. “Why? Are you looking to avoid me?” I asked, leaving my tone light, despite my real curiosity over the matter.

He laughed. I really liked the sound of his laugh. “Why would I do that? You’re the most interesting person I’ve met here... you’re probably the most interesting person I’ve met in a while. You make quite the entrance.”

His hand slid closer over the seat of the sofa and I found myself staring at it. It was familiar, the gesture had a little Jude and Quinn in it. But we weren’t them, and I decided not to be such a Quinn about it, so I left out that

hesitating part before I closed my fingers over his. They were calloused. Like smoothed-down sandpaper that was more capable of tickling than hurting. The way he slid those fingers over the palm of my hand brought that strange, warm feeling to my belly, my heartbeat blip-blipping a little faster, the way only the possibility of a new relationship could cause. I wondered if that's what that was. A possibility? I felt like that guy who gets the one-in-a-million chance to make it with his first crush.

And damn, it was such a... relief, not to have to try so hard with him. Luke had two hands. Good thing, because I really had no desire to let the one I was holding go anytime soon. He lifted the other one, brought it under my chin. I felt my eyes close. A chin finger-er! That sounds a lot dirtier than I mean it. I've just always had a thing for guys who do it... the way he hooked his index finger beneath my jawline, his thumb pressing against my chin. The entire action meant to lead me closer even as he closed in. I felt his breath on my face the moment before warm lips pressed solidly against mine. And I take it back. The kiss at the park hadn't been the best I'd ever had.

This one was a lot closer to the mark. I think it was because the first time I hadn't really known whether or not he'd been kissing me back. After he gave me his number I'll admit I wondered, but there was really no telling.

This time I knew beyond any shadow of a doubt. It was his lips moving against mine, his tongue entering my mouth the moment I gave him the slightest opportunity. Slow and calculated, it pressed against mine, as if he were self-conscious about making it messy. I happened to like kisses, messy or otherwise. But this was nice. He felt almost nervous against my mouth, and I think the fact that he was holding back not only charmed me, but endeared this Luke-outside-of-my-fantasies to me a little more. Made him real.

He traced my newly colored bold hair behind my ear, our lips parting as he repeated the action a few times, his blue eyes following it. "This is a good color for you, by the way," he said.

That settled it. For that he was definitely going to get more kissing. Cupping his face I turned him back to me, smiling against his lips when he met me halfway. Our tongues met again, mine more aggressive this time. There was no pulling back for him, no apparent discomfort. Just a small chill that ran through him when my hand slipped beneath the coat he was wearing and ran up his side. He felt even more solid beneath my fingers than he'd looked all those times I'd watched every visible muscle in his body while he was running.

When he moved his lips from mine suddenly I went with it, my mouth finding my way up his jaw to his earlobe while his hand gripped my shoulder. It took the sound of him clearing his throat to make me realize he'd stopped moving completely.

Releasing him I looked over his features before I followed the direction of h

is gaze until I had turned completely around.

Outside the large glass window in front of the furniture store's display--the one we were currently making use of--a family of four on a night out with grandma stood open-mouthed and offended. So I tried to make them feel better by grinning from ear to ear as I waved like a member of the Thanksgiving Day parade.

Laughing out loud, Luke grabbed my waving hand and led me off the couch before we vacated the store.

"Why the hell would you bring me there, anyway?" he asked, but there was no complaint in his tone.

"Honestly? I didn't want to take you somewhere where you'd get the idea I'm easy. Especially after the way we met."

Luke's smile softened. "I don't think you're easy."

"That's nice of you," I told him. "But it's complete bullshit. I'm totally easy. I just figure it hasn't been working all that great for me lately."

"Really?" he looked perplexed.

"I guess you were expecting a quick hookup?"

Luke shrugged. "Yeah," he admitted, but then smiled at me. "But I have a feeling this is going to be a lot more fun."

Taylors don't like to do favors

When I was supposed to be concentrating on things like school or work my mind tended to have other ideas. Like trying to figure out whether or not a month was a long time. James and I had celebrated our one-month anniversary with our very first fight. It was easy enough to remember, since the reason it had started was because I was too insensitive to realize that we'd been together exactly one month. I obviously didn't think about him. Or his feelings.

Besides all the yelling that night I remembered the make-up sex. A lot of it. On our second-month anniversary I made sure to remember. Set an alarm for it in my phone and everything. But after James ditched me for two hours for a group of friends he didn't think I'd fit in with, he told me that no one celebrated two months. Six months. One year. What about one year and six months? I'd asked him. I was serious, but he hadn't taken it that way. Told me since I was making fun of him it would be hard to celebrate the one-month anniversary of the first time we had make up sex. I'd asked if fighting over something even stupider would help to solve that problem. He'd kicked me out for the night. No sex. No celebrating.

My hopes that Luke was nowhere near as complicated as that were high. With James, that first month had felt like an eternity. Luke was different. Technically, we'd only been on three dates. Four if you counted the time he actually stopped jogging to walk with me for a while at the dog park when we crossed paths. (I might have still been stalking him just a little bit. But it's

not my fault old habits die hard.)

Things were moving along slowly. I was still learning something new about him every time we met. It was nice. It was also really fucking annoying. I could close my eyes, think hard enough about it and feel the way he kissed. I knew the shape of his mouth, how warm his tongue felt, and that when he was in a particularly good mood he liked to nip at my bottom lip with his teeth. While I had no complaints about the kissing, it was growing frustrating that we hadn't moved anywhere past that. Double frustrating when I started to wonder if it was my own fault.

Everyone's capable of putting signals out there. I did the first night we went out together. I could have taken him home. Hell, I could have taken him back to his home and learned about every inch of that golden skin before sunrise. But I hadn't. And now every time he didn't so much as ask me to come in and look at his apartment, and every time he stood outside my front door and thought of some reason or another why he couldn't come in, I had to ask myself about what the hell I'd been thinking.

Then one Saturday morning, a semblance of hope.

I figure I must have been at the peak of sexual frustration when I answered my phone that morning, still half asleep with my dick in my hand--because sometimes that's just where the thing ends up--and the sound of his voice completely threw me over the edge. I'm not sure whether or not he'd suspected anything past the sigh that escaped me, but doubt I imagined that soft laughter of his before he said, "Good morning, Taylor."

The slight scratchiness in his voice made him sound tired. He never called so early, and I won't deny that I was touched he'd think to call me as soon as he woke up. "Good morning, back," I said, and then, unable to stop myself added, "You know, you wouldn't have had to waste all that time dialing my number if you woke up over here."

He laughed. He always did when I made comments like that. I suppose I was still holding out for him to take me seriously.

"Then I won't waste any more time," he said. "Why don't you come over here?"

"Right now?" I asked, purposely sounding tired. I was already out of bed and looking for pants.

"Now would be great. I have a favor to ask."

I'd give him any favor he wanted. I'm not sure if it was a good thing that he probably knew that. Not long after brushing my teeth and making myself a little more presentable with a comb I was outside his door, listening to Chevy Chase bark as I knocked loudly, hoping he hadn't forgotten about me and gone back to sleep.

But then the door opened, and while he was somewhere behind it I clearly heard him tell me to come in. I'd been waiting for that invitation for weeks.

I could have been more gracious about it as I stumbled past Chey, who'd come to greet me, forced the door out of the way and all but charged his apartment.

I wasn't sure what to think when I got in there. I think that's because there was more to look at than I'd expected there to be.

I figured Luke was just like most guys our age when it came to his living situation. Small apartment. A few pieces of furniture to throw a room together. Probably more cash spent on an entertainment center than necessities like cleaning supplies and eating utensils. But I found it difficult to notice his furniture with all the doghouses lying around.

From the top of his small dining-room table to tucked under the coffee table, supplies were everywhere. Tools, stacks of wood, a can full of discarded parts. And the finished products: these weren't ordinary doghouses. They looked like smaller versions of real houses, ranging from the stucco-and-brick-look to log cabins. Detailed, from the shingles on the roof to back decks and front porch swings. It was all decorative, of course, and the access to the houses was normal by dog standards, as Chey proved as she popped in and out of one of the many that blocked most of the hallway on the way back to his bedroom.

"Damn," I commented. "I know I was hopeful when you said you worked with wood but this is...."

And holy christ! Who the fuck cared about dog houses when Luke was in a towel? Finally bothering to look at him I caught him brushing water from his still damp hair as he held the thick blue cloth closed at his hip, the sag in the material hinting at the blond trail that led up to an oval belly button on his sculpted stomach.

"Yeah. Sorry about the mess," he said. "I got a little backed up."

"You built all of these?" I asked, kneeling next to the one closest to the door. Okay, it might have been the one closest to Luke, too, and I wasn't exactly complaining when he moved, flashing his inner thigh in the process.

"Careful," he warned. "Some of that's still setting. I was up all night finishing this one. I'm supposed to deliver it tonight for a customer who's giving his wife a puppy for their anniversary."

"It's very... nice."

"The doghouse or my chest?"

Shit. "The doghouse's nice, too," I admitted, forcing my eyes up from where his broad chest stretched between even broader shoulders. All tanned skin stretched over lean muscles. Blue eyes laughing at me. I had the decency to blush, but not to be ashamed of myself. "So please tell me you didn't ask me to come over for a shower and I missed it," I said as I stood, following his lead.

Luke laughed, pulling the towel further against his hip, which made no diff

erence because it only sagged again. "Not exactly." Turning, he reached towards the coat rack near the door, but I had no idea what he was reaching for as my gaze dropped down his smooth back and over the shape of his ass beneath terrycloth.

"Not exactly..." I repeated. I wasn't sure I was up for this kind of teasing. When Luke turned, my eyes snapped back up to his face, and then down to the thing he was trying to hand me. "What's this?" Dog leash. I knew that. I just felt the question needed answering, anyway.

"It's why I asked you to come over," Luke said. "I was going to see if you could take Chey out for me. If she doesn't get her walks she starts to rebel... it gets ugly. And when I said I was up all night, I was seriously up all night.

This is all stuff I do on the side," he said, looking almost helpless as he waved to the chaos in his home. "I've got to be at the real job in about four hours, and if I don't get some sleep, I'm fucked."

Looking at him again, without all the ogling this time, I could see that he wasn't making it up. The skin beneath his eyes was a tad darker than usual, his lashes appearing to be a little heavier. "You're serious?" I still hadn't taken the leash. He took the initiative and put it in my hand.

"Yes. And you have no idea what this means for me, Taylor. I didn't know who else to ask, and then I thought, it's what you do, right? I mean, dating the dog walker has to come with some perks." He smiled at me.

"Does that mean I can't bill you?" My tone was teasing, but I don't think I was. For the first time since we'd met I was feeling inexplicable annoyance, and couldn't figure out whether or not I was being reasonable about it.

"Sure you can," Luke replied, his mood still light. "But don't forget I work in the trade."

He was suddenly touching my face, long fingers cupping my cheek as he leaned forward. I closed my eyes, his damp hair brushing my forehead. His nose brushed mine for the slightest moment before I felt his lips. He smelled good. Sliding my hand to his bare skin I leaned in closer, parted my mouth and took a deeper kiss before he was suddenly kissing my cheek and guiding me away from him. "Thank you," he told me again, his fingers touching the smile--most likely a goofy one--on my face. "Let yourself in when you get back."

And I forgot I was pissed off until I had Chey on a leash and was out the door.

Who?

Chey was a particularly curious dog. A trip to the dog park with her had me wondering what kind of magic Luke had over her that she was so well-behaved with him. With me, she had to stop and sniff every tree and shove her head in every hole she came across. I let her do her thing, deciding that she still hadn't warmed up to me quite as much as I thought she had. Wasn't



t the way to a man's heart through man's best friend? Who the fuck knew. I was good at being negative, especially when I was bothered by something that shouldn't bother me. I felt.... no, I don't want to say used. But that's what it was, wasn't it? And it's not that I expected him to ditch the towel and have his way with me. Not that that wouldn't have been completely awesome. But somehow being asked to walk his dog was a letdown. It occurred to me that when I was with James he'd call me all the time wanting something that always turned into a thankless job. Maybe I'd become more fed up with it than I'd realized. Maybe I was recognizing the signs earlier with Luke than I had with James. Maybe I was being a fucking moron about the whole thing.

The guy was tired. I was helping him. I should feel good about that. It should mean something that he put a smile on my face, just thinking about him. And it wasn't like he hadn't gone out of his way for me before. As slow as things seemed to be moving between us, he did make gestures that indicated he cared. Like just the weekend before when he found out I was still walking dogs and hadn't had breakfast or lunch, he'd met me in a residential area just to drop off a sandwich. As I recall, I'd gotten a kiss out of the deal, too, along with a telling smile pasted on my face that lasted until I got home and Audra made fun of me for it.

He wasn't using me. He was treating me like... a boyfriend. This realization irritated me further, but only because I had mixed feelings on the matter. As slow as we seemed to be moving I couldn't help wondering if it was still too fast. Hell, it's not like I wasn't coming off a disastrous relationship.

I hadn't even had the time to rebound yet. Maybe that's what Luke was supposed to be... a rebound. That was a thought that bothered me to no end. Not him. I liked him. And I sure had a funny way of showing it, getting all pissed off about being asked a favor.

Deciding I needed to turn my mood around for the sake of... whatever this was, with Luke, I took command of Chey's leash and quickened our pace, and then deciding that she needed to be good and worn out before returning her, let her off lead to play with the other dogs for a while.

When I did make it back to Luke's apartment, I was in a much better mood, and as requested, I let myself back in. While Chey went straight for the water bowl, I gave looking around a second chance. Luke needed a garage. Or a shop, or something. I found business cards on his bookshelf and pocketed some of them, fully intending to pass them out. Not only because I was being a kiss-ass, but also because he was talented, and I knew a few of my own clients who would appreciate what he could do. And how could I have not known this about him? I wondered as I studied doghouses of various sizes and styles. I liked learning new things about him. Gave me something to look forward to. But that didn't mean I was going to take my time learning

all of them when he was fast asleep and I was on my own to do as much snooping as I wanted.

I peeked in the refrigerator first, wanting to put a curiosity I'd had to rest. I smiled when I saw that he seemed to be a healthy eater. More fresh fruits and meats than take-out containers. That meant he was probably stomaching things like hot dogs and pizza for my sake. The thought had me further regretting my earlier doubts. More than once he'd watched me down a whole pie or two large sides of cheese-covered tater tots with a bewildered look on his face, probably wondering where it was going. I think high metabolism ran in my family because Audra and I both ate like that and then bragged about it when we managed to gain an ounce.

He seemed to be pretty clean, despite the clutter from his job, which he obviously had a passion for. Most of his books were on building and design, and there was a sketchbook that I flipped through that showed plans for everything from birdhouses to real houses, and I became more and more impressed with him. He seemed to know what he wanted to do, which was more than I could say for myself most of the time.

Once I could see past the clutter I found small things that were more personal, like the pair of reading glasses he kept behind a small pot filled with miniature cactuses, a wallet-sized photo of a wrestling team pinned to the side of his coffee table--one I almost pocketed when I spotted him in the third row--and framed pictures of people who obviously meant something to him. They were mostly men. Two older ones that consistently popped up around his apartment. First separately, and then I began to notice them in photos together. Then they were in two with Luke, and there was a third that looked like a Christmas photo where they were seated in the center of the photo, Luke to the right and another kid off to the left--cute brunet with short hair and a pissed-off expression. Probably because Chey had jumped onto the couch behind him, determined to lavish him with unwanted kisses just as the camera went off.

Curious, I found myself opening the back of the frame and removing the picture, finding that the inscription on the back read, Rory, Eddie, Jase and Luke, Christmas Eve. Putting the picture back, arranging it just how he'd had it I turned my attention towards the photo next to it. The only female he found deserving enough of a frame, I guessed it to be his mother. She was young in it, and I could see he got his looks from her. Definitely the eyes, just as blue as his were.

As I wondered why he didn't have any more photos of her, perhaps more recent, I noticed another houseplant that had a pitcher of water sitting next to it, as if he'd gone to do the task and had somehow gotten sidetracked. I smiled at that, too. Wanting to be helpful I moved towards it, but hardly had my fingers around the pitcher before I became a little distracted myself, list

ening to the sound of a phone ringing.

My first thought was that it might wake Luke up, and turned to look towards his bedroom door. But, when there was nothing from him I moved towards the phone instead. I figured since I was already snooping, there was no harm in going all out about it.

“Luke’s phone,” I answered.

There was no dial tone, so I knew whoever it was hadn’t hung up, but when the silence grew for so long, I almost did.

“Who is this?” a male voice finally asked. He sounded young and suspicious. Naturally, I became suspicious back.

“Who’s this?”

“I asked you first.”

I rolled my eyes. How dare he be childish.

“That doesn’t mean anything. Everyone knows that the person calling is supposed to introduce themselves first. It’s the polite thing to do.”

“But I wasn’t calling you,” he countered.

“That’s true,” I allowed. “But since I answered ‘Luke’s phone, you can consider me a stand-in. Besides. He’s sleeping, so you’ll have to leave a message. How can I give him one if I don’t know who this is?”

There was more silence for a minute, and then, “Are you his boyfriend or something?”

“Are you?” I asked quickly. That hadn’t even occurred to me before. What if Luke was seeing someone else? Would it even matter? I mean, it’s not like we’d talked about that. But I wasn’t seeing anyone else, damn it. He wasn’t supposed to either.

So there.

“No. You’re not,” I said, answering my own question. “Caller ID says you’re out of state. Is that supposed to be Arizona?”

“Maybe. So who says we’re not dating long distance?”

Huh? I sensed cockiness in his tone. And was that a snort I heard?

“You’re Rory.”

“How did you know?” he asked, sounding disappointed, as if he’d enjoyed annoying me. I could totally respect that.

“He has a picture... so who are you, his brother?”

“Something like that.”

“Mind explaining?” I asked.

“Actually, I do. I get a frickin’ headache every time I talk about it, so ask him. I’ll just say we’re family... and you’re definitely the guy he’s been seeing, right?”

“He mentioned me?” I asked curiously.

“That depends. Are you the ambush kisser?”

“Yep.”

“Huh. I kinda thought he was making that whole thing up.”

I smiled. “What else did he say about me?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“Sure it is,” I insisted. “Go ahead. Don’t be shy. What did he say?”

I got the feeling that when he laughed, he was laughing more at me than at my words.

“Is Luke even there?” Rory asked.

“Like I said, he’s sleeping.”

“Is that Luke?” I heard a muffled voice in the background ask.

“No, I think he’s sleeping,” Rory said to the newcomer.

“You think? I just told you he was,” I said.

“But it’s almost noon,” the second voice said, farther away now.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Jase.”

I recalled the picture again. “So... dad?”

“More like mom,” Rory remarked.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Listen, could you do me a favor and wake him up?”

I thought about it for a minute. “Um... no.” I wasn’t just being a dick. Honest. Luke had asked me to let him sleep. In fact, he’d ask me to walk his dog so he could do it. I was being helpful. Just more gracefully now than I’d been when I first left his apartment with Chey on her leash. “But I’ll tell him you called.”

“But I need to talk to him,” Rory replied, as if he didn’t understand the concept of patience.

“He’ll call you back,” I insisted. “I’ll make sure.”

“You could just bring him the phone.”

“Actually, I can’t. It’s on a cord,” I said as I wrapped that very thing around my finger.

“Fine,” Rory said shortly. “But you better tell him. It’s important.”

“I’ll tell him,” I promised. And just to make sure, I used a stack of post-it s and a black marker to jot the note down for Luke and stick it on the phone.

“So, it was nice meeting you, kinda-the-brother.”

“You too... I think. Kinda-the-boyfriend.”

I bit at my bottom lip as I listened to the click as he hung up the phone, wondering if it was a good idea to get rid of the kinda in that last remark.

Chapter 3 by DomLuka

A/N: Thanks to Jim for editing!

Dummy

Looking at the caller ID of my cell phone I cringed and sent the call to voice mail.

I know. Something was seriously wrong with me.

Anyone with half a brain would've told me so, and I'd be inclined to agree with them. My phone beeped twice, indicating I had a new message just as I aimed to slide it back into my pocket. Curiosity got the better of me and I slowly took a seat on the bench a few feet away from the candle shop in the mall, which Bree and Audra had disappeared into about five minutes ago. Dialing voicemail, I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of Luke's voice. It was the fourth time he'd called me in a week. Only the second time he'd left a message.

"Alright." He sounded firm. Decisive. Pretty fucking annoyed. "I'm not trying to sound desperate so I'm not calling you anymore. I just had to ask-- what's your deal? Unless something's wrong. If something's wrong call back and tell me you're okay. Unless you have amnesia. If you have amnesia, I'm Luke, and my number is..."

Even angry, he had the ability to make me smile. Which is why I was such an idiot. After meeting Rory over the phone I'd walked myself to Luke's room, Chey on my heels like a nervous babysitter. After squeezing past more dog houses I'd stepped into a small but organized room. A decorative blanket doubled as curtains to keep most of the light out. The closet door was open but his clothes were hung neatly. Car keys, his wallet and a pair of sunglasses sat on the nightstand, and the bed looked orderly even with him in it, blanket folded down to leave a beige sheet to outline his sleeping form. He slept on his side, one hand raised to cover half his face. It seemed like a natural pose to him, and with tousled hair, relaxed muscles and smooth, exposed back he looked like something I wouldn't mind crawling into bed with and snuggling up to.

At the time, that had been a disturbing thought. There were only two other people that came to mind that I'd ever felt that way about. It had happened shortly after meeting James. The first time I spent the whole night with him. The intimacy of sleeping. To know I'd wake up with someone next to me. Him next to me. And then there was Jude, but that was different. Before Quinn I crawled into his bed all the time just for the sake of being able to reach out and know someone was close in the middle of the night. Maybe looking for that kind of comfort from James had been a mistake. After all, the sex had been more comfortable with him than having to stay on my side of the bed or else.

So maybe I didn't have the best judgment when it came to wanting more out of a guy than instant gratification. Maybe I shouldn't be thinking about Luke like that. Only one problem. I already was. I was looking for reasons to be suspicious of him. Looking for reasons to think that I was wasting my time in falling for him. Because falling for him was pretty fucking scary. Maybe that's why I'd decided to get out before someone got hurt. Like me.

And this was probably the pussiest way I'd ever gone about anything. Ever.

I wasn't this guy. I was the one who'd answer a call just to say things weren't working out. Scratch that. I was the guy who purposely sought out other guys who I knew wouldn't call at all. And it was all to avoid situations like James. Like this, with Luke. Because I really didn't want to find out if he was another James.

And yet...

I couldn't bring myself to delete his number. Couldn't block his calls. What I could do, was push the call-back button when voicemail gave me that option.

"Hello?" There was a slightly bewildered tone in his voice, as if he knew it was me but couldn't figure out why I was calling.

"Hey."

"Hi."

Silence. I guess it was my turn to speak. Luke had obviously said everything he needed to in his message. I guessed he was waiting for an explanation.

"Sorry I haven't called... I got really busy." Bullshit. The excuse was a lame one. I didn't doubt he thought that, too. But somehow I couldn't bring myself to admit that I'd been blowing him off because I was afraid of developing any real feelings for him.

"Really? I haven't seen you at the park."

That's because I purposely started going to another one.

"School's been keeping me pretty busy," I amended. "Sorry I haven't called."

My voice sounded hollow, even to me. Made me wonder why he didn't just hang up on me.

"But you're calling now," he pointed out.

"Yeah." So was that it? Was all forgiven? If we hung up now, would I even talk to him again? I could sense the underlying questions between us. It felt the same as needing to have a good healthy argument with someone but holding it back. Frankly, I didn't know where to go from here. Just that I'd called him, so I had to admit that part of me wanted to.

"So some lady called yesterday, wanting some work. She said she got my number from you."

"Which one?" I asked, grasping at the opportunity to pretend the tension wasn't there.

"Lisa something."

I nodded like he could see me. "She has a beagle."

"You gave out my number?"

"I took some of your cards," I admitted. "I thought it would be alright." Now I worried that it wasn't.

Luke laughed. "It is. I was just surprised, is all."

"Oh. Okay."

"Can we meet?" he suddenly asked.

"Uh..." I glanced towards the candle shop, where Bree and Audra should be finished shortly. "Now?"

"Yeah. This might sound kind of stupid, but I feel like... I can't really talk to you unless I'm looking at you. You know?"

I swallowed, understanding perfectly. He wanted some kind of reassurance. It's not that I didn't think that Luke had feelings, too, or that I was any less capable of hurting them than the next person. But truth be told, sometimes when I was out with him I felt like he was out of my league every time someone else smiled at him. I'd felt the same way with James. Hell, even when I was with Jude and Quinn I felt that way. I hated that about myself, especially now as I was feeling surprised that Luke was asking for this. But...

"It's kind of a bad time. I'm shopping for a friend's birthday. I rode with someone else, so I can't really get out of here yet." Liar, liar pants on fire. Nothing was wrong with my legs and I doubted there would be after walking a couple blocks to his apartment.

"Yeah? Whose birthday?"

"Um, his name's Jude. We're supposed to celebrate this Saturday, so I've gotta get the shopping out of the way." I frowned, realizing I hadn't really mentioned any of my friends to Luke. Just Audra, because I lived with her. This was unusual for me. Made more so by the fact that Luke was exactly the kind of guy I'd like to throw up on my shoulders and parade past everyone I knew, all the while shouting, look what I've got!

And when he responded, he sounded like he knew all that.

"Uh-huh. So why don't I come meet you?"

"Here?"

"Yeah. Why not? I can help you shop and maybe after we can find something around there to do."

"Oh... well..." I paused as I spotted Bree and Audra coming towards me, bags in hand and smiles on their faces.

"Taylor, look what I got..." Bree started.

As I stood from the bench, I turned away from her briefly and spoke into the phone. "Look, like I said, it's not a good time. I'll call you later, okay?"

"and risking the chance that he might not answer that call, I hung up on him and turned back to my sister and Bree, who were now both looking at me funny.

"Who was that?" Audra asked.

"No one," I said.

"Luke?" Bree asked. "Are you still seeing him?"

Audra raised a brow, as if she were eager to hear the answer to that question

. I decided to change the subject.

“What would you have gotten Jude in there?” I asked.

Bree frowned. “Nothing. But I got this.” She held up a very girly unicorn candle holder.

“And I got this,” Audra said, waving a scented candle under my nose that made it turn up. “Your room needs all the help it can get.”

“Ha-ha. But what about Jude, any ideas yet?”

“What’s your hurry?” Bree asked as we started walking again. “Luke?”

“No. I just don’t feel like spending all day at the mall.” I must have sounded too defensive, because they both laughed at me.

Bree rolled her eyes. “So what are you getting Jude, Mr. Cranky?”

I shrugged. “Sex.”

My sister blanched. “What?”

“Not from me,” I said, and then decided to explain. “I’m getting Quinn some new porn. He’ll watch it, Jude’ll get lucky, and he’ll like my gift best.”

“Eww, Taylor that’s my brother you’re talking about,” Bree informed me, giving my shoulder a shove.

“Hey, it’s not my fault kinky runs in your family,” I remarked, and then loudly whispered, “I know about the handcuffs in your closet. You know, the fuzzy ones.”

Bree’s mouth dropped open indignantly. “I do not have...” She stopped, realizing that sometimes to say nothing was her best option. I’d just twist everything that came out of her mouth. Thank god that for the most part, she liked that about me. Shaking her head in an attempt to clear it of my obnoxious harassment, she hooked her arm through mine and turned us towards a shoe store. “Never mind. I’m here to shop. Less talking. More buying.”

“Does Jude have any interests?” Audra asked.

“Yeah,” I helped. “Quinn.”

“Pretty much,” Bree agreed.

“Maybe I’ll get him something for his apartment,” Audra mused.

“That’s pretty safe,” Bree said. “Just stay clear of the kitchen. My mom got him everything he could ever use there when she tried to cook dinner for him and Quinn over there before she realized he had nothing that she could actually stick in the oven.”

“That still leaves options,” Audra said optimistically.

“Like sheets,” I suggested. “You get him the sheets, I’ll get him the sex, and we can say it was from both of us.” They both pretended not to hear me, so I shrugged. “Since no one needs my help, I’m out of here.”

Bree spun on me then. “Luke?” she teased, batting her lashes and making kissing gestures.

In response, I narrowed my eyes at her and stuck out my tongue. Then I pointed at Audra, warning her not to help Bree.



“But you didn’t even drive here,” Audra pointed out.

“So I’ll walk. You guys call me when you know what you’re getting for Jude so I can tell you how much better my gift is.”

“Taylor, Eww!” Bree reminded me.

“It’s also not my fault it’s fun to picture your brother naked,” I informed her.

“Oh, you can go away now,” Audra remarked.

“Happily,” I said, gracing them with a smile before I got out of there. The two of them managed to leave me in a light mood most of the time, but this one only lasted until I left the mall, as soon as I realized that I wasn’t going to change my mind about where I was going.

A little bit

I must have walked faster than I meant to, because before I knew it I was in front of his door, wiping a sheen of sweat from my brow as I reached out and rang the bell. Luke had every right to think I was a lunatic, so it wasn’t at all a surprise when he opened his door and stared at me, arms crossed and brow knitted. Disappointed. I could see it, and it turned those instant butterflies I felt looking at him into uncomfortable knots. They became worse when it started to look like he didn’t even want to let me in, but then he stepped aside, his arm waving me in impatiently as his free hand went to push at the blond locks falling over his forehead.

I was slow moving as I moved past the door, holding out my hand for Chey so she could issue her standard greeting of slobbering all over my fingers.

“What are you doing here?” Luke asked, his tone suggesting that it was unexpected in a bad way.

I met his eyes as he closed the door. The lines of his face seemed a little harder than I was accustomed to seeing, his blue eyes were defensive and it looked like he’d had his fingers in his hair most of the day.

I tried smiling. It felt more like a grimace.

“You said you wanted to see me,” I tried.

Luke only looked at me as if he wasn’t buying it.

I let out a breath. Sometimes apologies were difficult for me, like I couldn’t quite get the words past my lips if I didn’t have a good excuse to follow it with. In this situation, I had no excuses at all. “I didn’t mean to hang up on you like that.”

His blond brow drew up sharply, his crossed arms tightening, flexing the muscles of his arms and making his t-shirt appear more snug against his chest.

And obviously, he didn’t plan to say a damn thing until I hung myself.

“Alright...” I tried again. “I shouldn’t have hung up like that. If you thought I was blowing you off... I mean, I don’t want you to think I’m trying to avoid you, it’s just that...”

“You’re avoiding me.”

Shit. “Yeah. Maybe a little.”

I closed my eyes momentarily, mostly to hide, and when I looked again Luke was moving across the living room, his eyes no longer on me as he reached for a bottle of water he’d left on the counter and took a few swallows. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Couldn’t read him for shit. There was a slight stiffness to his shoulders, and I couldn’t help wondering if he was trying to hide from me a little bit, too, as he looked over his apartment, at anything he could but me. I found myself following his gaze, over the floors, the sofa, the mismatched recliner...

“Will you let me ex....” I paused as something came to my attention, and found myself frowning as I realized that his place was clean. Not that it was ever dirty... but now it was... clean. And missing quite a few building materials and... no doghouses. “Where are...”

“I moved them.” He shrugged, looking over the room as if he didn’t know what to do with it now that there was room to walk. “This guy I share a couple of classes with has a house. Doesn’t use his garage because he’s close enough to campus to bike it. He’s letting me work out of it. Rent’s cheap.”

“Oh.”

Luke was silent for a minute, and then asked, “So is this better?”

I looked at him. “Huh?”

“I figured it all scared you off,” he explained. “That maybe you thought I was a freak or something.”

“Why would...”

I stared at him, slack-jawed, for probably an inappropriate amount of time.

Who would have thought someone like him would care about what I thought. Yes, I’m aware of how completely lame that sounds. But to look at him... he was the kind of person who turned heads. I had no doubt that he was used to getting what he wanted, who he wanted. But it wasn’t just the way he looked, it was the way he looked. He had confidence. Could smile at strangers for no reason and throw them off balance, all because they were probably wishing he’d do it again. I knew the feeling. I didn’t doubt for a second that he had his choice of friends. Hell, his choice of guys. Three weeks of trying to run into him at the dog park and I’d still been under the impression that I’d never stand a chance. Maybe that’s why I’d thought it best to just steal that kiss. It’s also probably why it was so hard for me to accept that my withdrawal over the last week was bothering him. I wasn’t like Luke. I figured I was easy to get over. James obviously thought so. And for Luke to put thought into what I thought of his apartment... what I thought of the way he lived...

I felt like a fucking ass for him thinking I’d be that much of a.... snob.

“I liked all the clutter... I mean, I like this, too...” I found myself babbling

ng, not wanting him to think I was now complaining after all the trouble he took to move everything out. "It didn't bother me... and you're not a freak. Trust me, I know a thing or two about freaks, and you... this is not the reason why I haven't been calling you," I finally said, waving over the area.

"Yeah. You said you've been busy," Luke said. There was a coldness in his voice as he plopped down on his couch and lifted the remote, turning on the television as if to dismiss me and any other excuse I might have. I felt helpless as I watched him abuse the remote control with his fingertips, obviously not paying attention to what he was trying to do because he kept flipping the same two channels back and forth. "What I don't get... is how you were busy twenty minutes ago but not busy now."

"I told you, I was shopping with some friends..."

I took a step towards the sofa but stopped when his eyes snapped to mine. "I need to ask you a question."

I blinked. "Okay..."

"Your friends, do they know about you and... other guys? Like, they know you're gay, right? Because when we've been out I get the feeling you don't give a shit who sees, so..."

"Yeah," I cut him off, wondering where this was going. "I don't keep it from them. No reason to."

"Okay. So that's not why you didn't want me to meet you today?"

"Huh?"

Luke sighed, as if exasperated that he had to explain things to me. "So, was one of your friends another guy? I mean, you obviously have the right to see whoever you want, but it would be nice to have a heads-up about it, you know?"

I couldn't help the sudden laughter that bubbled up, and had to do my best to bite it back. Luke didn't seem to appreciate it. "I'm not laughing at you," I said quickly, finally brave enough to take a seat on the sofa. "It's just, if you had any idea..."

"So... give me an idea," Luke said when I failed to keep talking. "Because I've gotta tell ya, you're confusing the shit out of me. When I met you, I didn't know what to think of you. But, turns out I like you. In fact, I like you so much that for the last month I've spent every free moment outside of school and work with you..." Luke paused, shaking his head at himself. I just sat there feeling stupid. As frightening as developing feelings were, it hadn't felt like we were seeing a lot of each other. But then, my free time, and his free time varied on a level I hadn't taken into account. "Look, Taylor, obviously you're here, so I'm thinking that we're doing something, but..."

"If it helps," I said quickly, turning my knees towards him, "I like you, too, and there isn't another guy." Hell, even if there was I doubted I'd get through one date without wishing I was with the hot blond that smiled against

my mouth when I kissed him and liked it when I stared at his ass in public. Besides, even if my only attempt at a real relationship had been with James, I'd never been the type to go behind anyone's back, and no one else had ever lasted long enough for me to have to worry about more than one guy at a time. Jude had once told me I was a slut, but then said I was at least an honest slut. Still don't know if I should be offended about that.

"Then... why are you afraid to introduce me to your friends?"

"Huh?"

"It's been over a month," Luke pointed out. "I mean, I only know a few people around here, and I don't really hang out with them, but if I did..." he paused, frowning. "Why does it seem like every time we go out somewhere I get the feeling we're only going places where you go... with me? I mean, you know I like to get outside, so we're doing that a lot... movies are movies ... I wanna get to know you. I want... to go somewhere where you like to go, with people you like to hang out with."

"Oh." That sounded simple enough. Except it really fucking wasn't.

"So?"

"So?" I repeated, lost as I considered what he was asking.

"Are you going to tell me why that's been a problem for you?" he asked.

Because I don't want you to meet my friends. They're mine, and damn it, I'll tell them the same thing about you.

"It's not a problem," I insisted, wondering if I should start carrying around toilet paper for all the bullshit that came out of my mouth. "It's not," I repeated when he didn't look convinced.

Luke turned his attention to Chey when she rested her head in his lap and he rubbed at her wrinkled forehead. When he glanced at me again, his eyes were softer, lashes heavy over the blue as his tongue ran over his bottom lip. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "We can go somewhere I like to go... whatever." Whatever, I just wanted to do things with him. At least that was honest. And now that I could admit it to myself, I wondered how I was going to go about avoiding the butterflies without ignoring his phone calls.

If I only had a brain

If Luke had a super power, I think it would be his ability to smell good all the time. He was musky and clean. And maybe there was a little bit of wood chipping and Chey in there, too. But it was always pleasant, regardless. His car smelled like him. His house smelled like him and his jacket smelled like him as I buried my nose in the collar of it and closed my eyes. He was still wearing this particular jacket, and I think it was my breath on his neck that made him tremble and hold onto me a little tighter.

I felt his fingers at the nape of my neck, and then his thumb at my jawline, turning my face until his mouth came into contact with mine. Second super pow

er. He tasted good after finishing off a plate of super salty fries. But maybe I just didn't notice because I'd eaten some, too.

I felt his tongue flick against mine for the briefest moment before his mouth moved up over my cheek and finally pressed a kiss to my forehead. "I don't think we're fitting in anymore," he whispered.

"So?" I didn't see his point. I liked the feeling of lightheadedness developing as I pressed my body closer to his, absorbing warmth and the sensation of every contour beneath his clothes becoming physically visible as they rubbed against me. Sliding my hand down from his back it came to rest against where his jeans sat low on his hip, my fingers curling beneath the edge of the denim.

I might have pulled him closer by his pants, because a huff of amused laughter escaped Luke before he kissed me again. Unfortunately, when he pulled back this time he meant business, moving his body a safer distance from mine, which gave me the opportunity to regard our surroundings more closely.

The club was loud tonight, and hardly the best environment for a slow dance, though as I found myself following the lines of his body from beneath his tight-fitting shirt to the snugness of his jeans against the developing bulge in his pants, I might have needed more convincing on that point, because I reached for him again. Luke took the opportunity to slip his hand into mine, bringing me to meet his eyes. There was a soft expression to his face, the ever-present amusement still in his eyes, the slight upwards slant to his temptingly kissable mouth. I was so glad we'd decided to do this. At least, I had been until he led me over to a table, sat me down and walked away to get us something to drink.

The moment he left me alone the spell of simply being near him was gone, the comfort level I'd felt since our conversation at his apartment eluding me just as quickly. Guilt was setting in as I looked around, knowing I had him convinced that this setting was something I wanted to share with him. Because the truth was, it wasn't.

At the time it had seemed like a good idea. He wanted to get to know me. I doubt he had in mind he meant he wanted to know where I went to pick up guys when the urge struck. It still hadn't seemed like such a bad idea when we were able to have some fun right off the bat. Ninety percent of the patrons in the bar were gay, leaving the atmosphere open and friendly. Luke had loved it. He'd smiled at me, laced his fingers through mine and walked into the club with me. Together. This was the same club I'd met James at, and now I was all too aware that when we'd come here he'd be with me... for all of ten seconds before he saw someone he just had to talk to and I got ditched.

Luke was a completely different experience. Even in the crowd I got a gla

nce back. A smile. When he found a shorter line elsewhere he gestured so I knew where he would be. He was there with me, and it showed. It made me wonder why the hell I'd brought him here.

Good time.

Yes.

Smile on his face.

Yes.

It was all so wrong.

Double yes.

It was the setting, I realized as my eyes followed a brunette passing my table, smiling at me. I felt defensive. Maybe it showed, because he didn't stop.

Good. Protective might have been a better word. Of me. Of Luke. Of whatever this was. It felt insulting, to have brought him there. I wasn't sure he would have thought I was very rational had I brought it up, so I had no intention to. Too early into the relationship for him to figure out what a lunatic I can be.

I wished he'd just come back to the table. If he did, maybe the anxiety I was suddenly feeling would go away.

My eyes sought him out, and I found myself frowning momentarily when I couldn't see him at first. Too much of a crowd. Too many bodies clashing on the dance floor to sort through.

But then there he was, accepting two bottles of vitamin water from a waitress without even looking at her because he was looking at me. Under the dim lights, at that distance I couldn't make out the blue in his eyes, yet I knew it was there because I couldn't picture him without it. Blue. Perfect. So fucking hard to read. Especially now, because he wasn't smiling anymore. There was something in his expression that seemed distant. Burned. Like he'd just read my mind and knew I didn't really want him there. Not this place.

Reason told me that all I had to do was tell him I wanted to leave. We could walk out the door together, away from my past, and I'd escape the dark feeling that was slowly coming on, slowly smothering me.

Having acquired beverages I watched him move towards me, and then I watched him stop, his weight shifting from one foot to another, a more calculating expression crossing his features. I found it bothersome, felt myself moving to the edge of my seat, frowning as I gave a small wave. He didn't seem to see it. He was looking in my direction, but not at me.

A forearm suddenly blocked my view of him, and I resisted the urge to outright shoo it away as I attempted to look around it, but a shadow was looming now, Luke was gone, and the scent of a familiar and pleasant cologne invaded my nostrils. I forced my eyes up, unable to avoid the inevitable.

His eyes were still green. Why wouldn't they be? But somehow, they'd lost some of their shine. The thought relieved me as I leaned back in my seat, suddenly aware of every little expression that crossed my face as I tried to maintain control. Tried to look as nonchalant as possible. I must have failed miserably because his lip turned up the way it did every time he got exactly what he wanted.

"What did you do to your hair?" James asked.

My fingers twitched where I held my hands carefully under the table, wanting to run through it in an act of insecurity. For a second I pictured myself looking the way I did the last time I looked in a mirror before switching from black to red. Too pale. Too tired. Not at all flattering.

I swallowed any explanation I might have given him in self-defense, and was proud when I forced myself to narrow my eyes. Look unfriendly. "What do you want, James?"

His handsome face turned disapproving. He didn't like my tone. Good. I think.

"Are you seriously still avoiding me?" he asked. His hand slid across the table, too close to me. He wanted to touch me. I leaned further back in my seat, knowing that to tolerate even the slightest contact with his fingers would be a mistake. I think for a second I actually believed if it happened I'd feel an unimaginable jolt and the next thing I knew I'd be back to taking out trash and wondering when he was going to call me. I felt myself take a deep breath.

"We're kinda over," I said, wishing that my voice sounded stronger than it did. I felt myself looking over my shoulder, half wishing that Bree would appear in a puff of smoke and chase him away. She'd do a better job than I was doing.

"Doesn't have to be that way," James insisted. "It was nice when we were... friendly. Remember?"

His voice sounded more seductive than it had when we were together. I didn't know if I should resent it, or run screaming from it. All I knew was that as he pulled out a chair to sit down, my level of alarm skyrocketed as I tried to remember every example of why that was a really, really bad idea.

"Don't do that," I heard myself say. Good. I hadn't gone comatose yet. But my attitude seemed to need an adjustment when it came to the temper that I knew should be flaring right now. It peaked somewhat when it became clear that he wasn't going to listen to me.

But he did stop, only it wasn't because of me.

I caught the beverage that suddenly slid across the table in my direction, because not doing so would have put it right in my lap. I looked up and stopped breathing around the time I could see Luke again, smiling again. I tried to mirror it, but couldn't even get my mouth to turn up. I probably looked c

reepy for a minute there, but that was hardly a concern as I studied the blond for any sign of tension and found none.

Except for his eyes. Maybe his eyes were a little harder, but it could have been the lighting. Probably was the lighting. My frown deepened as I realized he was looking at James... James was smiling at him, and I knew the effect of that smile. My ex was suddenly a threat in more ways than one, and before I could stop myself, I swung my foot under the table, aiming for him. I cussed when all I hit was a cold, hard table leg. They both looked at me.

James smug, Luke questioning. But no one asked for an explanation as their attention turned back to each other. James made the first move, his hand out as he introduced himself. Luke responded in kind.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" James asked him when I finally remembered to breathe.

"Probably not," Luke replied. "I'm good with faces, and haven't been around here that long, anyway."

James full out grinned, amusement lacing his voice. "That explains why you're hanging out with Taylor."

I might have been insulted by that if I wasn't so concerned with the way James was still holding Luke's hand.

"Who are you again?" Luke asked, his hand sliding away from James'. I felt instantly better, until I looked up and found that Luke's smile had changed. He looked predatory to me, head cocked every so slightly, as if to feign interest--very convincingly--in every word out of James' mouth. I might have believed it, too, if the glance Luke suddenly gave me hadn't been so cold it shocked me back to my senses and I stood up.

"James is..." I started, but froze up again when they both looked at me expectantly--Luke for longer than James, whose eyes moved back appraisingly to my date, and not in a way that suggested he was checking out the competition. Something about that hurt me more than I cared to think about. But I suppose it was to be expected. James always did like pretty things.

"We're friends," James finished for me, eyes still on Luke. "So when did you two meet?"

Luke didn't answer, but suddenly gestured to the chair James had been pulling out. "Wanna sit down?"

Oh, fuck that.

"Actually, guys," I said, "I've gotta get going. Early morning tomorrow."

James looked smug as he glanced my way. The same way he'd looked the night we met when he interrupted a conversation with another guy I'd just met. It had been obvious who he'd been interested in then, and that guy had given up easily. I hadn't thought much of it then. I looked at it a whole lot differently now. I wasn't going to be that guy. Just picturing Luke with James... James with Luke... it was a miracle that it didn't turn me on, but not



so much of one that it actually made me feel sick.

“Can you still give me a ride home?” I didn’t hesitate to ask Luke.

He looked at me like he found that question particularly baffling, and I felt ashamed to be equally surprised by his quick response. “Yeah,” he said as he lifted the same bottled drink he’d just placed on the table and gave James a friendly nod. “Um... nice meeting you.”

“Yeah,” James replied, not bothering to show the irritation I knew he was feeling. “I’m here a lot. Maybe I’ll see you again. In fact....”

I winced when I ground my teeth together so hard that it pained my ears like nails on chalkboard. Sonofabitch. Asshole who I wished a curse upon, or at the very least, a nice case of genital warts.

I watched Luke carefully as James picked up a napkin, and with the pen he never left home without, wrote down his phone number. There was no indication from the blond that he was annoyed as he patiently waited, and the small smile that crossed his mouth felt unpleasantly devastating as James handed it over.

“Call me if you ever wanna hang out,” James told him, and then whispered, loud enough for me to hear, and way too close to Luke’s ear, “I can show you a few things Taylor can’t.”

Again I looked to Luke for a reaction. Any. But there was none as he turned his attention away from James to glance at me before he led the way out of the club.

I followed.

It wasn’t like it had been coming in. There were no smiles, glances, whispered conversation or touching. I was there alone again. Only this felt worse than being abandoned, left to my own devices, because all I wanted as we walked out into the cool night air was for Luke to turn around and look at me. Show me that what had just occurred meant nothing. At the very least, I wanted him to slow his pace to indicate he wanted me walking with him, but he didn’t bother stopping until we’d reached his Jeep.

He went straight to the passenger side, turned then, like he was blocking the door. Blocking me out. He didn’t seem so unreadable now. The creases in his forehead, the way his blond brows were drawn down as he chewed at the inside of his lip all made it impossible for him to hide his agitation.

I took a step forward, and when his eyes narrowed on me in warning that he wasn’t ready for that, I ignored it and took another step as I slid my hands into my pockets.

“I didn’t know we’d run in to him,” I said. I knew I should be apologizing for something. Like the fact that I never should have brought him to this particular club in the first place. If there was nothing for me to feel guilty about, then I probably wouldn’t have been thinking about it before James ever made his appearance. But why explain, when Luke, on some level, looked lik

Did he already understand that?

"You still don't want me to meet your friends," he finally said, more acceptance in his tone than anger. "That's why you brought me here... Did you at least think we'd have a good time?"

"I wanted to," I said honestly.

Luke made a move towards me this time, the toes of his boots stopping less than a foot from mine. "I was," he admitted, voice dropping subtly. "Is he the reason why you couldn't?"

"It's not like that," I said quickly. I withdrew my hands from my pockets, but avoided touching him just yet. "I was having a good time with you. It's just..."

"Him," Luke said. He glanced away just briefly, as if it would hide the frustration that crossed his features. "Is that who you're waiting for me to turn in to?"

"What?" I wasn't sure what else to say. Too stunned to think of more when he'd just thrown out the biggest thing I never wanted to admit to him. When his expectant gaze didn't relent, I felt myself swallow and tried again. "Listen, it's hard to explain... James..."

"How long were you with him?" Luke interrupted.

I sighed. "For a while."

"How long ago?"

"What does it matter, Luke?" Maybe I had no right to it, but I was feeling irritated, too. I didn't want an interrogation. Not now. Not when I wasn't thinking clearly enough to know if I'd been hurt by James again, or if I was just angry with him. Not when I wasn't sure if Luke even had a right to that question.

"How long ago?" he repeated, his voice becoming something close to a whisper, his blue eyes giving away that regardless of whether he had a right to it or not, the answer was important to him.

Realizing this made me not want to tell him. But then at this point, it was the least I could do.

"Not long."

I felt like I'd sealed my fate with that bit of honesty. Probably would have thought it was pretty fucking stupid, too, if I wasn't there to see just how much my revelation bothered him. Maybe it even cost him something. I didn't understand it, but I understood the look he gave me perfectly. So perfectly, that his next words were almost entirely unnecessary as he rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Um... could you... do you mind getting another ride? I've gotta... go."

My first thought was that it wouldn't be anything to walk home from where we were standing. But that faded just as soon as he turned and I realized he wasn't waiting for a response. My hand reached out, fingers taking the sle

eve of his coat. Saying nothing, he glanced back at me.  
“Yeah,” I told him. “I do mind.”

Chapter 4 by DomLuka

A/N: Thanks to Jim for editing!

In the past isn't always in the past

I was encouraged when we reached his apartment, despite the fact that he hadn't spoken a word to me since we got in his jeep and drove away from the club. I figured if he really wanted to be rid of me he could have just driven me home and dropped me off. Things grew even more promising when he made no objections as I followed him to his door. He hadn't exactly encouraged me, either, but still...

The real test came when he stepped inside and I waited to see if he'd simply close the door on me. He didn't. Just left it open as he walked into his place towards the kitchen as an excited Chey kept close to his heels, waiting for him to greet her.

I let myself in slowly, closed the door behind myself with equal precaution. Luke had made his way to the kitchen and was staring into the fridge when I caught up to him.

“Luke?”

He looked over his shoulder, his expression unreadable.

“I do have a past,” I said, just in case that revelation was a shock to him.

He turned back to the refrigerator and I heard him sigh. When he straightened and faced me again, he had beer. When he handed me one I took that as a good sign. Angry men didn't tend to share their beer. But even as he opened his, I put mine down on the shelf, needing more than a cold bottle as invitation to stick around. When he met my eyes, I watched him from across the counter, waiting patiently.

“My past includes falling for a lot of wrong guys,” he finally said, sounding almost bored with himself.

I frowned. “Luke...”

“I'm not exaggerating,” he interrupted. “Like, I'm the idiot who falls for the straight guy.”

“That's one thing you don't have to worry about with me,” I assured him. “Fall away.” I held out my arms as if to catch him. He didn't seem to think I was very funny so I allowed them to fall back to my sides.

“That guy's still my best friend,” he informed me, and I felt myself wince for him as he drank on his beer. “And then there's the one who got me arrested on my birthday. It wasn't as fun as it sounds,” he added, reading my next reaction. “And you...” he shook his head, seeming bemused.

I frowned. “And me?”

“You're still hung up on your ex,” he informed me accusingly, all the while

he looking disgusted with himself. "Who, by the way, is a jerk." I watched him remove the phone number James had given him only to watch him roughly toss it in the wastebasket. I kept to myself how relieved I was when his blue eyes snared me again, his hand waving helplessly at the trash. "That's the guy who's been on your mind." His tone was both disbelieving and insulted.

I took a breath. "Do I get to say something now?" I asked cautiously. With his beer in hand, he rolled his eyes at my question and headed to his sofa to do that indecisive thing with his remote again, waving Chey away when she sought attention.

"That wasn't all entirely accurate," I informed him as I approached the back of the sofa.

He glanced back at me, clearly begging to differ but not so rude that he'd completely deny hearing me out, so I continued. "I do think about him," I admitted. "But it's not the way you think. I think about... a lot of things, not so great things. You saw how he talks to me. Compared to our relationship, tonight was actually kinda mild. Trust me, you're not the only one who falls for the wrong guys."

He looked at me again, this time more curious, and I became comfortable enough to move to the couch where I sat next to him, my eyes turning to the flipping channels just as his did. I heard him let out a breath, and then slowly he said, "Liking you... freaks me out. I can't handle another guy being ashamed of me. It took a long time to figure out I don't deserve that, and going back..."

"Um... my ex just hit on you in front of me. Last week a girl ran into a door trying to check you out and I'm pretty sure apart from not returning your calls for a week, you know you can flash a nipple at me and I'll do anything you want me to, because I'm that disgustingly whipped every time I'm within five feet of you; so where the hell would you get the idea I'm ashamed to be with you? Better yet, what dumb-ass would be?"

Luke frowned. "I'm not talking about... attraction," he replied, not needing to argue with anything I'd said. "It's me.... at least, for the longest time I thought it was. There was another guy once. When I was with him, it was great, just like it is with you. Then I'd call him, and he wouldn't call back."

He looked at me pointedly, and I felt the guilt I deserved as I realized that I wasn't the only one worrying about falling prey to past mistakes. "When he finally did it was too easy to forgive him. We'd go out, and he'd flirt with other people, and I could be standing right next to him and he still didn't want me to have anything to do with his friends. I let him know me better than anyone else did and in the end I still had no idea who he was, except that everything he knew about me turned into a weapon. I won't go back there." I frowned, easily understanding how he'd relate my actions to his past. But

I didn't know how to explain to him that he shouldn't be worried about me hurting him, that my concern was him hurting me. So I placed my hand on the sofa between us, palm up, just the way that Jude did. I waited for him to take it just as Quinn would, because if he took it, for just a moment every thing would be just fine.

"You don't have to go back there," I said. "And I want you to know my friends ." He started to protest, as if he felt I was blowing smoke up his ass, but I interrupted it. "I just want to make sure... I don't want to... James didn't like them. Actually, the feeling was pretty mutual, and it was easier to keep him separate."

Luke studied me for a moment, attempting to dissect that. He looked annoyed. Offended. But whatever he wanted to say, he ultimately kept to himself as he placed his hand over mine. "Okay."

"Okay?" I repeated, uncertain of what conclusion we'd just come to.

"Okay," he said again, meeting my eyes. "So keep me separate... but don't pretend I only exist when it's convenient for you."

There was a warning in his expression, and I felt myself frowning as I considered his words. He was taking everything all wrong, and I was frustrated that it was probably my fault.

"That's not..." I held my breath for a moment, let it out slowly, and then met his eyes. "I don't want to keep you separate," I explained. "That's just it. .. I don't want another James. I want..."

"You don't know what you want," he said when it took too long for me to continue. "It's what you're showing me... you treat me like I'm James."

Now, there was a thought. Frankly, I knew I should feel bad over that remark, but all I could think for a very long moment was that despite his issues with my friends, I hadn't treated James bad at all. Often times I'd thought of him more than I thought for myself. Thinking about it, I came to the sudden conclusion that Luke was wrong. I didn't treat him like I'd treated James. I'd treated James better.

That, was something to feel guilty over. I was so busy trying to protect my fragile feelings that I was making Luke pay for James's mistakes, and he wasn't even reaping any of the benefits.

Again, I didn't know how to explain my reasoning to him, nor did I really want to. So instead I held his hand tighter when he attempted to remove it from mine.

"Are you doing anything on Saturday?" I asked.

He shrugged, looking annoyed. He probably assumed I was trying to change the subject. "Work in the morning," he explained. "I'll probably meet up with my study group later in the afternoon."

"Around six o'clock," I said, "we'll be having a little get-together for Jude. His boyfriend's mom is throwing it--she's been trying to make gestures

lately. The whole gay thing with her son has had her head spinning for a while. Do you wanna come with me?"

Luke looked skeptical. "Do you want me there?"

I sighed. "My friends want to meet you."

"That's not what I asked," he pointed out, and then raised a blond brow. "Your friends know about me?"

"Well... my sister knows about you. Bree knows about you, which pretty much means they all know. If they don't... then I want them to." Because I could be ready for that. I think.

It was all worth it, anyway, when Luke smiled again, and then kissed me.

Nice to meet you

It occurred to me running into James was an experience that was as good as forgotten. In fact, I couldn't think of one reason for why I'd want to think about him as I stretched out on Luke's living room floor enjoying every minute of him winning at a card game. I would have enjoyed it more if I was winning, but only because he'd announced: loser loses his shirt.

And just in case there's any mistaking it, my head is always in the gutter. Like, all the time. At three in the morning and Luke polishing off a twelve-pack, it was a little extra in the gutter.

And then the phone rang.

My first thought was wondering who would be calling him in the middle of the night, but I only smiled back at him as he forced himself off the floor to go answer. After a short greeting, I forced myself to roll onto my back as I watched him greet Jase, a familiar enough name.

"... yeah, obviously I'm still up," Luke said into the phone as he rolled his eyes in my direction, hinting that he was amused. "... Never mind why I'm up. What are you doing up? I thought you were supposed to be old."

I smiled at his banter as I pretended to look at his cards, and then laughed when he threw a ballpoint pen at my head.

"Why would Rory call me?" Luke asked, his back suddenly to me as he gave the call his full attention. "You're the only one who'd do that in the middle of the night... Jase, relax. You didn't lose him.... Did you guys have a fight or something?.... Then he's mad at Eddie, not you, and if Eddie's out of town there's no way Rory took off on you. He probably fell asleep at Seth's and has no idea he's missing." Luke turned back so I could see that he definitely was amused, and he shook his head patiently. "If you already thought of that, then why are you calling me?"

Whatever Jase's response was, Luke didn't seem to like it as he mumbled under his breath and released an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. Give it a minute."

Then, he simply hung up and stared at the phone.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Family crap," he replied, and then picked up the phone again. I sat up to

watch him, wondering if the way I found his fingers sexy as he dialed a number would be considered creepy. When Luke spoke into the phone again it was in a whisper, as if afraid anything louder would be considered an offense.

“Seth?” There was a pause, and then he released a sigh of relief. “Cool. I was afraid I’d get your parents... yeah, I know. Sorry, I know it’s late.. .. Yeah, I’m calling for Jase again.” Luke listened for a moment and then I laughed, nodding his head in agreement. I found myself smiling at the way he moved his hand through his hair, tugging at his curls. He caught me and smiled back. “Look, Seth, could you just... please, wake Rory up and tell him to call home... Of course he’s gonna get his ass chewed.... Uh-uh. Not my problem. Tell him to call Jase.... Thanks. Bye.”

Luke rolled his eyes and sighed as he turned to give me his full attention again. “Sorry about that. Rory is....”

“Kinda the brother,” I said helpfully.

Luke laughed at that. “Right. And a drama magnet.” I watched as he moved back towards me and reclaimed his position on the floor. “He gets into it with his dad at least once a month. Big fights.” Luke smiled to himself. “I kinda miss it.”

“Jase is his dad?” I asked, remembering Rory’s comments the one time I’d spoken to him over the phone. If they didn’t get along, it would make sense

.

“No, Eddie’s his dad. Jase is my cousin.”

“And you all lived together?” I asked absently, my attention having been turned to his sock-covered foot, which had landed not far from me. I found myself reaching out to pull it into my lap, smiling at the way he laughed when my palm covered his heel.

“Yep,” he answered. “Eddie and Jase raised me... Rory came along a lot later.”

“Eddie and Jase,” I repeated, watching his toes wiggle beneath cotton when I tickled them. And then the idea of two grown men and two teenage boys living under the same roof occurred to me, and I felt the odd expression cross my face before he laughed at it and I met his eyes.

“Four gays under the same roof isn’t anywhere near as fun as you might think it is when you’re related to all of them in one way or another,” Luke commented.

“That’s still an interesting... upbringing,” I decided. “Could see why it gives Rory a headache to explain it.”

Luke’s brows drew together. “Huh?”

“Never mind,” I said, pulling his foot closer. “How come you never mentioned it?”

Luke frowned. “Because when I tell people my cousin raised me they usually

ask where my parents are, and it's not exactly a topic that impresses the guys I'm really into."

I found myself smiling at his choice of words, the way his eyes were capable of softening on me despite our trouble earlier in the evening. "At this point I don't think I could be unimpressed," I informed him.

He seemed to consider my invitation to tell me anything he wanted to, and finally shrugged. But, despite my claim not to be bothered by anything he could say, I found myself frowning over the first words out of his mouth.

"My mom died when I was young."

I guess it seemed a little strange to me that he hadn't mentioned that in particular before, especially since during our first meetings together when he'd asked about me living with Audra I'd openly told him about the untimely death of my own parents and explained my aversion to fire. I suppose it was unfair to feel offended that he hadn't bothered to confide in me then, but I couldn't help but wonder why he'd want to hide it. I suppose Luke seemed to be the type who didn't like any kind of pity pointed in his direction. Or maybe the way I'd been acting since we met had caused him to hold back. That, anyway, I couldn't fault him for.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He shrugged. "It was a long time ago... and it's not like you don't know how it feels, right?"

I nodded. "Right."

Luke pulled his foot gently from my grasp and scooted himself closer until he was seated next to me. "I miss her," he admitted. "But I don't think things got good for me until I moved in with Jase. I was happy, you know? And it was easier to... not think about my dad... he's in jail."

Luke's eyes shifted in my direction, as if waiting for a reaction. It took me a moment to come up with one that didn't involve prying questions. "Oh... and that doesn't impress the guys?"

Luke smiled. "Not really... my dad doesn't really impress me, either. He's never really wanted to get to know me, anyway. I tried... when I was little. It didn't go so well. Um... when Rory called, the day you answered, it was to tell me I got a letter from my father." Luke smiled to himself. "I think it's driving him nuts that I wouldn't let him open it."

"What did it say?" I asked curiously.

"I don't know. I haven't decided if I want Jase to send it."

"Oh." I'm not sure what else I could have said. There was an odd expression on his face, and I wondered if it was there to hide what he was feeling. It's not like he was asking me for my opinion, and even if he had been, I don't think I'd be the right person to give it since I'd do anything to be able to hear from my own father like that.

I don't think Luke expected anything more from me, since suddenly a familiar



smile was touching his face as he lifted the deck of cards and started shuffling again. "We should finish this game before the sun rises, and your shirt's coming off."

"Yeah," I agreed, but found myself taking the cards from him and tossing them aside in a messy pile. "So, you win."

He laughed as I pulled my shirt up, and he was kissing me before I had it over my head. The carpet in my apartment was coarse on my back when it landed there, but I didn't care as I felt him leading my hand under his own shirt, his skin hot and smooth against my hand before I froze as his fingers moved over a stretch of scar tissue on my wrist that always seemed uglier to me when someone discovered it. I felt him tracing the same lines I did every night before I went to bed, but he didn't ask, or wait for an explanation. He moved on slowly until his hand was on my side and his eyes met mine.

That's when I knew we weren't going slow anymore. It seemed like odd... timing, I guess. When it came to Luke sometimes it was hard to tell if we were moving forward or moving back. I figured I'd take most of the responsibility for that. When it came to where we were going now, I figured I was overthinking things. It tended to be a lot easier to let a guy into my pants than it was to let a guy into my life. But, Luke wasn't just a guy.

"Okay," I decided, not sure I meant to say that out loud when the corner of his mouth quirked upwards and he cocked his blond head at me

"I didn't say anything."

"That's okay," I replied, earning myself another odd look. "Look... we should start over, okay? I want to be different... than I've been with you."

Confused, Luke started pulling away but I pulled him right back. "Not that different," I corrected, and then rolled my eyes at myself. "I'll try to explain later." And when I pulled his mouth back to mine, I felt his gentle laugh against it as we went back to kissing. I liked kissing him, and there was nothing left to think about.

I was okay with being naked. I was okay with being naked on Luke's couch. We'd moved there after he'd noticed a case of rug burn developing on my elbow from his scratchy carpet. He'd effectively used the opportunity between getting from there to here to help me out of the rest of my clothes.

He'd forgotten the sock on my right foot, but I wasn't going to nitpick. However, I think I would have liked it better if Luke was naked with me.

Believe me, the trouble wasn't because I wasn't trying to get him there. I'd made more than one reach for his securely zipped-up pants. It was his hands that continued to get in my way, guiding my fingers to his chest, his face, even through his hair. There wasn't an inch above his narrow waist that I hadn't touched. I was sure he'd like the results if he'd just let me touch below it. It was almost frustrating, but then, I couldn't be bothered with more.

e than one frustration at a time as he deepened our kiss and pulled me more closely against him, until my cock was jumping against his thigh. Frustrating, indeed. It felt like I wanted to move everything along faster, greedy for the finale, but knew I needed to slow down before my excitement caught up to me. That would be embarrassing. I figured I had plenty of time to embarrass myself with him, and not wanting to start tonight, I moved my hands to his waist--knowing now that he wasn't ready for me to go below it--and pushed him away, lifting my head to follow his lips with mine, not wanting him to think I wanted to stop altogether. Control. I needed some of that. But he smelled good, and he was soft even when his muscles were moving under my fingers, each time sending a thrill through me as I moved my tongue against his. And that was just me touching him. He slid his fingers against my thigh, just inches away from the part of me that was most impatient. Too close to keep trying the whole control thing.

I suddenly wished that we'd just done this on our first date. Before I cared what he thought about me. The lights probably would have been off. I wouldn't be thinking so much. I'd know the lyrics to "99 bottles of beer on the wall" and I'd be using them every time I needed to take a step back and avoid a premature end to the physical part of the night; and he definitely wouldn't have seen the look on my face that indicated I was completely losing it. But he did see it, and his eyes glazed over before he moved his mouth to my neck, a small groan escaping him as he slid his knees onto the floor. Everything about him was a turn-on as he took me into his mouth for a few short moments before everything in the room turned into white lights. The tension in my body relieved, I found myself reaching for him, pulling him closer until his mouth covered mine again. I only realized those locked-up jeans of his were open now moments before he found his own release in his own hand. It would be much later that night, after he fell asleep next to me, that it would start to bother me that he never let me touch him, or that I'd wonder why. But we were starting over, and I figured there was time to worry about it later.

And he holds my hand, too

"Are you alright?" I asked, unable to make myself sound more concerned than amused.

We'd parked on the street in front of the Moores' house. Luke had insisted on driving, as usual. He'd seemed happy enough when we'd left his apartment, but now that we'd reached our destination he was beginning to look ner

vous. It was cute, but I didn't dare say that as he attempted to assemble a confident, and maybe somewhat macho, face.

"I'm okay," he insisted. "I mean, why wouldn't I be? Everything's good, right?"

"Yeah... so should we go in?"

"Yeah... I mean, your friends are expecting you, right?"

"Us," I corrected him. "I told them you were coming, too."

Luke slowly smiled as a pink hue crept up his cheeks. "Right. And I guess after the big deal I made about meeting them it would be stupid to be freaked out about it."

"Why would you be freaked out?" I asked him.

He shrugged a shoulder. "I dunno. Maybe because there's a reason why you didn't want me to meet them."

"Oh. Well, that's because I was being stupid," I assured him. "You'll like them. They'll like you... Look, I have issues sometimes, but we're starting over again, right? I want you to meet my friends."

Luke rolled his eyes, as he'd been doing over the last few days every time I brought up that starting-over business. My guess is he didn't understand it. I guess I didn't need him to. But the whole concept was doing wonders for me. It was easy, actually. Every time I worried about something that would have worried me with James, I told Luke we were starting over, and I'd get on with whatever was bothering me until I realized there was no reason to have the same doubts with him. Thinking like that left me unburdened, and while I would have been worried about him asking for favors due to that ever-present fear that I'd be taken advantage of again, I found myself doing things for him without him having to ask. Not that he would ask me to clean up his place when I woke up before he did, or to stop and make sure I had dinner with me when I showed up at his place, especially when I knew he'd had a busy day.

I guess those were things I should want to do for him, and I did. It was easier to see now that the only reason I hated doing it for James was because there was a serious difference between the two of them. James had expected it, made me feel like I was flawed when I didn't think of it on my own. Luke expected nothing, and had a smile whether or not I was empty-handed. Overall, I liked the way things were going.

"Alright, let's go," Luke finally said, making the first move out of the vehicle. Willing to go at his pace, I followed his lead and we moved towards the front door together.

The unusual number of cars parked over the Moores' driveway and on the block suggested that we weren't the first arrivals. I doubted we'd be the last.

Mrs. Moore had been trying to prove to her son for a while now that she wa

s completely accepting of his boyfriend. Not that anyone questioned whether she liked Jude. She did like Jude. It was just my belief that she'd like Jude a lot more if he wasn't dating her son. Bree always said the gay thing still had her mom a little frazzled. I'd once told Mrs. Moore that it could be worse; that it could have been me. She'd given me a hug and then shortly after asked Jude to go to lunch with her. Not a month later and the woman was insisting on throwing him a birthday party even though Jude had insisted he didn't want a big deal made out of it. He wasn't lying. He would have much rather spent the night with Quinn; but since his boyfriend's mom wouldn't take no for an answer, I'd provided a decent guest list out of his less-questionable friends and hoped he'd still have a good birthday, anyway. Luke and I paused in front of the door and I saw his nervousness return only a little when I bypassed knocking and simply let us in. We were immediately assaulted by the scent of frying onions and french fries, and then by a cute brunette in a blue dress who threw her arms around me, stepped back and twirled in her new outfit.

"Skirt too short?" Bree asked me. "Mom hasn't seen it yet."

"Wouldn't make a difference to me," I told her. "But I'd watch out for your brother."

Bree rolled her eyes. Either she was oblivious to how overprotective he was of her, or she just didn't care. Either way, it left plenty of entertainment for me.

She turned her attention to Luke, and as if he couldn't see her, gave me a too-obvious look of approval. Luke laughed outright before she extended her hand to him. "I'm Bree."

"Luke," he replied, eyes widening when she pulled him into a hug.

"Hey!" I objected when she felt up his muscles. Dismantling my best friend from my boyfriend, I looked around, wondering where that overprotective brother was when I needed him.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

Bree shrugged. "I've been upstairs. But they're probably where the food is." She shoved me ahead of her, towards the kitchen, and I made sure Luke was with me as I went. Shortly after we were greeted by Mrs. Moore, who fed us half-frozen french fries, and we easily moved into a crowd of people.

Some I knew from school; most I knew from before Jude or I even acknowledged Quinn Moore's existence. I introduced Luke to everyone we bothered to talk to, and felt myself easing into a social situation even more when it became apparent that he was leaving no question about whether or not we were there together. I liked it when he held my hand.

When we finally ran into Quinn we exchanged insults after I made comments about the way he was trying to clean up after everyone. Luke only seemed p

ut off by it for a few minutes before he realized that Quinn was, in fact, a friend. We stayed around him long enough for Jude to make an appearance, and not long after, the four of us, plus Bree, ended up on the back porch, party forgotten as we exchanged stories with Luke in the way that most people did when they were getting to know each other.

“Will you guys get in here?” Mrs. Moore said somewhat impatiently when she stuck her head out the back door. “We’re going to be out of cake.”

“Yeah,” Quinn promised. “Just a minute.”

The door closed, and Bree made a face at her brother. “You told her that over an hour ago.”

“Come on,” Jude insisted, attempting to pull Quinn up with him. “Let’s go inside.”

Quinn pulled him back down. “No rush. And stop trying to make my mom happy.”

Jude smiled patiently. “If you did it every once in a while I wouldn’t have to. Besides, I’m good with her not showing up at my place every time she knows you’re there.”

Sighing, Quinn rose with his boyfriend and the rest of us followed. Cake--what was left of it--came next. I shared mine with Luke and got a kiss out of the deal before people started handing over presents to the birthday-boy.

Jude got plenty of gift certificates--one from Luke, too, which surprised me as much as it did Jude. I got to introduce Luke to my sister, who’d shown up late, and then gave Quinn his porn well away from his mother. Bree made a point to look disgusted, Jude threatened me with bodily injury, probably to impress Quinn, and for a second Luke looked embarrassed to be there with me. I let it slide because he didn’t let go of my hand.

I’d also like to note that Quinn never tried to give back the movie. I knew I’d have the best gift.

Although, in Jude’s opinion he’d probably say that title fell to Quinn when he hauled us all--us all being the same five of us who’d avoided the rest of the party all night--into the garage.

A thick white cover was formed to the shape of a car. There was excitement before Quinn pulled it off. Then, it was just Jude who was excited. There were expletives involved. Happy ones, I think.

“Do you know what this is?” Jude asked Quinn, who stood by, amused. “How did you... and when...how did you even get it here?”

More like, why would he even want it there? There was more rust than paint on the surface of an old car with a flat back tire and two missing in the front, which sat on cinder blocks.

“Murphy,” Quinn explained, referring to Jude’s part-time boss. “He said you wanted it.”

“Yeah... but how did you get him to give it to you?” Jude asked as he forced the rusty hood open and sighed over what he found inside.

Quinn shrugged. “I gave him money.”

Jude glanced up from his new toy long enough to look offended. “I tried to do that. He wouldn’t give it up.”

Quinn smiled. “That’s because I beat you to it.”

Jude couldn’t have looked annoyed even if he wanted to. “Have I told you how much I love you?”

“Me or the car?” Quinn wanted to know.

Jude stopped swooning long enough to thank his boyfriend properly while Bree and I exchanged eye-rolls and confused stares over the rust-bucket. Luke took a step closer. “Skylark... Seventy, right?”

Luke didn’t sound like he was confused about the matter, and I feigned horror. “You’re not a car guy?”

He smiled at me. “Not really, but I once liked a guy who liked cars.”

“You should’ve stuck with him,” Jude teased as he moved back towards the car, staring for a long moment before shaking himself out of it. “Wow.”

“Why would you want to?” Bree asked, then looked at me. “Am I missing something?”

I cocked my head at the thing. “Maybe. Try looking at it from over here. It’s kind of... sexy.”

Bree moved closer to me and mimicked my serious expression.

“Can you fix it?” Luke asked Jude.

“I hope so,” Jude replied. “It’s been sitting at the shop for months. I’ve replaced a few things in my spare time, but it’ll be the transmission that’s the big issue.”

Yeah, like that wasn’t the last thing you wanted to hear from your mechanic.

I found myself smiling at Quinn as he realized that his gift was about to be his number one competition for his boyfriend’s time. Note to self: never get Luke a broken-down, rusty muscle-car.

Bree Moore and the rest of her family were always interesting to me. Like Bree, her mom and her brother had the same dark hair and green eyes, and always seemed a little more pretty than what should have been natural. Mom looked too young for her age, and when Bree bothered to put makeup on they looked more like sisters all the time, especially since Bree chopped her hair short. Quinn Moore was a different matter entirely. Different, in that I’d never really been able to control the thoughts about him that crept into my mind. Obviously, as Jude’s boyfriend he was off limits. For a while now that same rule had applied because he was my friend. I wasn’t complaining. It’s just, for a minute there, having him and Luke in close proximity to each other, it was difficult not to compare their differences.

I'd always thought I'd fall for someone like Quinn Moore. That alone should have clued me in to how far off base I was with James. Quinn wasn't unnecessarily fancy. He was clean. In some ways he reminded me of the attractive boy-next-door that I'd find in the movies. The kind of attractive that didn't make sense, and he was often too self-centered about what was he was feeling to notice the effect it all had, a quality I always managed to find sexy when it came to him. Of course, he could also be incredibly obsessive at times and came with a temper it wasn't wise to be on the wrong side of. So some of those qualities had always provoked imaginative ideas regarding how passionate I thought he'd be in a relationship.

Luke was nothing like Quinn. Luke was calm and steady but could be charming and seductive all at the same time. He understood the effect he had on me and others and he wasn't afraid to use it, wasn't shy of it, and I doubt he'd ever feel ashamed of it. I got the chills just thinking about it. I suppose in many ways, Luke was a lot like Jude in that regard. I wasn't sure what to make of it, mostly because when it came to Jude, we'd had our fun in the past, but never had either of us been deluded enough to think a real relationship other than friendship could work. Jude would say it was because I'd be too obsessed with sex all the time, if the two of us were having it. I'll admit I'd given him reason to believe that. But if I were the one being asked, I'd say it was because Jude was a rescuer, and I didn't want to be rescued. I liked to think of myself as a generally happy person, but I had my dark moments. Sometimes it felt like I needed those, because without them, being happy would mean nothing.

Like, being there with Luke. I doubt I would have appreciated a simple situation such as his meeting my friends as much as I did if I didn't know I'd almost prevented it. Just knowing that made me want to take care with what we had. Call it backwards thinking, but it made sense to me.

I think as I sat there on an old bench against the garage wall with Quinn, watching Luke explore the rust-bucket with Jude, I had an epiphany of sorts. Luke fit in. So well, in fact, that I couldn't remember what I'd been worried about in the first place. He caught me watching and winked at me. I heard myself sigh before I looked at Quinn, a gloating grin on my face.

"My boyfriend's hotter than yours." I was sure if Bree hadn't been called in to help clean up, she'd back me up on this.

Brow lifting, Quinn looked back towards Luke and Jude, as if to assess the situation for himself. It wasn't long before he shook his head. "No fucking way."

"It's true," I insisted.

He shrugged. "Your opinion."

"Yeah, but my opinion's right."

He rolled his eyes at me, and knowing he'd get nowhere with this, decided

to change the subject. “We’re gonna head to Jude’s after a while here. Are you guys coming?”

“Are we invited?” I asked, making sure to sound surprised.

“You’re less annoying when he’s around,” Quinn remarked, nodding in Luke’s direction.

I smiled at that. Quinn had gotten a lot better at tolerating me since we’d met. He even liked me, not that he’d admit it to my face.

“I’ll ask Luke,” I told him.

Quinn nodded, and for a moment we sat in silence, listening to Jude’s voice as it grew louder with his excitement over plans for his newest project.

“He’s a step up from the last one,” Quinn said of Luke, and it took me a moment to realize that he had made the inevitable comparison between Luke and James.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I know.” Because I’d be a complete idiot if I fucked this up with Luke. At least, that’s what I heard in Quinn’s comment. But I told myself I shouldn’t be worried about it. I was slowly making amends over my sabotaging behavior and Luke was obviously still interested. There was that little matter of what happened when it came to sex, but I told myself it was too early to read anything into it. We’d only gotten close that one time, after all. I was probably concerned over nothing. I was sure that once he knew what a good participator I could be that little issue would sort itself out. And to get started, the moment he approached us with Jude I stood up and initiated a kiss that had his arms around me before Quinn cleared his throat uncomfortably and we pulled apart. Luke was smiling. I liked it when he did that.

“Jude asked us to stop by before I take you home,” he told me. “Your call.” I shrugged. “Whatever’s good with you.” Because all night it had sunk in with me that I didn’t have to be alone with him to be with him. And I smiled because I was starting over, it just happened to be with him.